

Process, Context and Content:

Observations of churches effective in mission.

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Introduction

When I was asked ‘what’s working’ in church growth early in the 21st Century, my mind fairly quickly went to what’s not working. Much of the thinking and training about evangelism in the second half of the 20th century tended to reduce the gospel to a few bytes of critical information that a recipient was pressured to accept or – at their peril – reject. Its most extreme forms amounted to accosting strangers with a pressured sales pitch. Such approaches reduced the missional task to individual undertaking, and much of what was labelled ‘evangelism training’ sought to convert believers into sales reps.

Statistics on such approaches report bountiful conversions – but few disciples, at least in the post-Christian West. In my straw-poll type research, I’m yet to find a person who came to faith through a one-off conversation with a stranger who has persevered as a believer

By my observation mission that is solely driven by *content* – and content distilled to facts with minimal context - is not effective in the task of disciple-making. My personal experience of being spectacularly ineffective using these methods, combined with my observation of historical and contemporary examples of effective disciple-making, led me to consider an approach that paid far more attention both to process and to context.

Process

In my sixteen years as a church growth consultant, I have found *process* thinking, whether applied intentionally or intuitively, evident in the vast majority of growing churches I have served and studied. Further, I have come across thousands of enduring believers who have come to faith through an important relationship in the *context* of a Christian community.

‘Pathways’ is a process-oriented approach that organises church activity according to missional function. It’s been the subject of an on ongoing informal grounded research project as I’ve used and honed a consulting tool that considers the ministry process adopted, adapted, inherited or habituated by local churches.

The central concept of ‘Pathways’ is that unchurched people can be reached and disciplined through activities intentionally designed and coordinated as a series of simple, obvious and attractive steps. Important factors within and between each activity work together to encourage participants to respond positively to take the next step in their discipleship journey.

‘Pathways’ thinking begins by identifying people within the reasonable span of influence of your church for whom there is possibility for meaningful and enriching engagement. In marketing-speak, it’s those for whom your church could provide a ‘value add’. In church planting literature, these people are sometimes referred to as a ‘mission focus group’ – ie the people with whom you’ll focus

your primary attention in mission. In Australia that group is most commonly the mothers of toddlers – but it could be people associated with a school community, people living in a defined geographical area, people who struggle to speak English - whomever you sense God is calling you to serve. In Pathways parlance, we say these people have '*potential for contact*'. They're only an introduction away from connecting with someone from the church. That introduction could come by finding a phone number in a directory, meeting in the course of daily life, seeing a sign or visiting a website.

Once that contact is made, that person is '*in touch*' with the church (even if they may not yet know it). It may be that they've had a meeting with the minister, or they've begun a friendship with a church member, or a church member has entered their professional circle, or they've been greeted warmly at the door of a church-run program. Whichever way, there's someone at church who knows their name and is interested enough to nurture the relationship.

A person '*in touch*' with a local church is only an invitation away from beginning to feel like they '*belong*' within the church community. This means that they fairly regularly participate in a group that includes a number of Christians. This is often where their felt needs are met – be it a marriage support group or an after-school kids-club or a conversational English class.

There's been a fair bit written lately around the sequence of 'belonging, believing and behaving' – in that order (and even more written by people who criticise it). Let me say history is generally on the side of those who advocate belonging as a precursor to believing, provided you don't conflate 'belonging' with admission into church membership. More than eighty percent of people I have polled indicated that they felt like they had a strong group of friends inside the church before they made a faith commitment.

People who feel some sense of belonging are only an invitation away from beginning to consider the claims of Jesus Christ. We call this stage '*Embracing the Gospel*'. Here people come to understand the good news that God loves them, that sin has alienated them from God, that God has made the way of reconciliation through Jesus, and that they can be restored to their intended relationship with God through repentance and faith. This could happen through traditional means such as the confirmation class, or a process-evangelism course like Alpha.

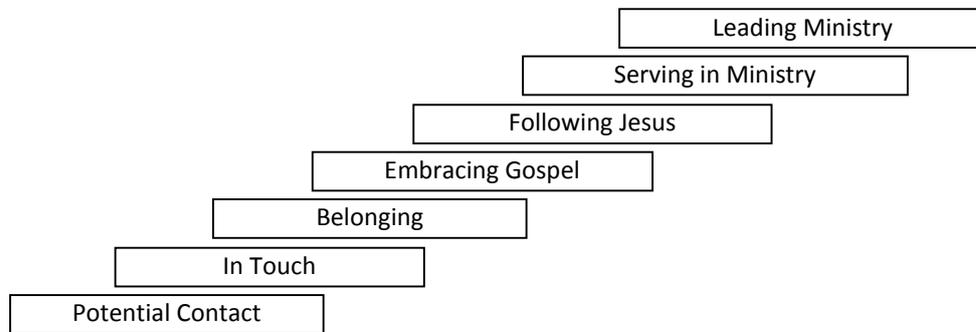
In days gone by, '*Embrace the Gospel*' activities tended to take the form of large-group public preaching, whether it was Whitfield, Wesley or Billy Graham. Nowadays the trend seems to be toward conversation. If you read the book of Acts, you'll note that Paul used both. An '*Embracing the Gospel*' activity has served its purpose when a person makes a profession of faith, such as Confirmation or Baptism.

People who've embraced the gospel can naturally be invited to environments that help them shape their life and values to the teaching and example of Jesus. We call this stage '*following Jesus*.' While no-one truly graduates this stage, immediately after conversion (I use that term advisedly) is the ideal time to help a person embed habits that will lead to a lifestyle of discipleship.

'*Following Jesus*' activities might be a Sunday service, a small group bible study or a triplet-sized group. Historically the most effective mission movements (eg the Wesleyans) have used all three simultaneously. The key similarity is that people are taught, challenged and resourced to become more like Jesus.

'*Serving in ministry*' sometimes begins as a way of belonging, or it may begin after conversion. '*Serving in ministry*' activities simply help and support people to contribute to the ministry of the Jesus and his church. These include processes like a giftedness discovery course.

The final stage in the pathway is '*Leading ministry*'. Some may never move to this stage – leadership is not everyone's cup of tea.



Hundreds of churches have made preliminary pathways assessments and a proportion of them have seen their missional effectiveness (ie capacity to make disciples from among a defined group of unbelievers) improve.

Culture as Context

A little more thought brought me back to a question that has been nagging me almost as long as I have been using 'Pathways' – *How come some churches get all the process pieces in place, but struggle to make them work together?*

Some churches realise quickly that 'Pathways' is a philosophy akin to farming (ie hard work and patience) so they abandon the approach in favour of something that promises results more quickly and with less effort (or opt to do nothing at all). Perhaps half the churches that have completed the Pathways workshop have found it a discipline too hard to maintain.

Other churches do, however, diligently apply themselves to the disciplines inherent in the 'Pathways' methodology, and still struggle to bring people along the journey to faith in Jesus Christ and commitment to his community and his cause. As I compare the churches that struggle with those that do grow, a second, perhaps even more telling dimension emerges – a culture of discipleship.

Of all the local churches and church plants I've served, those that have grown have a single characteristic in common: a sizeable group of people who are prepared to make considerable sacrifices for the sake of the gospel. These people are more than believers – they are disciples who consistently offer their time, effort and money, forgoing comfort and the trappings of the 'good life', in order to serve the cause of Jesus.

Conversely, parishes and plants that that have struggled to grow frequently lament a shortage of committed disciples in their congregations.

Throughout history, the great advances of the church have been characterised by deeply committed and highly mobilized laypeople. No matter how hard clergy work, sustainable progress in the health

and growth of a local church is only possible through the efforts of a core group of laypeople who are deeply committed to modelling their lives on the example and teaching of Jesus Christ. When discipleship is 'outsourced' to a pious clergy who will be followers of Jesus on our behalf, the church stagnates.

Discipleship entails a daily commitment to bending one's life around the mission of Jesus, not the other way around. It means marching to a very different drum-beat to that of society around us. Wholeheartedly serving the cause of Christ may also include giving up personal aspirations, and the sporting, cultural and artistic aspirations people may have for their children.

Discipleship must be distinguished from commitment to the local church. I have met dozens of faithful believers who serve on rosters, turn up at working bees, sit on committees and give their money – yet their lives, while outwardly upright, are largely indistinguishable from other 'respectable' people in their socio-economic bracket. When quizzed about their personal spirituality, these people tend to respond with decades-old conversion accounts, or they divert to the safety of religious activity. More often than not, those with more commitment to 'church' than to Jesus attend my workshops hoping that their church might grow, thus arresting its decline and staving off an otherwise impending demise. This is not a motivation conducive to mission.

Discipleship by its very nature is about emulating the character and continuing the mission of Jesus. The life of Jesus described in the gospels was characterised by deep intimacy with God, and a passion to do his will. It was also marked by compassion for the common-folk who were harassed and helpless. What sometimes goes unremarked was Jesus suspicion of - and perhaps even opposition to - the religious leadership of the day. His main beef was that spirituality was supposed to be life-giving, rather than fear, shame and guilt-inducing.

The culture of a discipling community is perhaps its most effective missional dimension. In an increasingly post-modern and post-rational society, evangelism is shaping up as more of a socialisation process than an educative one (as it largely was prior to modernity). People are more apt to be curious about the gospel as a set of propositions and more likely to grasp its meaning, when it serves as an explanation for that which they are already experiencing as they participate in the Christian community.

A person who has experienced the love of Jesus expressed through the compassionate action of his followers is more likely to find credible the idea that "God loved the world so much that he gave his Son." Further, a person who has shared life with one who is experiencing the some of the "abundant life" that Jesus promises will be more likely to be curious about its source. The truth is, disciples make disciples, and neither programs nor courses will serve as a substitute.

Jesus' primary invitation to would-be disciples was simply to 'come with me'. For those that did, the character of Jesus proceeded to rub off onto them. Jesus created a particular and attractive culture among those who followed him, fuelled primarily by his mere presence. There is an unassailable power in tactility with which mere information cannot compete. If the message and the culture are at odds, people will believe the culture. If however the message and the culture are congruent, the potential is powerful. I think Christian Schwarz is onto something in describing a church as a kind of ecosystem where you need a range of characteristics all working interdependently.

Content

While all of the foregoing argues for due consideration of process and context, I must return to the issue of content. The most common gap in the model of ministry pursued in Australian churches is the absence of a context where people can hear the gospel in a way that makes sense to them, and be challenged to make a response. While process evangelism tools like *Alpha* and *Christianity Explained* are readily available, few churches link them to 'belonging' environments and offer them at strategic times.

Although consideration of both process and culture is necessary to provide the preconditions for effective mission, a clear and compelling presentation of the gospel message is indispensable in making disciples from among unchurched people. Some may argue that the liturgy of the church conveys the gospel, and point out the pains that its authors took to make it so, but there is little evidence that contemporary audiences 'get it'. I have worked in churches where people have listened to the second order Eucharist every week for 40 years and still have almost no idea of basic concepts conveyed. And there are countless liturgical churches in Australia where no new believers have been formed for years.

Some churches seem to have 'moved on' from the idea of a presentation of the gospel that provides an opportunity for an identifiable response of repentance and faith. I've heard a range of arguments why such traditional ideas of conversion can be safely relegated to the Billy Graham era. However, most of the growing churches I have observed call for people to make a faith commitment that can be pinpointed in time and space. It may be located within a process evangelism course like Alpha, instead of taking the form of an altar call at a crusade, but it's clear and unmistakable. Conversely, I have observed the 'absorption' approach leading to all sorts of discipleship complications alter on.

Beyond the faith commitment (and pre-dating it to some extent) lies the long journey of discipleship, which consists of a rhythm of revelation, repentance, commitment and obedience. While preaching is important and bible study groups are helpful, there is no substitute for the regular (preferably daily) personal engagement with the scriptures.

I cannot overstate the importance of believers engaging the scriptures for the purpose of knowing the will of Jesus that they might obey, and understanding the character of Jesus that they might emulate him. Too much of what happens under the banner of discipleship is education so that believer might know the right answers (in exactly the same way I learned physics: as concepts divorced from my life experience that I needed to be able to recall for the sole purpose of a passing a test. However Matthew 25 seems to suggest that the 'entrance examination' into heaven is entirely behavioural).

A Word of Hope

While practitioners of the 3DM philosophy will recognise much of what is set out above, the majority of the effective disciple-making churches I have observed have not been new plants, and neither have they undergone radical restructures. Most of the first-time faith commitments made in Australia this year will occur in the company of people belonging to fairly conventional churches with buildings and services with sermons and singing.

Conclusion

While there is no magic formula or sure-fire program that delivers church growth, there are three distinct yet interdependent considerations apparent in the majority of churches that are growing by forming new believers. There are:

- A pathway of interconnected activities that enable an unchurched person to take a series of clear and simple steps toward faith and maturity
- A culture of discipleship where deeply committed people seek to embody the character and pursue the mission of Jesus
- Clear, biblical content presented that invites people to commit their lives to Christ and seek to conform their lives to his ways.

This is a brief paper, and there is a great deal I have not covered. Hopefully, the main ideas I have addressed will help the reader lead their local church toward mission effectiveness.

Ken Morgan, May 2015

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Some questions for consideration:

- Reflect on points of resonance for you personally, and in your observation of local churches as you read this paper. A stand out thought? A new question raised? An area of disagreement?
- Using the 'Pathways' framework, what in your view is the biggest 'weak point' for your own local church? In what ways might this be addressed? What is a first step?

What do you think is the most common 'weak point' for churches more broadly across our movement? Identifying a 'mission focus group'? Facilitating 'embracing the gospel'? Or...?
- What is the discipleship culture like within my own congregation? In our movement more broadly? What is in my power to help improve this? What would I do? Where would I start?
- What is personal biblical engagement like within my own congregation? In our movement more broadly? What is in my power to help improve this? What would I do? Where would I start?
- When things are going well, the usual time it takes between 'contact' and 'embracing the gospel' is slow (18 months+). The usual time it takes to turn a new believer into a settled disciple takes years. What will help me / my church / our movement persevere *long-term* in mission and disciple-making?