

BOUBAKAR SANOU

Toward a Biblical Model of Discipleship: A Case Study of the Willow Creek Community Church

Introduction

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus set the agenda for the church. In a sort of farewell speech, he said to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

This call to disciple all nations has been interpreted and applied differently over the centuries. Today, there is a renewed emphasis on discipleship in many Christian circles. This paper looks at the Willow Creek Community Church's seeker-sensitive approach to discipleship and then draws some implications for developing an effective discipleship model.

The Seeker-Driven Model of Discipleship: The Story of Willow Creek

Founded on October 12, 1975 by Bill Hybels and friends, the Willow Creek Community Church is a non-denominational Christian church located in South Barrington, Illinois. According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, Willow Creek Church is the third most influential church in North America with a weekend attendance of about 25,000. Only the Lake Wood Church, Texas (43,500) and the North Point Community Church, Georgia (30,600) have a larger attendance.

Bill Hybels and friends started the Willow Creek Community Church with the following vision: “A weekly seeker service that would provide a safe and informative place where unchurched people could come to investigate Christianity further” (Hybels and Hybels 1995:41). Since their passion was to see unchurched people become followers of Jesus, they designed programs and facilities accordingly to meet the needs of those seeking to further explore Christianity. “The church’s leadership believed the approach would attract people searching for answers, bring them into a relationship with Christ, and then capitalize on their contagious fervor to evangelize others” (Branauh 2008). As such, their approach was highly program-oriented and culturally up-to-date.

With its emphasis and success on attracting large numbers of congregants, Willow Creek has helped shape the ecclesiology of many church leaders in the last four decades. Although they are not giving up their seeker-sensitive approach, Willow Creek Community Church now gears “its weekend services toward mature believers seeking to grow in their faith” (Branauh 2008). This shift in their approach to discipleship was influenced by the result of a three-year process study between 2004 and 2007 focused on how congregants at Willow Creek were growing spiritually (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007).

The goal of their study was “to find evidence of spiritual growth in people, and then figure out what types of activities or circumstances triggered that spiritual growth” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:19). Based on Matthew 22:37-40, they defined spiritual growth as “*an increasing love for God and for other people*” (19, emphasis in the original). They embarked on their study guided by three hypotheses (31):

Hypothesis 1—*There is a migration path for spiritual growth based on church activities*: the more people are involved in church activities (small groups, serving, Bible study, midweek services, and weekend services), the closer they grow to Christ.

Hypothesis 2—*The most effective evangelism tool is a spiritual conversation*: putting an increased emphasis on spiritual topics combined with the use of multiple evangelistic styles would increase their congregants’ desire for personal evangelism.

Hypothesis 3—*Spiritual relationships are a key driver of spiritual growth*: deep spiritual relationships in the context of small group meetings can trigger spiritual growth.

Then they tested their hypotheses by analyzing 6,000 surveys completed by people who attend Willow Creek, 300 surveys completed by former members of Willow Creek, 5,000 additional surveys completed by congregants at Willow Creek and six other churches across the United States, more than 120 in-depth one-on-one interviews with people on their

spiritual lives, study of Scripture, books, and articles on spiritual growth and human development, and consultation with experts in the area of spiritual growth (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:23). Six key discoveries were made as the result of this three-year-process study (33-60):

1. *Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth.* Although the study showed some increase in spiritual behaviors (e.g., tithing, evangelism, and serving), there was very little correlation between levels of participation in church activities and spiritual attitudes (increasing love for God and for other people). People with greater involvement in church programs did not express a greater love for God than people who were less involved in the same programs. Thus, involvement in church activities alone made no direct impact on spiritual growth.

2. *Spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ.* In other words, it is only as people draw closer to Christ that they will begin to see changes in the way they live their lives and experience an increase in their love for God and for other people.

3. *The church is most important in the early stages of spiritual growth.* The research found that the role of the local church in helping nurture a growing relationship with Christ shifts from being the primary influence to being a secondary influence as people move along the following spiritual continuum: Exploring Christianity—Growing in Christ—Close to Christ—Christ-Centered. As people mature in their spiritual journey, “the church becomes less of a place to go for spiritual development and to find spiritual relationships, and more of a platform that provides serving opportunities” (42).

4. *Personal spiritual practices are the building blocks for a Christ-centered life.* As the role of the church decreases during the later stages of spiritual growth, it is personal spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, journaling, solitude, study of Scripture) that become the driving force behind a person’s growth in their relationship with Christ. Thus, “an authentic Christ-centered life is fundamentally the result of a strong commitment to a growing personal relationship with Christ” (45). There is therefore no more need for the church to continue handholding people who are moving along in the later stages of the spiritual continuum.

5. *A church’s most active evangelists, volunteers and donors come from the most spiritually advanced segments.* According to the research, “as people grow spiritually, they demonstrate increasing faith through their actions. The farther along they are on the spiritual continuum, the more they express their faith to others and donate time and resources to the church” (45). Although an increased participation in church activities does not automatically equate to spiritual growth, the more a person grows in love for God and other people, the more that person becomes involved and committed to serving, tithing, and evangelizing.

6. More than 25 percent of those surveyed described themselves as spiritually “stalled” or “dissatisfied” with the role of the church in their spiritual growth. Those stalled in their faith journey were in the early-to-middle stages of spiritual growth and were wrestling with either addictions, inappropriate relationships, emotional issues, or lack of prioritizing their spiritual lives. The dissatisfied group included people from the more advanced spiritual growth segments who appeared completely aligned with the attitudes and behaviors related to a Christ-centered life and also exhibited all the signs of full devotion: they regularly attended weekend services, participated in small groups, volunteered at church, served those in need, returned their tithes, and were diligent in their personal efforts to grow spiritually. While 25 percent of the “stalled” were considering leaving the church because of significant barriers to spiritual growth, 63 percent of the “dissatisfied” were considering leaving the church due to their dissatisfaction with the church not doing enough to keep them on track (hold them accountable and keep them challenged) or helping them find a spiritual mentor.

Implications for Developing an Effective Discipleship Model

What does Willow Creek’s seeker-sensitive model teach us about discipleship? What implications can we draw from their objective evaluation of their approach to discipleship? Before doing that, it is essential to have a clear biblical understanding of who a disciple is. My survey of discipleship literature (Wilkins 1988; Hull 2006; Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014; Hirsch 2006; Harrington and Absalom 2016; Melbourne 2007; Barna 2001) revealed three essential dimensions of every effective discipleship model. They were rational, relational, and had missional dimensions.

The rational (learning) dimension of discipleship is where a believer intentionally learns from Jesus. In its original context “disciple” (*mathetes*) referred to “someone who was either an apprentice in a trade or a pupil of a teacher” (Harrington and Absalom 2016:20). That person would attach himself to a teacher for the purpose of acquiring both theoretical and practical knowledge (Brown 1975:484). The stress of the rational dimension is on the need for a continuing transformation and growth even for those who have already become disciples. Since “teaching” in Matt 28:19 is an ongoing process, the rational dimension of discipleship refers to “a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith” (Blomberg 1992:431). However, the goal of this continuing learning is not to impart knowledge only but to rouse total commitment to Jesus (Wilkins 1988:159).

The relational (community) dimension of discipleship develops in the

context of a supportive community where accountability can take place. For the apostle Paul, being a disciple was not synonymous with only accepting an abstract propositional truth about Jesus. For him being a disciple of Christ was about learning from Jesus and modeling out in life what a person knows about him. In his writings there is a constant invitation to imitate him as he imitates Christ. To the Corinthians he writes, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). Thus, "discipleship not only involves what a Christian does on behalf of Christ but also how the disciple represents Christ in the World" (Melbourne 2007:10).

The missional (sharing of one's faith) dimension of discipleship is concerned with understanding the call to "Make disciples" (*mathēteusate*) in Matt 28:19 as essentially a call to engage in mission and duplicate one's self. This is the primary command of the Great Commission and it must remain the primary responsibility of the church in every context. Mission in the context of the Great Commission is more than a call to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ. It is a call to disciple the nations (people groups) by going to them.

Hence, the New Testament uses the word disciple to indicate a relationship with and total commitment to Christ. This relationship with and commitment to Christ comes as the result of being changed by constantly growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18), living a life of total submission to his lordship (Phil 3:8), and helping others begin to trust and follow Jesus (2 Tim 2:2).

Below are eight suggestions for developing an effective discipleship model that takes into consideration all the essential components of discipleship.

1. *Prioritize personal commitments to developing a growing relationship with God over participation in church programs alone.* Although involvement in church programs may influence spiritual behaviors, the fact remains that it is God alone who transforms the human heart. Hybels admits that in the case of Willow Creek, "the church and its myriad of programs have taken on too much responsibility for people's spiritual growth" (2007:4). The goal of any approach to discipleship should not be to keep church members busy by a plethora of activities, but rather to help them embark on a quest for a growing relationship with Christ (John 15:1-8). Also, the weekly worship gatherings should not be the main focus of discipleship. Discipleship is not pulpit-centric. Dallas Willard rightly observes that "one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of 'regular church services.' They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple" (2002:250). To be effective, the impact of worship services and other church programs needs to be extended to people in every stage in the spiritual continuum;

challenging them and suggesting to them practical ways and tools to take the next step in their spiritual journey.

2. *Do not make numbers the only standard for measuring success in discipling others.* Membership and church attendance are not sufficient measures as to whether or not people are becoming more like Christ in their spiritual journey. The health of a church “is not just about the numbers. It’s about the movement of people toward Christ, toward deep love for God and genuine love for others” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:8). Bigger is not always better. Quality should be preferred to quantity alone. Our motivation should be to see hearts grow and not to simply see numbers grow. In discipling others, the How many? and Where are they spiritually? questions need to be addressed together. While the How many? question helps evaluate the statistical impact of an activity, it is the Where are they spiritually? that will help measure the spiritual impact of that same activity. In discipleship numerical growth and spiritual growth are not two separate agendas. Both belong to the same agenda. It is the misunderstanding of the correlation between evangelism and discipleship that “has given rise to churches that produce large numbers of converts with little depth, converts who could hardly be called disciples of Jesus Christ. . . . Conversely, there are also many churches that emphasize great teaching and theological depth but fail to see God use them to bring very many, if any, new believers to faith in Christ” (Rainer 2016:11). A biblically-faithful approach to discipleship seeks to find a balance between attracting numbers and at the same time helping those numbers grow to maturity in Christ.

3. *Balance any seeker-sensitive approach to discipleship with a concern for all the congregants’ spiritual growth.* Although “all churches should remove as many barriers as possible for seekers, yet there’s no need to focus entirely on them” (Hull 2006:257). Thus, cultural relevance, biblical coherence, and spiritual growth across the board need to go hand in hand in every discipleship-focused congregation. People need to be comprehensibly taught all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19) and not primarily what they want to hear or what they feel good about. This is important because whenever the primary energies of a congregation are spent on a well-crafted production of programs solely focused on meeting the needs of people who are still exploring what they believe about Jesus and Christianity, then only secondary energies are left to help both those seekers and the other congregants grow in their spiritual journey. Sometimes, it becomes very challenging to help the religious explorers who are used to big event gatherings to find God in other “less significant” gatherings if the church programs somehow already communicated to them that God is found and experienced only through sophisticated weekly programs (Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014:78).

4. *Approach discipleship as a life-long process.* Being a disciple of Christ is a lifelong process, not an event in time. It is about “*becoming* a disciple rather than having been *made* a disciple” (Hull 2006:35, italics in the original). As a process of becoming Christlike, “discipleship isn’t a program or event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners alone; it’s for all believers for everyday of their life” (24). Since “the path to spiritual maturity is not correlated to age” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:33), every church member needs to be constantly challenged to grow in their love for God and other people. The fact that the role of the church in helping nurture a growing relationship with Christ decreases as people move along the later stages of the spiritual continuum should not lead to a congregation total disengagement toward the spiritual welfare of those along those stages. Adequate attention and resources should be available to people at every stage of the spiritual continuum to help them remain growing in Christ.

5. *Make spiritual mentorship an essential component of the process of discipleship.* Since the call to “make disciples” (*mathēteusate*) in Matt 28:19 is essentially a call to duplicate one’s self, mentorship is inseparable from discipleship. A mentor is defined as someone who is committed to a healthy spiritual relationship with another person for the purpose of mutual accountability and growth in Jesus Christ. A good biblical model of spiritual mentoring as discipleship is found in 1 Thess 2:7-13 where discipleship is portrayed as a process of spiritual parenting. Spiritual mentoring as discipleship can help achieve four things: a long-term commitment to the spiritual welfare and growth of believers, personal attention to believers’ spiritual growth needs, modeling a spiritual walk with God to mentees, and the teaching of biblical truth. Beside the formal church programs, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with others. This type of spiritual relationship can help keep both the mentor and the mentee on track as they become accountable to one another. It can also help address some significant barriers to spiritual growth.

6. *Give due consideration to spiritual disciplines in the process of spiritual growth.* Spiritual disciplines refer to deliberately self-imposed spiritual habits for the purpose of nurturing spiritual health, thus fostering spiritual growth and maturity. They constitute concrete expressions of our decision to place ourselves before God for him to change us into his likeness (Calhoun 2015; Whitney 2014; Dybdahl 2008). Spiritual disciplines help us check our spiritual life for toxins (Groeschel 2012). Examples of spiritual disciplines include the study, memorizing, and meditation on Scripture, journaling, prayer, fasting, service, etc. A word of caution about the practice of spiritual disciplines is that it does not automatically result

in spiritual growth. By opening our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the cleansing power of God's Spirit and truth, spiritual disciplines place us before God where genuine transformation can only take place.

7. *Approach mission as disciples making other disciples.* By commanding his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19), Jesus was basically telling them "to make more of what they are themselves" (Wilkins 1988:162). The primary focus of a congregation should not be on what happens at its facilities. Although we find the "Come and See" method of evangelism in the New Testament (John 1:39), the church was mostly expected to go out, mingle with people, and sow the seeds of the gospel. The emphasis on "come and see" puts the responsibility on individuals to come and hear the gospel rather than on the church to take the gospel to them (Hirsch 2006:275). "When Jesus delivered the Great Commission, he revealed God's plan for his church as well as for individual disciples. He charged the church to go to the world, because the world has no reason to go to church" (Hull 2006:254). According to the parable of the lost sheep, it is the church, not the unchurched, who are supposed to be the "seekers" (Luke 15:1-7). As such, "we are not to wait for souls to come to us; we must seek them out where they are [because] there are multitudes who will never be reached by the gospel unless it is carried to them" (White 1900:229).

8. *Strive to become a genuinely welcoming and loving congregation.* People were irresistibly drawn to Jesus because of the unselfish love and concern with which he treated them. In the same way, sincere and loving Christian communities can become fertile ground where people grow in their relationship with Christ. Since "the strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian" (White 1909:470), it is right to say that it is believers and not programs that are the most effective bridges to Christ. As a loving community, the church becomes not only a true reflection of Jesus Christ but also an answer to Christ's prayer for unity among his followers (John 17:11, 20-23). While life has become so politicized around ethnic, racial, and national identities, the church, through genuine and loving relationships between its members, is able to irrefutably show our fragmented world that "a community of diverse persons can live in reconciled relationship with one another because they live in reconciled relationship with God" (Van Gelder 2000:109).

Conclusion

The primary command of the Great Commission is to make disciples among all people groups. This paper has argued that church attendance, programs, or revenue are not the only dimensions to be considered in

measuring success in accomplishing the Great Commission. A biblical perspective on discipleship indicates that ministry success also relates to the spiritual quality of congregants' lives (Barna 2001:95). Therefore, seeking to provide comprehensive spiritual nurture to religious explorers as well as to believers should be the top priority of every biblical approach to discipleship. This was Christ's model of discipleship as expressed by Ellen White, "The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'" (1909:143). We can be confident that such an approach "will not, cannot, be without fruit" (144).

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Boubakar Sanou is a PhD graduate of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University where he currently serves as a professor in the departments of World Mission and Christian Ministry.