

A Discipleship Process For Pastors

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A Personal Word of Introduction

You are a pastor of a Baptist Church or one of like faith. At some point in your past God imposed Himself upon your life and personal agendas. He made it clear that He had other plans for you. God's people recognized that God had ordained (set you apart) you to the ministry and acknowledged this through an ordination service. Make no mistake; the Bible is clear, you were ordained by God, not the church, to the gospel ministry; the church only acknowledged this God-given calling. I emphasize this point because you are responsible to the Lord before you are to the Church. Reluctantly, or enthusiastically, you embraced this call to the ministry, left your nets and set out on a journey of faith following the Lord, perhaps with visions of grandeur and confidence that you would etch your name in history for your epic accomplishments. But sometime early in the ministry your idealism collided with the reality of ministry in the local church; two worlds were colliding. The people in the church you served didn't always appreciate your ideas or follow your leadership; in fact some of them could be downright ornery about it. Shortly after arriving on the field of one pastorate, I gathered the key leaders of the church and with naïve exuberance shared my vision for reaching our community with the gospel. One older woman listened to the whole presentation and when I asked for feedback commented tersely, "That was the dumbest thing I've ever heard! All of that!" To this day, my wife still uses that phrase with a smirk after I've said something she doesn't like or agree with.

All of us, at one time or another, have experienced a good dose of reality therapy and had to adjust our thinking and expectations about ministry. However, I pray that none of us have adjusted them too low or completely conceded defeat to the challenge of leading your people to be a disciple-making-disciples kind of church. The saying that everything rises or falls on leadership is true. And nothing is more important than leading your people to go into the whole world beginning at your church's doorstep to make disciples. That is the quintessential core of your ministry. If you have been in ministry for any length of time you have realized that your church members will allow you to pick up as many hats as you are willing to wear. There is rarely someone in a local church who will say to you, "Pastor, that's not your job and you should delegate it to someone else so you can do what you were called to do." We've all heard of the pooped pastor and the passive pew. Determine that it won't happen in the church you pastor. Be on guard against the tendency of your church to lure you away from your scriptural job description; to wear you out with endless meetings, events, and services that do nothing to further the gospel. Refuse to be relegated to the role of family chaplain, Sunday preacher or the director of the complaint department. Additionally, many churches have added layer over layer of traditions and events throughout their history without ever evaluating their kingdom value or eliminating some of them. Your primary role is to be an equipper of equippers and all of the forces of hell will line up to keep you from that task. Someone once pointed out that the most

active chicken in the yard is the one that just lost his head. Left to themselves, without pastoral leadership, churches will do almost anything but share their faith and make disciples. You must be bold enough to confront this fruitless busyness and refocus the church on their God-given mandate; to make disciples. As Rick Warren says, “Sometimes you need to do less to do more.” There are a few hills in ministry that are worth dying on; the hill of whether your church refocuses its energy and resources on making disciples is one of them.

Leadership isn’t always fun. It’s more agony than ecstasy; more guts than glory. But God placed you as the pastor of a church to lead them to fulfill the Great Commission. The Great Commission is fulfilled when a church is making disciples. You must lead or they will not accomplish their God-ordained purpose. You must always be that divine spark, that spiritual irritant like the proverbial grain of sand in the oyster shell if the pearl of ministry is to ever materialize. Someone defined leadership as getting God’s people to do what they know they ought to do but don’t necessarily want to do.

This document is not intended to be a treatise on leadership or whether you’re an effective leader. However, let me assure you that your success as a leader isn’t measured numerically, but by your faithfulness and perseverance in the ministry God has called you to, period. My goal for this Discipleship Process is to breathe new life and hope into your soul. To help you develop a “can-do” attitude about making disciple-making disciples even if you have very little congregational support. My goal is to assure you that what you are doing is of eternal significance. There is no more important calling in the universe than that of a pastor or missionary and you are the missionary on the field God has placed you. Charles Haddon Spurgeon told his young ministry students, “If God has called you to preach the gospel, don’t stoop to be king.” Whether you are in a small, struggling church with 20 people or a thriving church of 2000, your ministry is valid, significant, honorable, and has the potential to impact the eternal destination of any man, woman or child. Don’t sell your noble birthright for the bowl of porridge called laziness, expediency, compromise, or busyness. You can and you must lead your church to be a disciple-making church whatever it costs you. I don’t presume to be teaching you any new, dynamic truths about discipleship in this article. I do hope to remind you of some fundamental, essential truths about it and to motivate you to make Jesus’ Great Commission the mission statement of your church and your ministry. Or, as Bobby Welch used to say, “Let’s be sure that we keep the Main Thing, the main thing.”

A Definition of Discipleship

Once you have decided that making disciples and equipping others to make disciples within your church is your primary calling as a pastor, you must decide on how you will go about accomplishing this. You may even be grappling with the meaning and definition of a disciple, or discipleship. I love what Rick Warren said when asked what discipleship meant.

“Discipleship is the process of transformation that changes us to be increasingly more like Christ through the Word (John 17:17), the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18), and circumstance

(Rom. 8:28-29). Growth is both mystical and practical; God has a part (***“Only God makes things grow”*** 1 Cor. 3:7) but we have a part as well (***“...put off...and put on”***Eph. 4:22-23). Discipleship is based on continual repentance (“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” Rom. 12:1-2). It takes far more than Bible study to grow a disciple – it takes a **balance** of worship experiences, fellowship experiences, engagement with the Word, ministry experiences, and evangelism/mission experiences. Without balance there is no health, and without health, there is no growth. Jesus modeled both the method and goal of all discipleship, moving the 12 from “Come and see” to “Come and die!” over a period of three years. The strategy we’ve used for 32 years (purpose driven) is a systematic, sequential catechism that moves people along the predictable stages of discipleship from unbeliever to believer to member to maturity to ministry to mission, based on Jesus’ model. If you don’t have a process, you aren’t making disciples, because spiritual growth is **not** automatic. Discipleship is intentional, incremental, relational, covenantal, habitual, and incarnational.”

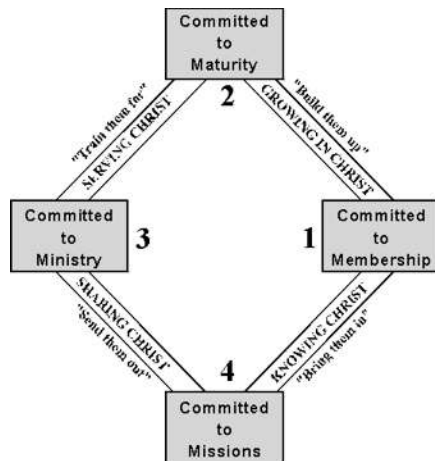
We could spend pages unpacking all there is in that short paragraph, but it is one of the best definitions I have found. He uses a word that is critical for us to understand if we are ever to be successful in making disciples; the word “process”. I believe that seeing Discipleship as a process which the whole church is responsible for is one of the most freeing, empowering realities you can embrace. You can know and believe that when you pour your wisdom, knowledge and experience into one new disciple, you are making an eternal difference in that person’s life. You are fulfilling your calling and ministry in reproducing your faith in another person. When you make disciples you don’t have to worry about whether you’re expending your energy on a fad program that will be here today and gone tomorrow. You don’t have to get your church member’s permission or blessing to make disciples; if they won’t, they are in direct disobedience to their Lord. You won’t need to “sell” your people on it as though it were one of the latest gimmicky programs; it is the clearest biblical mandate we have as believers. You cannot be more squarely in the will of God as a pastor and a believer than when you are making disciples. I would be so bold to say that those pastors who are devoting a large portion of their time each week to discipleship are the ones who are regularly welcoming new members, filling the baptistery and seeing lives transformed.

Basic Principles of Biblical Discipleship

1. Making disciples must be the biblical priority of every New Testament church, every church leader and every church member. If you find yourself in a church that has not been practicing Christ’s mandate to go and make disciples, you may need to spend considerable time teaching, preaching and casting vision among your people and key leaders. Just remember the wisdom shared in the book Simple Church; when you are growing weary of communicating the vision, your people are just beginning to get it; so don’t give up on them too soon. If your church has added layer after layer of ministries

and activities which does not make disciples or further the gospel, you may have to do the difficult and unpopular task of ending some of the busyness so the church has time, energy and resources to make disciples. As Rick Warren says, "Sometimes you have to do less to do more." Implicit within the several Scripture passages which communicate the church's responsibility to make disciples is the mandate for pastors to lead their churches to accomplish this essential task. Here are just a few such passages that you can teach and preach from: Matthew 28:18-20, II Timothy 2:2, Ephesians 4:11-13, James 1:19-27, II Peter 3:17-18, Colossians 1:25-29, John 15:1-11, I Timothy 4:6-16, II Timothy 4:1-5, Titus 2:11-15.

2. Discipleship should be seen as a process rather than a program. Programs are seen by believers as faddish and gimmicky. Programs have a beginning and ending point, but discipleship is an ongoing process every church and believer is involved in until they die or the Lord returns. Seeing discipleship as a process gives you and your members a more definite criteria by which to measure their growth as a disciple. This can help you and them. It is often difficult to see spiritual growth in a believer. By giving them a process with identifiable goals, you help them see their own progress better and it results in more victories to celebrate. Seeing these spiritual victories and milestones achieved in your people's lives breathes new life and enthusiasm into your soul and brings greater fulfillment in your ministry.
3. A church's process of discipleship should be communicated simply and clearly with the use of a visual analogy. This helps believers identify where they are in the process of becoming a fully developed follower of Jesus. Northpoint Church uses the front porch to living room to kitchen analogy. The front porch represents a person's initial involvement with the church such as worship attendance. The living room indicates that a person has joined the church and a small group where they regularly study the Bible with other believers. The kitchen indicates when a person has moved from learning and being served by the church to serving others and being able to teach others. The kitchen means you are now able to reproduce your faith in others through sharing your faith. Saddleback Valley Church uses the baseball diamond (left picture) to help members identify where they are in the process of becoming a fully developed disciple.



Lifeway's discipleship visual (right picture) shows an oval with the words, Connect, Grow, Serve, Go. This allows your members to see the areas they need to be growing in so they can evaluate whether they are a fully developed disciple. Whatever you use, believers do need a simple visual aide to quickly and accurately evaluate where they are in their relationship with the Lord and which areas of the Christian life they still need growth/maturity.

Every church/pastor should clearly and regularly communicate and define biblical discipleship for their congregation. It should be promoted from the pulpit, through church media outlets and visually with signs, banners and logos in church printed materials. It should be a key part of your new member orientation course or way of educating newcomers to your church's expectations. High expectation church's get greater commitment from new people than do low expectation churches. A discipleship process inherently brings a greater accountability among long-time members and new members. And, it is what Jesus desires for them, not just you.

4. Pastors and church leaders must model true discipleship for their members as well as teach it. More is caught than taught. Church leaders/pastors should not expect their members to do anything they aren't willing to do. The player/coach model of pastoral leadership is very effective. There is nothing more discouraging and demoralizing to a truly called pastor than being in a church where nothing is happening; where people

aren't being saved or disciplined and the baptism has been dry for some time. It is at such a time that many pastors begin looking for a new pastorate, falling prey to the greener grass syndrome, or considering another profession. You should only move if you can answer "yes" to the following two questions: "Has God given me express permission to leave this ministry?" "Have you been giving a significant portion of your time each week to personally sharing your faith with others and teaching small groups of believers in your current church?" Most studies show that it takes a pastor from 4 to 6 years to be recognized as the spiritual leader and pastor of a church. If a pastor changes churches every three or four years, they never stay long enough to gain the "leadership clout" they need to bring about necessary change and health in the church. A revolving door of pastors and leadership in a local church is a very unhealthy precedent for any church. Bloom where you're planted; having a long pastorate at your current church is your church's best hope of having new health and growth.

5. Believers in your church must be given real world opportunities to practice their faith as a disciple so that the church's discipleship process is not merely academic. We are told in James to be not only hearers of the Word, but doers. People need to put into practice Christian behaviors and practices as quickly as they learn them. This could be serving around the church in various capacities, shadowing another member in their service, community service projects, short-term mission trips. The question we all eventually ask in attempting to make disciples is "How do people really become more like Christ?" Recently, there has been a fair amount of skepticism towards our typical "set and soak", classroom/course based strategy of discipleship; this is the Learn-Feel-Do model of discipleship. A more effective model for many may be the Do-Feel-Learn. Many in our churches are not auditory/classroom learners; some are poor readers or don't learn best from reading or lecture based teaching. Many people learn by doing (kinesthetic learners) and our discipleship/evangelism training must reflect the differences in how people learn and change their behavior.

6. Believers should come to see the integral relationship between discipleship and evangelism; true discipleship will lead believers to share and reproduce their faith in others. Evangelism and discipleship go hand and hand and are not mutually exclusive areas; they are not in competition with each other in any way within the church. True discipleship carries within it the seeds of church planting and sharing our faith from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). True discipleship will immediately awaken an awareness and motivation within our members that we must have new believers to make disciples. Again, consider this portion of Saddleback Valley Church's definition of discipleship: **"The strategy we've used for 32 years (purpose driven) is a systematic,**

sequential catechism that moves people along the predictable stages of discipleship from unbeliever to believer to member to maturity to ministry to mission, based on Jesus' model."

7. A good beginning point for a believer beginning the discipleship process is a new member class which includes a spiritual gifts, temperament and personality assessment. This assessment needs to help the believer pinpoint their giftedness and area of kingdom work they are passionate about. God gives people gifts, but He also gives them various interests and passions. Several simple assessment tools are available to help a believer begin to discover their unique giftedness. Lifeway has a free online spiritual gifts assessment you can use. Aubrey Malphurs has a wide range of spiritual assessment tools in his book *Maximizing your Effectiveness*. A few giants in the faith have advocated teaching your people to take a "try them all" approach to discovering their spiritual gifts. Every believer has at least one gift, but most probably have several. If you don't currently have a new member's class, or Connections Ministry as it is called in some churches, you should strongly consider implementing one. It will help new believers and church members get off to a healthier start and, at least, partially close the revolving door of membership many churches experience. Also, it makes it more likely that new members will stick to your church. New member's classes create a congregational climate of higher expectation and accountability for new members, too. I can email you the one I used in my last pastorate if you need a starting place.

8. Church leaders/pastors should recognize that there is a big crowd and small group aspect to making disciples. The crowds followed Jesus around Israel and listened curiously to His teaching before they were willing to make a commitment to Him as Lord and Savior. No doubt, Jesus was thinking of this when He told the parable of the soils in Matthew 13. Jesus was obviously not "anti-crowd". He cast the seed of the gospel upon the vast crowds that came out to hear him preach and teach. We see in Acts that once these disciples embraced the gospel and came out of the crowds they were brought into small groups of believers to learn the "apostle's doctrine" (Acts 2:42-46). Again, it is a process. We will encounter people at every spot along a continuum from antagonistic to disinterested in the gospel, to curious about it, to those investigating the claims of the gospel to those who are convinced and ready to make a commitment to the Lord. Bill Fay in his book *"How to Share the Gospel Without an Argument"* says that the average lost person hears the gospel 7.6 times before they accept it as true. That's why sowing evangelism ministries are so important. We often do not get to be present when someone we have witnessed to makes a public decision to accept Jesus as Lord and

Savior, but our witnessing efforts were essential to their heart being prepared to embrace the gospel at a later date.

Also, your sermons should acknowledge that people of every level of receptivity to the gospel are present in your services. Andy Stanley consciously addresses and thanks “searchers/unbelievers” who are present in their services each Sunday and presents the gospel directly to them and doesn’t just talk “about” the lost and unchurched (from his book *Deep and Wide*). Be careful not to communicate too much of an “us” versus “them” or “**those** people” attitude. Instead, affirm seekers and emphasize that Christianity is one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread; that the church is more of a hospital for sinners, rather than a trophy case for saints. Encourage transparency and honesty among your members so you are creating a climate where unchurched people feel safe and welcome to come and work on the messes in their lives while Christ is transforming them into His image.

The reality is that small groups are the best place to create this kind of atmosphere that is conducive to attracting and holding new members/attendees. The Transformational Church study which looked at over 7000 churches and observed the common practices of those who were growing and making disciples found that the formation of new small groups was a common factor in their success. The solution to long-established small groups which have become closed to newcomers is to start new groups. A small group study by Willow Creek Church in Chicago found that a small group or Sunday School class will become closed to newcomers in 10 to 12 months. The growing churches recognized that you can’t always change the openness of an existing group, but you can begin a new group composed of newer members/attendees that help them make meaningful connections with other members of the church. Groups need to be kept to around 10-12 in size. The Willow Creek study found that with more than 10 active members the intimacy of the group shuts down and members become less willing to share their real struggles and questions about the faith. As a church grows some members will complain that they don’t know everyone anymore and they feel the intimacy of the church is dying. Their observation is “exactly” why new groups must continually be started. They’re right; they don’t know everyone and they only have “relational space” enough to meaningfully interact with 40-60 people. If they’ve been a member for some time and don’t know everyone well, it stands to reason that the new member knows far fewer people and are having a lonely experience in the church in the absence of a new small group to befriend them. Growing churches understand that new groups create relational space for new people to be accepted and embraced by the church. Ed Stetzer, in his book *Comeback Churches*, found that churches reversed their decline by locating and training small group leaders and then beginning new groups.

Another way of purposely getting your church members to interact with the unchurched is through community service or transformation ministries. These local community transformation ministries often become back-door evangelism as non-members and unbelievers work alongside stronger believers in your church and share life and ministry together. If you think about the great commission, we often overlook a simple but profound truth; we are commanded to “make disciples”. But who do we make disciples from, or among? New believers is my first thought, because we have traditionally thought of evangelism and discipleship as two separate tasks of the church. We reach the lost person (evangelism) and then we teach the new believer (discipleship). I have been challenged recently to reconsider this. What if “making disciples” encompasses evangelism and we are to begin with lost people making disciples, not new believers?

9. At it's core, making disciples is about growing the faith of believers. A mature disciple is one who believes God and that He will do what He said He will do. Discipleship should increase a believer's confidence in God.

Many in the evangelical world are beginning to question the heavy teaching-only approach that has been widely used by our churches. As stated above, the set and soak model isn't getting kingdom work done. II Peter 3:18 does say that we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; I am not espousing that no Christian education or Bible teaching be done. I believe, as I was taught, that education almost always precedes inspiration. But some people are educated by doing, not reading or listening to a lecture. In an era where many are hands-on learners, non-literate, or non-readers, the church needs to consider using more than one strategy for making disciples. In Andy Stanley's book *Deep and Wide* he had mature believers within his church write down what it was that grew their faith and matured them into strong, committed believers. Many things were shared but they all listed 5 things in common:

- a. Practical Teaching
- b. Private Disciplines
- c. Personal Ministry
- d. Providential Relationships
- e. Pivotal Circumstances

Any comprehensive discipleship process should include as many of these opportunities for growth as possible. Though providential relationships and pivotal circumstances would seem to be out of our control, we can create an atmosphere of humility, transparency, intentional mentoring and multiple opportunities for Christian service that is conducive to these things happening.

10. Pastors and church leaders must work with those who catch the vision initially and not become discouraged with those who won't follow or recognize the value of the new emphasis on making disciples. Don't continually grieve over the ones who are not present and accounted for. One wise pastor's advice is to play with the team that shows up. We recognize that some of you pastor churches where you have little, if any help with the task of making disciples. If that is the case, it is even more important that making disciples becomes your main objective. Don't underestimate the power of "one"; **you**. As the old prayer goes, "I am only one, but I am one; I cannot do everything, but I can do something. What I can do, I ought to do, and by the grace of God I will do." If you only made one disciple each year who, in turn, made one other disciple per year, at the end of 5 years you would have 32 disciples counting yourself. If each of those people belonged to a family of 3 people on average now you have 96 who are a part of your church or new work. At the end of 10 years you would have 1024 people if each person discipled one other person.

If you are a part of a church that can offer you little help or refuses to catch the vision of making disciples, we at the Association, can partner you with another church or group of committed believers who could make a commitment to join you for a period of time. We can help you with discipleship resources, too. Another helpful ministry we are starting at the Association is the Legacy Cohort. This monthly fellowship is for pastors of "normative" sized churches; churches with under 150 in attendance. It is called normative because over 80% of all churches in North America fit this category. The beginning point of this process would be to invite you into a "cohort", or fellowship, of other pastors who would meet on a monthly basis with me and other guest speakers to better equip you for leading your church toward health and effectiveness. You would, in turn, lead your church to rediscover and embrace their great legacy of faith as a beginning point for new growth. We believe you, the pastor, are your church's greatest hope for impacting your community with the gospel and that you have the greatest influence upon your people for leading them to positive change. We wish to come along side you with encouragement and equipping and to be an avenue for you to share your joys and struggles with other pastors.

One of my goals as your associate director of missions and a pastor to pastors is to help you to be successful at making disciples. But, more than this, I endeavor to help restore your faith in the power of the gospel, if it's been quenched by the daily grind of ministry. I want to help you replace discouragement with encouragement, despair with hope, a sense of being trapped in your ministry to feeling empowered and liberated to serve the Lord with joy and abandonment. I have always loved St. Irenaeus' profound statement, "The glory of God is man fully alive." Without making you feel too egocentric, I do believe that the Lord wants you to experience a deep abiding joy in what you do as a pastor, in spite of the negative ministry circumstances you face. As Johnny Hunt says to pastors, "it ought to be joy, brothers!"

I would be glad to come out and spend some time with you to assess your current situation and to make some recommendations. Never hesitate to call us for encouragement or consultation. We believe you know best what your church needs for health and growth, but also know that there is value in having an "outsider's" perspective on your ministry and church. We want to help you use the limited time and resources you and your church have to bring about the greatest kingdom impact. We believe that making disciples, one at a time, who, in turn, make other disciples, is essential. Remember this: you believe in the gospel; it is the one most defining experience and truth of your entire life; you believe in the Lord, God. But, never forget, that He believes in you, too. He sought you and with His redeeming blood, He bought you. He called you, first as a believer, then as a minister of the gospel. He sealed you and gifted you with His Holy Spirit and placed you into His service as a sacred vessel. Whatever else you do in life, be certain that you live up to that glorious heritage!

Helpful Resources, Links, Articles and Personnel

Articles:

Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: Dr. Tim Keller

<http://theresurgence.com/2011/02/15/leadership-church-size-dynamics>

How To Break Through the 200 to 300 Attendance Barrier: Rick Warren

<http://www.timberidge.org/images/59506/HowToBreakThroughthe200-300Barrier.pdf>

Unseen Factors Affecting the Growth of an Older, Traditional Churches: Gregg Boll
(Copies available at the Association Office, or can be emailed to you)

Websites and Resources:

Most Important Thing Website: Interactive website hosted by Oklahoma Baptist Convention but available nationally to all believers. Your members submit their testimony to the website where it is posted. You can publish business cards from your church with a blank line where those who have their testimonies on the site can offer the card to people they come in contact with throughout the day. Those people can go to the website and read your people's testimonies at their convenience and other people's testimonies along with a concise presentation of the gospel. This is a great form of evangelism because it allows your church members to share their faith and make connections with unchurched/lost people they see each day, but who don't have the time for a lengthy conversation about the Bible or salvation.

<http://www.mostimportantthing.org/>

Evangelism Response Center of the North American Mission Board: A 24 hour internet and phone hotline that presents the gospel and gives counsel after people see the 800 number or website address on various advertising, media outlets, and other materials

your church distributes in your community. <http://www.erconline.net/erconlinepb.aspx?pageid=16616>

Find It Here Website, Gospel Brochure and Bibles for Distribution: Operated by the S.B.C. It is an interactive website with answers to common questions about the Christian Faith, a church finder tab so they can find S.B.C. churches in their community, testimonies of other new believers and access to the 24 hour spiritual hotline by phone or live chat. This website is promoted on a cardstock quality brochure available from N.A.M.B. or your state convention and is printed on the Find it Here Bibles for mass distribution which are a part of the G.P.S. evangelism initiative of the M.B.C.

<http://www.findithere.com/>

Books:

Transformational Church: Ed Stetzer and Tom Rainer

Transformational Discipleship; How People Really Grow: Eric Geiger, Michael Kelly, Philip Nation

The Lazarus Effect; New Life For Declining Churches: Harvey Kneisel

Questioning Evangelism; Engaging People's Hearts the Way Jesus Did: Randy Newman

Evangelism Without Additives: Jim Henderson

Every Church Guide to Growth: Elmer Towns

Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too: Ed Stetzer

Deep & Wide; Creating Churches Unchurched People Love To Attend: Andy Stanley

Healthy Congregations: Peter L. Steinke

Truth That Sticks: Avery Willis, Jr. and Mark Snowden

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