

# Imagining a new church: Disciples, not members

by [Glenn McDonald](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

As the organizing pastor of a suburban congregation, I have experienced firsthand its faltering first steps, its seasons of growth and drought, and the Spirit's persistent attempts to help us identify and embrace the vision of God's own choice. Quite frankly, we've resisted the vision. We've settled for many comfortable "second bests" until prodded, pushed and forcibly compelled to have our spiritual eyesight checked.

I am not a member of that small slice of the leadership pie that relishes radical change. Sit with me sometime at my favorite restaurant. Every time I go there I pick up the menu and read the descriptions of various entrees. Why do I do that? I've been to that restaurant at least 75 times, and I already know what I'm going to order. It's going to be either the Charleston salad or the chili. The server will come by the table and say, "We have a special today. It's Cajun fried orange roughy with sautéed vegetables." "Boy, that sounds great," I say. "I'll have the chili."

Most congregations also prefer predictable entrees, no matter what God happens to be serving. The gravity of familiarity pulls us to the safety of tried-and-true patterns.

The development of our congregation has involved envisioning the future and reaching for the courage to embrace it. Our first 15 years may be broken roughly into three five-year periods, in which our vision has been informed by decidedly different sources.

Looking back, it's clear that our earliest vision was not so much purpose-centered as it was driven by the vagaries of demographics. Our church was established according to the Burger King model: that is, one look at the growing periphery of Indianapolis revealed that the northwest side needed a new outlet of our denominational franchise. If we built it they would come. And we all knew who "they" were—Presbyterians and other mainline churchgoers who had moved into houses in the area.

Yes, our original mission statement appropriately hinted at the need to reach unchurched people. But none of us had any idea how to tackle such an ideal. We had never talked to unchurched people to learn what they were seeking. We eagerly and effectively organized a congregation that essentially amounted to a warm version of the church of our collective memory. We gave birth to a "family church"—a haven for convinced church attenders. Despite our functional ignorance of the Great Commission during those first five years, God graciously blessed us and Sunday attendance began to grow.

When we reached 250 worshipers each week I began to notice some changes. First of all, I was exhausted. Driven by the self-imposed expectation that every decision ought to cross my desk and every family room deserved my personal presence at least once a year, I began to despair that I would ever escape the sensation of fatigue.

Our growing congregation and growing list on Sunday mornings—combined with my growing family at home—began to overwhelm me. Increasingly I felt guilty every time I made a call or headed to the office. "I should be home right now," I reckoned. "What kind of husband and father am I?" Sitting at home I found myself thinking, "I should be out making calls tonight. What kind of pastor am I?" The frenzy of attempting to keep all the balls in the air at the same time and the accelerating anxiety of falling short both at home and at work began to crush me. I yearned for a different way to do ministry.

About the same time I began to notice that more than half of our attenders seemed to have ended up at the wrong franchise. They knew little or nothing of our denominational distinctiveness. Increasingly we attracted young families who had no church pedigree whatsoever. Slowly we began to rethink our target audience. Instead of positioning our young congregation as a homing beacon for "our kind of people," we began to imagine what it would be like to make a dent in the 59 percent of county residents who identified themselves as unchurched.

This realization hit home with special force one Sunday at the end of an inquirers class. In the presence of several dozen potential new members I fell on my pastoral sword, admitting shamefacedly that I hadn't yet made a home visit to a single one of them. I was shocked to see the palpable relief on their faces. "Oh, you don't need to do that," they assured me. "Why would you want to visit us, anyway?" They professed dread at the thought of having to clean up their family rooms to receive a

guest. An unchurched inquirer stated meekly, "I have no idea what you'd expect me to say to you . . . or even to serve you as a snack!" A new world was dawning before my eyes, a world in which traditional pastoral expectations just might be set aside. These young new members weren't encumbered by the notion that laypeople were incapable of doing ministry. They expected to contribute. I began to ask myself, "How might we rethink our church so that everyone might make a difference?"

The result was a frenetically exciting second five years informed by a new vision—a vision of a decentralized ministry style, one that saw the termination of standing committees (which our members had generally experienced as fruitless and boring) and the arrival of dozens of small groups and ministries. Our emphasis shifted from the-pastor-does-it-all to a spotlight on the gifts and calling bestowed on every believer by the Holy Spirit. Scores of individuals moved from Sunday spectators to ministry players.

Two of the outcomes of this new approach to ministry—outcomes I had assumed were mutually exclusive—were the multiplication of new members and less stress for the pastor. My work load actually lessened as the congregation tripled in size.

We had reason to celebrate. But with time the poverty of our church's vision became gnawingly apparent. Yes, there were more people on site. They were certifiably more assimilated than ever. They were even being managed in a way that affirmed their gifts and calls. Christ, however, sent his followers not to manage, but to transform ordinary men and women into full-fledged disciples. I became haunted by our numbers, the very numbers that looked so good on the denominational spreadsheet. What had our growth accomplished? We had multiplied the number of people who really had no clue how to obey Christ as Lord every hour of every day.

Our vision had first been demographically driven and then ministry-driven. How could it be driven by the Master's call to make disciples? On my watch a church had grown up filled with members who deeply admired Mother Teresa but had no idea how to *imitate* Mother Teresa.

For that matter, my teaching and preaching had never seriously floated the notion that people *ought* to be as devoted in body, mind and spirit as that little Albanian nun. She was applauded by us all as a splendid aberration. During times of wrestling with God and in rereading the teachings of Jesus, I uncomfortably came to see that for ten years I had failed to challenge the American assumption that affluent

Christians can enjoy the benefits of a life with God without seriously compromising their lifestyles.

Today our leadership team is working to demonstrate how all those called to our congregation might fulfill God's primary mandate: to become lifelong learners, or disciples, of Jesus Christ. We set before the congregation the ideal of *six marks of the disciple*. These include a heart for Christ alone, a mind transformed by the word, arms of love, knees for prayer, a voice to speak the good news and a spirit of sacrifice.

After years of upholding a model whereby a hundred believers send one of their number to "go be a missionary" on a foreign piece of geography, it's not easy to admit that we didn't quite get it right. What we meant to model was the sending of one of our number to be a foreign missionary—to learn a new language, to understand a local culture, to sacrifice the amenities of affluence and to live knowing that he or she is always being watched by seekers—while the rest of us stay here as lifetime *local* missionaries, learning to speak the language of the unchurched, understanding secular culture, sacrificing the amenities of affluence and living as a "watched" person in a society that is skeptical of Christian spirituality until it sees the real thing on display.

We soon realized that a church in the Spirit would do things differently, beginning with church membership classes. The "soft sell" that many churches give to those who are exploring church membership is truly tragic. Years ago, as I spoke farewells to those who had attended the last session of a particular inquirers class—the very meeting in which I sought to "close the deal" of bringing new members on board—I noticed that two young couples stayed behind, talking intently with each other. Neither of these couples had ever belonged to a congregation. They looked worried.

"Can I answer any questions for you?" I asked. "Well," they stammered, "we're not quite sure we're ready to make such a huge commitment."

"What's troubling you exactly?"

"There's attendance, for one thing," said one of the men. "I'm not sure we can be here every Sunday of the year."

"Oh, don't worry about that!" I assured them. I watched the tension flee from their faces as I described what amounted to the least common denominator of church

involvement—the kind of behavior in God's people to which I had accommodated myself years earlier.

They smiled. They joined the church. They participated irregularly.

I wish I could have a second shot at that conversation. I wish I had been wise enough to honor the genuine tension in their faces and their sincere contemplation of perfect attendance for the Lord. It occurred to me about that time that the Zionsville Rotary Club was asking me to make a greater commitment of involvement—and promising swift retribution if I fell short—than I had ever dreamed of demanding of church members. And I was the leader of the community pledged to transform human history.

The more our congregation focused on discipleship, the more it was necessary to rethink the meaning of membership. For several years I found myself torn between two parables. On the one hand Jesus declares that his followers are to be a city set on a hill. Shadowy, half-hearted disciples need not apply. This is the parable of exclusiveness.

On the other hand, Jesus also describes the kingdom as a dragnet that ensnares everything within reach. The angels will separate the trout from the carp at the end of the age. Until then there is a mingling of the faithful and the pretenders. This is the parable of inclusiveness. How might these parables speak to the openness of our front door?

After years of experimentation and reflection—and membership protocols that tended to err on the side of inclusiveness—our staff came to the conclusion that our membership process could and should be far more than a perfunctory series of classes. We've elected to challenge our inquirers to a seven-week series of interactions with staff members, lay leaders and other inquirers that clearly communicates the mission of our church and actually initiates the behaviors that are consistent with being a disciple of Jesus. This ministry consists of four main features.

First, we explore with integrity our inquirers' commitment to Christ. Membership in a PCUSA congregation is predicated on a simple three-word confession: "Christ is Lord." What is our responsibility in discerning the authenticity of the one who speaks? I am a reasonably observant person. It's not hard to read the face of the bored or resistant husband in the inquirers class whose expression fairly shouts, "I'm here because *she* wants me to do this. Now let's get this over with."

We have begun to include in our membership process a talk on the dangers of spiritual perjury. As Jesus put it, by our own words we will be acquitted and by the public statements we make we will be condemned. We clearly teach that it does not matter what path we have followed to faith, or precisely when we came to faith, but it is crucial that we do now stand in faith before God. We present the good news of Jesus and insist that the salvation offered in the Bible requires a response of the whole person. Those who have unanswered questions are invited to meet with a staff person. During almost every class, a discerning leader identifies an inquirer who needs further reflection, more time or more information to make a decision. Honest discussion over a lunch follows. Occasionally we recommend that an inquirer postpone joining until he or she has come to a threshold of spiritual clarity. We do our best to prevent members from crossing their fingers during a public confession.

Second, we present and carefully analyze the mission, vision and values of the congregation. We demonstrate how the six marks of a disciple are the behaviors that alone are able to move a mission statement ("Growing and serving together in Christ so that all may know his love") from the front of the Sunday bulletin to one's calendar, purse and mind.

Growing up in his native India, author Ravi Zacharias used to participate in a strange event called the slow cycling race. The goal of the race was not to take off as soon as the gun sounded, but to move as slowly as possible. In fact, it was best if you could remain standing still on your bicycle, your feet not touching the ground. The goal of the race was to come in last. Some competitors were so adept at staying stationary that the distance of the race was only a few yards.

Imagine a visiting cycling champion from another country standing there before the gun sounds. He sees everyone get on a bike and he thinks, "I wish I could be in this race and teach these beginners a few things about cycling." If he's offered the opportunity, imagine his astonishment when at the sound of the gun he speeds off and breaks through the tape first, only to look back and see the rest of the cyclists still at the starting line trying to balance their motionless bikes. Imagine his astonishment when he discovers that he has finished *last* even though he crossed the line *first*.

It pays to know the purpose of a race before we try to win it. It pays to know the purpose of involvement in the body of Christ before we speed off, assuming we're winning, when in fact we can't even state the reason that Christ has called us to be

part of his body. We people entering our congregation to have a full awareness of and a growing commitment to our mission and values—and an idea of what it would look like to live them out.

Third, every inquirer completes a form designed especially for our congregation that tests for 20 spiritual gifts. One of the sessions of the new member process at our church is reserved for teaching about the gifts and call the Spirit bestows on every believer. By appointment at a later time, every inquirer spends up to an hour with a member of the Ambassadors, a team of "involvement interviewers" who have a keen awareness of the 75 or so ministries of our church. The interviewer assesses the background, interests, experiences, gifts, concerns and dreams of the new member and works to make appropriate "ministry matches," contacting ministry leaders on behalf of the inquirer, and staying in touch with these new members for up to six months to help them over the rough spots of assimilation.

We have discovered that members new and old regularly need a refresher course on these matters, so they are highlighted annually from the pulpit. One Sunday in September is set aside for a morning-long Ministry Fair that allows publicity for the ministries, opportunities to interact with team leaders, and recruitment of volunteers. Every year we revise and update a strategic booklet, which includes printed descriptions of ministries and team leader phone numbers for every functioning group and ministry in the church. Several Sundays a month I invite members and guests to pick up a Guidebook at our welcome center and consider their next step of involvement in the kingdom.

Fourth, we have added homework to our inquirers process. All new members write out and submit (for discussion with a staff person) a personal plan for spiritual growth, specifying how they intend to build the values of discipleship into their lives. Without an action plan we don't get very far. This personalized document is ideally the doorway to moving into a small group, a retreat experience, Sunday or midweek class, mission endeavor, and an ongoing commitment to spiritual disciplines.

I've been watching birds off and on for about 30 years. Early on I thought the key achievement in bird watching was to tally up a huge life list of the birds I had seen. I kept adding to my list by going on hikes with skilled guides. They could see and hear things I could never pick up. I remember being on a hike when one of my guides said, "Now up in that tree there's a cerulean warbler." Cerulean warblers are tiny birds, turquoise blue, with magically beautifully voices. I looked and I looked. I could

hear it, but I couldn't see it. But my guides had spotted it, and I was with the guide, so I marked it down. At the time it was gratifying to put another check on my life list, but today I feel differently. Today I want to see a cerulean warbler for myself.

What is my deepest wish for those entering our congregation? It is that when it comes to Jesus Christ, they will insist on seeing him for themselves—never being satisfied with somebody else's prayers, somebody else's service, somebody else's experience of the power and presence of God. May there be no spiritual hitchhikers in the church, but only those who with integrity can say that Christ is Lord, and *their* Lord.

*This article is adapted from Imagining a Church in the Spirit: A Task for Mainline Congregations, by Glenn McDonald and Ben Campbell Johnson, which was published by Eerdmans.*