

Whose transformation?

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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I once had occasion to meet with a potential confirmation student at a Subway restaurant. He was 6 feet tall, dressed like a punk and played in a rock band. I fed him a sandwich and tried to explain why he should invest two years of Sunday afternoons studying the art of Christian discipleship. I suddenly realized, sitting across from him, that after 15 years in ministry, I still didn't know how to witness to someone about my faith.

Around that same time, I was encouraged by my Presbytery to learn about church transformation: how churches can be revitalized for regrowth. I went to a lot of workshops on this topic. They covered spiritual practices and the importance of becoming more *missional*. There were workshops on how to connect with the neighborhood and turning committees into Task Forces, Teams or Ministries. But more than any of that, I was discerning that transformation is not just about what happens in a church. It's also about what happens in a person.

The church I served during those years was not "transformed" for growth. In fact, it died. But I think *I* was transformed through experiences like the one with the teenage boy. I am slowly learning to be transformed by my faith, and learning how to transmit my enthusiasm about discipleship to others.

If we wonder why our churches are shriveling, maybe one simple reason is because we don't know how to encourage evangelism and discipleship. For our parents and grandparents' generations, this was done by procreation and acculturation into a society that transmitted Christian doctrine and practice through familiar cultural rituals. For some churches today, it is done with guilt and coercion. These methods of spreading the gospel no longer work for many of us in the mainline traditions.

Today, I see Christian discipleship as more of an alternative lifestyle. To attract someone to this life perhaps requires an alternative kind of evangelism. Madeline L'Engle once wrote,

We do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

How can we do this? This [article from \*Sojourners\*](#), written by a fitness coach, is a little bit strident, maybe, but it speaks of the need for churches to consider our task of making disciples more seriously, and then “get to work” doing it, instead of just talking about it.

I’m learning that “transformation” is what should be happening to *us* as God’s people. If we allow ourselves to be transformed, maybe the church will be transformed, too. I am one who needs to “get fit” spiritually, and I yearn for a church where I can practice discipleship alongside others.

How do you want to be transformed?

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