

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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Last year I was at Willow Creek when the **REVEAL** study was released and discussed. It became a significant discussion among the ministerial staff of the Great Rivers Region last Fall. For those of you who are not familiar with it, **REVEAL** is a report of internal research at Willow led by Greg Hawkins. You can purchase the book, check out its website ( <http://www.revealnow.com> ), or read a critique of the study from a sociological perspective ( <http://brewright.blogspot.com/2007/11/review-of-reveal-where-are-you-by-greg.html> ).

The study was a serious self-examination driven by concern for the spiritual development of those who attended Willow. In the opening pages of their report, Hawkins and Parkinson state: "The health of your church is not just about numbers. It's about the movement of people toward Christ, toward deep love for God and genuine love for others." I would call that "discipleship," which is my point in this essay.

The findings were startling to the ministerial staff at Willow. Fully one-fourth of those interviewed at Willow described themselves as "spiritually stalled" or dissatisfied. In other words, they did not feel like they were going anywhere in their discipleship. That was painful enough, but even more painful was the discovery that there was no relationship between participation in church program activities and long-term spiritual growth. In fact "the higher the level of engagement, the more likely it is that satisfaction with the church [in terms of its contribution to personal discipleship] will be lukewarm." These persons remained faithful church attenders, above average tithers, dependable volunteers and diligent in their personal spiritual disciplines. They appeared to be mature Christians, but they were dissatisfied with their spiritual development and lukewarm about the church's contribution to their discipleship.

Many critics of Willow Creek have been quick to shout "I told you so," but they miss the point. The glaring light of the terrifying question "What difference does the church make in discipleship?" needs to be turned on every church. If the same questions that Willow Creek asked itself were asked in your church, what would you discover?

I am not interested in either defending or attacking Willow Creek. I also do not want to begin a critical analysis of their research methodology—mainly because their findings ring true to me. Further, I do not think the situation is limited to Willow Creek or churches like them. Over ten years ago I came to the conclusion that churches in America were increasingly failing the task of discipleship. I was not alone in that conclusion. That was a painful confession for someone who started as a Christian educator. We had organized and programmed with great skill. We memorized Bible verses. We had produced books and curriculum without end. We used the most up-to-date media available. We planned mission trips and retreats. We kept everybody busy. But, in the final analysis, we were too often failing the last command of Christ, "Go and make disciples." While "fail" may be too strong a word (remember 75% of the Willow Creek respondents were more or less satisfied with their progress in discipleship), it should be very

troubling that the longer a person is in church the less relevant the church seems to their discipleship. Significant numbers of persons are gathered into the community of faith, but then either “stall out,” remain faithful but dissatisfied, or leave.

Organization and programming is not the problem. Neither is memorizing Bible verses or selecting good curriculum resources. I think we got distracted. We became over-reliant on activity (organization, programming, etc, etc.). We also (unconsciously) forgot that discipleship is fundamentally about transformation, not information.

I have come to believe that there are five important components of Christian discipleship. Discipleship is *spiritual*, in that it must be a life directed toward God. Discipleship is *relational*, in that it demands community life with others. Discipleship is *narrational*, in that it participates in particular story—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is *behavioral*, in that it is reflected in the way I speak and act. Discipleship is *continual*, in that I never “arrive” and that the faith community in which I live will include persons at different places along that continuum.

As I read my New Testament, it is evident to me that these things do not happen apart from a community of faith. I love what Lesslie Newbigin said: “The greatest apologetic for the Gospel is and always has been a community that actually lives by the Gospel.” The book of Acts describes all kinds of things that happen when discipleship is nurtured in the community of faith: believers come to Christ, Spiritual disciplines are practiced, the Holy Spirit is manifest, the Gospel is proclaimed, leaders emerge, ministry abounds, stewardship multiplies, missionaries go, hospitality welcomes, and the Kingdom grows.

Before long, your church will be planning for next year. The plans will involve recruiting volunteers and budgeting resources. I invite you to ask scary questions. What difference does our church make in the discipleship of those who attend here? Have we become so focused on yesterday’s activities of discipleship that we never ask what is actually happening to the spirituality of those in and around us? When others look at us do they see the Gospel alive, active and attractive, or do they see self-centered busyness? Are we allocating resources and energy for the last thing Jesus told us to do?

