

# Thinking Like Disciples

William Obalil

**P**eter Drucker says there are just two questions: What's our business? How's our business? Our business is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. To know how we're doing, we need a clear picture of what Christian disciples are. Don't we mean people who do the work of Jesus in their daily activities, witness to God's kingdom in all the contexts they inhabit, and embody the Holy Spirit for their neighbors? Those capacities require a new way of thinking...and more, but not less. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." (Romans 12:2) When we discern the will of God, there is still the matter of courage and stamina to do it. But there's not much virtue in whomping up grit and guts if we don't know where to go with them.

I fear not many weekly churchgoers are equipped to integrate what we hear and affirm in church with the concrete choices faced each day – at home, school, work, and marketplace. The result is functional atheism.

Much of the time we operate as if God were not an active factor, let alone the decisive factor, in our decision-making. Yes, we engage discrete religious practices. We go to church. We pray. We read the Bible. We give time and money to acts of mercy. Many pastors would be thrilled if every one of their members did all that. But we also act without considering God as a force to be reckoned with. We weigh a purchase, asking, "Can I afford it?" but not, "Am I being a faithful steward?"

We vote our pocketbooks and not our faith, perhaps because we've been convinced that faith and politics don't mix, or perhaps because we don't know quite how to mix them responsibly (and we've been scared off by some examples we've seen). We customarily explain what we experience in psychological categories ("He has a big ego." "She's depressed."), economic categories (supply and demand), and political categories (human rights). Are we equally adept at using Christian categories (sin, grace, idolatry, shalom, new creation) to understand our lives?

I envision church leaders, as they balance local programming and mission giving in the church budget, who know that "Charity begins at home" and "God helps those who help themselves" are not in the book of Proverbs – or any other part of the Bible.

I envision Christians who can thoughtfully ask whether consumerism may be more than a secular activity, whether it may be an alternative religious faith, like Baal worship was for Elijah's folk –

involving a standard of value and a locus of trust other than God.

I envision followers of Jesus who are grounded in biblical notions of hospitality as well as in political notions of national security as they enter the debate about immigration.

I envision church members adopting a "green" lifestyle not simply from fear of eco-disaster but to fulfill the sacred calling to be faithful stewards of God's creation.

I envision worshippers who witness to their neighbors how God in Christ is transforming their lives right now and not just changing their destination upon death. Some Christians already do all this. Many who fill the pew each week do not.

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Our daily decisions involve an endless conversation (mostly subconscious) over questions like, "What's going on here? What is good and valuable? What is trustworthy, wise, and effective?" The people of my church have sophisticated training in medicine, education, psychology, manage-

ment, economics, engineering, and the physical sciences. That training provides assumed perspectives, habitual approaches, and trusted truths for answering those questions. Their training may not be hostile to Christian faith, but it seldom includes explicitly Christian perspectives, approaches, and truth claims. It is up to the church to provide sophisticated theological training that can hold its own in that inner dialogue – so that Christian ideas, stories, and values can effectively shape their actions. They will get it nowhere else. Congregations are the seminaries of lay ministry.<sup>1</sup>

From a recent "conversation" with Loren Mead, I have culled three principles for theological education in congregations.

**1** *Focus on people who are in transition: new members, new retirees, new committee members.* People in transition are more open to change — and to God. *Beginnings* and *Alpha* and other programs offered to those entering the congregation try to shape expectations before people sink into less challenging patterns. With some success we have targeted our invitation to *Beginnings* to new members, new parents, confirmation parents, and newlyweds.

What if Christian imagination could see retirement as "new work," not "no work"? I've seen it happen — capable, experienced, and vigorous people, freed from the rigors of earning money, take on a new ministry involvement with zest, and are open to ministry training.

The Jesus Corps for all those who missed the Peace Corps in their youth – and just in time for Baby Boomers retiring!

2 *Reflect theologically on what people already do.* “...the clearest path to theological discovery rises from engagement with the life of the world, through the ministry of ordinary people.”<sup>2</sup> My most formative course in divinity school was an action/reflection seminar. We presented case studies from our ministry settings. Two professors and the handful of students pondered, questioned, and challenged the presenter’s plans. I was in charge of a church-sponsored day camp in a Chicago neighborhood just west of Ashland Avenue, which had fallen as a racial barrier that kept African-Americans to the east. I wanted to racially integrate the day camp for the first time, recruiting students from neighborhood schools.

Professor Al Pitcher, veteran civil rights advocate, asked, “Why on earth would you want to do that?” It wasn’t that he thought I was wrong (though he was afraid I was). He wanted me to think about the role of the church in social justice and change. He wanted me to think seriously about culturally embedded sin and what it takes to redeem it. He wanted me to think why, as a temporary pastoral presence who would be gone come September, I would start such a project. His questions motivated and structured all my subsequent theological study.

You’d think I would have learned from my experience and offered such “seminars” for the members of my churches. I never have. Yet maybe there is something here to convince our people that theological study is not just another “add-on,” but integral to living an authentic, joyous, and fulfilled Christian life.

3 *Provide a full curriculum, not just a few courses from time to time for individual growth.*<sup>3</sup> Why? “Members of congregations need to be challenged beyond religious dilettantism to serious, long-term engagement with the stuff of the faith. Ministry in the twenty-first century is going to demand persons equipped with the biblical story and with working theologies that translate into working-world realities.”<sup>4</sup> As areas of study, Mead’s chart for curriculum planning<sup>5</sup> includes the literature of faith, the people of faith, the life and ministry of faith. It also names three tracks: beginner, advanced, and post-retirement.

Whew! What a daunting task! The responsibility for it will fall upon those already stressed with anxiety over institutional survival. It will take a marathon effort, not a sprint. It may require partnership among neighboring churches to muster the leadership and the critical mass of learners to offer more than now-and-then study (as we partner with other churches to provide Stephen Ministry training). And if seminaries could reinvent themselves to train Christian leaders and not just ordained leaders, taking their resources to clusters of churches instead of asking students to go to the seminary (a sort of seminary Chautauqua), what a gift that might be! I believe the enthusiasm generated by committed key people can power growth over the long haul.

There are obstacles.

- *Not enough time.* When we offer a class that people have asked for but then few attend, what we hear is, “I really want to come, but I just don’t have time.” Yet these busy people make room for what they think is important. So I suspect the “time” obstacle is a sign of a deeper resistance.
- *The amateur v. professional mindset.* Seldom if ever expressed, the operative understanding of most congregations is that the pastors and paid staff are the ministry professionals and the rest are just amateurs. Only the pros need the training. NFL players go to training camp. Weekend warriors just hit the field. It is a Christendom model in which the staff members do ministry and the congregation members come to church to receive and support ministry. So we probably can’t change Christian education without a...
- *Paradigm shift in the congregation.* Expectations for membership and leadership must shift. Those incredibly busy leaders

in Church Council, Sunday School and Choir must somehow commit to serious study and spiritual formation. Out of a planning retreat, our Church Council members committed to enroll in at least one adult education event, join one church-sponsored service ministry in the community, and invite at least

one neighbor to church in a year. A few Church Council members agreed to monitor and report progress at each meeting. At the end of the year, the adult education pledge garnered the least support, less than 50%. It won’t be easy.

I am sobered by my own words. I know good things are happening in my church and in many. *Companions in Christ*, *Beginnings*, book study groups, Bible study groups, and especially *Disciple* have helped our members mature, emerge into leadership, and get excited about further theological study. Maybe it will take more time for the experience of the few to become the commitment of the many. And maybe it will take the vision of church leaders backed by prayer, courage, and stamina to challenge church members into new dimensions of discipleship. I don’t think Christ’s life, death, and resurrection were necessary to establish religious institutions with dues-paying members and expanding professional staffs. Christ came to rescue us from a dead-end way of thinking and living, to free us for a new way of thinking and living that he both models and empowers. Let us learn to think like his disciples that we may live like his disciples. □

1 Loren Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow* (The Alban Institute, 1993) p. 43ff. For anyone who wants to lead a shift from gathering church members to making Christian disciples, this book is a valuable read.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 47

3 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.



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