

Get Ready for the Biggest Paradigm Shift Ever

Last weekend I preached at a thriving megachurch in Newnan, Georgia, near Atlanta. Although Crossroads Church has a Southern Baptist affiliation, the worship is more energetic than many charismatic churches I've visited. Crossroads packs huge crowds into its sanctuary on weekends, although most of the people are masked and socially distanced these days. The pandemic hasn't stopped this church from reaching their community.

The most unique thing about Crossroads is its commitment to small-group ministry. During any given week, people take part in more than two dozen healing ministries—offering everything from divorce recovery to grief counseling to freedom from addictions or sexual abuse. New believers gather in small groups, so they can grow in their faith.

The church's pastor, Ken Adams, loves to preach the Word from his pulpit, but he's an unusual leader because he believes Christians can't grow without small groups and close relationships. He knows he's not the star of the show. He knows Sunday morning church isn't enough. That's why he organized a Discipleship Summit last weekend to encourage his members to embrace the call to biblical discipleship.

During the summit, my mentor of 47 years, Barry St. Clair, asked me to join him on the stage. We sat on stools and told the story of how he invited me to be a part of a small youth discipleship group when I was only 15. I shared how Barry not only taught me the basics of the Christian life but also modeled what it means to make disciples. His humble example inspired me to spend most of my adult life mentoring younger people; now my disciples do the same.

When I was at Crossroads this weekend I could sense that what was happening there was not an isolated phenomenon; it is evidence of a sweeping tsunami that will reshape the church in this decade. All across this nation and the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to reevaluate our core priorities. It has shoved us into an uncomfortable realization that business as usual will never work again.

God is using this crisis to prune away dead branches, so we can bear more fruit. Are you ready for the shift? I've described below some of the ways the Holy Spirit is renewing our wineskins so we can contain what He is sending:

1. **We are shifting from quantity to quality.** In the days before COVID, pastors measured success by what we called "the ABC's of ministry"—attendance, buildings and cash. We assumed we were successful if we had big crowds in a nice building. But the apostle Paul said ministry made with wood, hay and stubble will burn up when tested by God's holiness (see 1 Cor. 3:12-13).

Just because a sanctuary is full of people doesn't mean we are making strong followers of Jesus. Don't evaluate your success by worldly standards.

2. **We are shifting from spectators to disciples.** Churches that already had strong small group ministry before the pandemic have thrived during this last year. But churches that put all their resources into big congregational events have been shut down or have lost huge percentages of their membership. Church growth expert Thom Rainer predicts that 20% or more of marginal churchgoers (who were not connected to any small group) will never return after COVID.

Jesus didn't call us to make churchgoers. He never intended His followers to just sit in pews year after year, listening to the same sermons. He told them, "Go therefore, and make

disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). He certainly did not want His followers to remain spiritual infants; He invites us all to grow up and do the works that He did.

3. **We are shifting from big events to small groups.** There's nothing wrong with big gatherings. I love to worship with a crowd. But when we made the church about the crowd, we created a Frankenstein's monster that doesn't resemble the original church in the book of Acts. People don't effectively grow if their only input comes from a weekly or monthly 30-minute sermon. They need discipleship in a close-knit environment with supportive relationships.

We live in a world full of fear, loneliness and abuse. And that's a big reason many people would never set foot in a big church full of strangers. Their social anxiety prevents them from walking into a concert-style arena to hear a sermon. But they would consider visiting your home for a meal or a small group study. Why are we making it so hard for people?

4. **We are shifting from unapproachable celebrities to accessible servants.** We have lived through the era of the rock star preacher, and this fad will fade. True ministers of the gospel don't allow people to worship them. When we embrace the idea that all Christians can make disciples—not just the most eloquent or the highest paid—we will impact the multitudes like the early church did.

Ministers who lead like Jesus aren't afraid to empower others, and they aren't afraid of their followers being more successful than they are. In fact, they want their disciples to surpass them. The faster we shift away from the celebrity model, and embrace Christlike humility, the sooner we will reach the world with the gospel. {eoa}