

STUCK TO UNSTUCK

Sharpening the Mission & Ministry of the Church



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INTRODUCTION

You've prepared for this all week. You've studied, trained, planned, practiced, and organized. You've readied yourself mentally, spiritually, and physically for the grueling effort to come. You want to give your best, lay it all on the line; your coaches and teammates are counting on you. Now, it's gametime. It all comes down to execution. But to be successful, two things have to be certain in your mind: the objective and your own part in making that a reality.

Most of us have participated in athletics on a sports team in the past. If we haven't, then perhaps we've watched as others we know and love have. We understand the dynamics involved. But when gametime arrives, we watch to see if we are able to accomplish all we hoped and dreamed of achieving. Our desire is to win the game.

To be sure, ministry in church is not a game. It is a life-transforming experience for all involved with eternal consequences. This puts it on a whole different level of reality and impact. But for our purposes here, it can help us understand our objective and role in the work where we currently find ourselves.

In sports, the objective is to win, and in most instances that means scoring more points than the opponent before the game is over. For that to happen, each teammate has to understand and accomplish his or her role in the game plan. We all have to do our part.

In ministry, what is the objective? This gets fuzzy for a lot of people in ministry, and this fuzziness can contribute to our struggle.

Some think the objective is to have the most people present at our weekend services, but the Bible never says that. Some think the objective is to generate a lot of interest in the creative and innovative ways we do church “for the unchurched;” however, the Bible never commands that. Some think the goal is to build an impressive facility that will be “the talk of the town,” which everyone from miles around will want to come and see. Again, the Bible doesn’t suggest this, at all.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

What the Bible does say is ***the church exists to make disciples***. In the Great Commission, this is clearly and explicitly stated, when Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20a). This is the objective, and it’s not open for negotiation. Jesus has mandated it to us all. His mission is now our mission.

In my experience, ***this is the first obstacle most churches face: they aren’t clear about what they are trying to accomplish in the experiences of church life***. Most churches don’t focus or given enough thought to what they are hoping to see happen in the life of their people. Even more of them have not taken the time to figure out how to know if they are successful in getting their members to this objective. Perhaps this is part of the reason struggling churches seem stuck and unable to move forward; they haven’t clearly defined the way forward for those they are seeking to assist. Often, they are simply lost in the busyness of “doing church.”

So, ***we must, first of all, adopt the mission Jesus has given to us***. What do we believe God has called us to see happen in the lives of the people who are a part of our church? Another way to say this might be, what are the acceptable and blessed ways for a person in our church to become a fully mature disciple, even if that means they may leave us some day to fulfill the Lord’s will in another place or with another group of people (think missionaries, “preacher boys,” church planting teams, etc.)?

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- Do we believe our mission here is to make disciples?
- Do we have other objectives that are more important to us than making disciples?
- Is anything competing with or rivaling the attention and resources we invest in making disciples?
- **THE MISSION OF OUR CHURCH IS ...**

In the world of revitalization and replanting, we like to say that success is *“making disciples who make disciples that results in the community being noticeably better”* So, the goal is achieved when reproducing disciples are producing evidence that is impacting the community for Christ.

HOW DO WE ACCOMPLISH THIS?

Good question! Unless you have determined what actually is involved in the making of a disciple and spelled it out for the congregation to understand, then you will again not be able to tell if you’ve actually “made” one.

What needs to happen through the Spirit’s transforming work in the church to mature a disciple? At this point, you and your church leadership have to “own” whatever description you determine to be the best understanding for the church. And you have to “own” the metrics to determine whether or not the participants have arrived at the point needed.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- What characteristics need to be seen in a disciple’s life?
- What behaviors need to be evidenced in a disciple’s life?
- How do we evaluate the character of a disciple’s life?
- How are we helping a disciple strengthen his or her weak areas and deal with sin in life?
- Where do we see evidence of a disciple reproducing “the Christ life” in others?

- Where do we observe transformation “in the community” (home life, workplace, church involvement, neighbors, town, etc.) that are a result of a disciple’s life?
- Other? _____

Remember: ***if your metrics are wrong, then your end result will be, too.*** In that case, you will have to revisit your process of making reproducing disciples and tweak it, under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, until it produces the results intended.

PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER

Now, there are a few other important principles about these systems that need to be incorporated in your mind as a leader of the church. The first is this: In Albert Einstein’s famous words, ***you can’t keep doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.*** Working harder will not make a difference. Something has to change. This is where a lot of churches get stuck; they simply think “doubling down” will change the result. On the contrary, it typically does not, and at the same time, creates more burnout, frustration, and fatigue for those involved.

Second, ***your system is perfectly designed for the results you are currently getting.*** In other words, if your current process is not producing mature, reproducing disciples who are making the community noticeably better (or however you define “success”) then you must examine your process to determine what has to be removed, added, adapted, or modified, so that you get the actual, intended, desired results.

The final principle is this: ***when a church falls so in love with its current system that it is unwilling to change it, then the system has become idolatrous.*** This happens a lot in declining churches: they love the way they “do church” more than the “reason they do church.” If this is the case, God cannot honor your idolatry, your love for the system more than your love for Him. It must be cast down, and repentance have to be offered to God for this grievous sin.

So, the way to fix these systemic problems is to examine your current system or process in place and see if there are any blockages or obstacles keeping it from functioning as it should. To repeat: in order to do this

effectively, we must understand two things: **our intended or expected outcome, and what is actually happening in our process (what we might simply call, “the way we do church around here”)**.

This is as good a place as any to remind you that evaluating our system and making necessary changes will never replace the need for spiritual renewal in the life of God’s people. ***We cannot make organizational changes and expect spiritual results!*** Primarily, struggling churches are dealing with issues of “hindrances and the sins that so easily beset us” (Hebrews 12:1-3), which must be dealt with properly. This includes repentance and humility, sacrifice and servanthood. These attitude issues are dealt with spiritually, with contrite hearts that embrace submission to our Lord Jesus as the Head of His church. Unless we have clean hearts and clean hands, everything else we seek to do with the Lord’s church will be in vain. **Spiritual renewal must take precedence.**

That being said, our hearts can be right with God and our way of doing church still creates unnecessary complications or complexities that hinder us from achieving our desired outcome, the making of mature disciples for Christ. This is where we need to look at our church and see how its own systems are working for or against us toward this outcome of making disciples.

YOUR CHURCH IS “A SYSTEM”

Let me illustrate this. The human body is an amazing creation. While outwardly, each of us function as an entire, whole entity, the reality is each body is made up on several, individual systems that work together in an integrated fashion. The number of systems is surprisingly a matter of some debate. Some systems, like the cardiovascular, the nervous, the respiratory, the skeletal, and the digestive systems, are quite obvious to us all. There are also reproductive and urinary systems. But other systems, like the lymphatic/immune and endocrine systems, or my personal favorite, the integumentary systems, are included by some scholars as separate systems, as well. While these systems all need to function effectively on their own, they also need to work in “unity” with each other as an integrated entire system we call the human body. When they function as they should, we say that the body is healthy. When one or more of these systems fails to function effectively, we call that unhealthy. The severity of the failure impacts the damage it can do to the whole body. It can result in a sickness for a few days or a failure can be

catastrophic and fatal. Doctors analyze the body for clues to determine “why” it is functioning as it is, and act accordingly.

Churches have systems, too. Let’s take a brief overview of the seven elements involved.

YOUR CHURCH SYSTEMS

1. Output
2. Input
3. Environment
4. Boundaries
5. Transformer
6. Feedback Loops
7. Holy Spirit

We have already mentioned the **output or outcome** we desire as a result of our church life. We have indicated that Jesus commanded us to make disciples, so that is our goal, the intended result of our efforts. For most churches, we seek to make disciples through certain events and activities that are a part of our church process. The primary ways most churches seek to do this in our day is through preaching and small groups/ Sunday school classes. These are helpful, to be sure, but may not accomplish all we desire. We will come back to this later.

The second element is **input or who do we reach** with the Gospel. Of course, we want to reach everyone we can, but realistically, you will not be able to reach everyone in your community. In fact, some researchers suggest these three things primarily aid or hinder you in reaching people: the name of your church, you as the pastor/communicator in the church, and the location of the church. Most churches seek to reach others through evangelism (I hope!), service in the community, and publicity or marketing, even if it’s by word of mouth. ***To reach more people, the logical answer is you must increase your input*** (the efforts to share the Gospel and connect with people in the community).

The **location or environment** as we mentioned above has an impact upon your church. Every church, including yours, operates in an environment (your community, context, and its culture) that is different from others. It is easy to see this when we think of a church in America versus a church in

Kenya; they will be very different. It may not be as easy to see locally, but it is still very true. The west side of my city has a different “feel” and people who live there, than the other side of my city. This reality should affect your church (at least, how church is expressed and experienced), giving it uniqueness and personality that differs from other churches. For a church, this will affect the language you use with your people (how educated or multi-ethnic are they?), the illustrations you choose in your message (is it a white collar or blue collar people?), the events and experiences your church celebrates (does your town have an annual festival or something it’s known for?), just to use a few simple examples, which should all be based on your location.

What does someone have to do to become part of your church? These **boundaries** exist to show we are a people who belong to God and are committed to each other. As a result, most churches have membership classes and other ways for newcomers to learn and experience what it means to be a part of your church. Your church will have a statement of its beliefs and requirements for membership that will limit or exclude who and when individuals can hold a position of service or vote on decisions in church life. These boundaries define who is a part of the church and who is simply observing or interested in the church. Typically, churches have different expectations and involvement of those who have become members and those who just attend. Church discipline is also an expression of boundaries that God gives His church to enforce its health and protection. More often than not, these boundaries are found in the constitution and bylaws of your church. Ironically, higher expectations have been found to produce healthier disciples and churches.

Now we come to the heart of church life, what some call the **transformer**, or the way we operate as a church (as a whole, not just on Sunday morning). For a church, what happens here in the transformer can be quite complex. But the key is understanding how the experience (and the work of the Holy Spirit, which we will mention later) “changes” or “transforms” the participant who is engaged with it. For the visitor or member, it may be a change in **attitude** (welcomed warmly or counseling about a need in life) or **information with application** (remember, information is not enough by itself). The hope is individuals will be changed through the process involved. This is the key focal point for our consideration.

There is a sixth, and often ignored or neglected, element in church life. We call it **feedback** (or sometimes it’s called **feedback loops**). This is the way

the church validates its correct functioning or invalidates its incorrect functioning. Positively, they provide evaluations and reviews that improve the church and the care it provides for those, both inside and outside. Negatively, though, these feedback loops may produce gossip, resentment, and undermine the work of church leaders, if not dealt with properly. Churches need to offer ways to glean feedback from the congregation in a healthy manner on information cards, websites, in meetings, one-on-one, etc., or the feedback may turn negative and malicious in the form of criticism, or worse.

Feedback in church life is unavoidable; how we handle it is critical. If you neglect or ignore it, my experience is it will come back to bite you.

The ultimate and final element in any church's life and process is the person and work of **the Holy Spirit**, who gives the church life and empowers her to do her ministry and service for Christ as it should. Only the Holy Spirit can produce the transformation needed, giving us the mind of Christ and confirming us more and more to His image. He is the Master Teacher, our Paraclete, and the One who gifts those in the church for the work they are to do. This seventh element then is the most necessary and important element for the church to know and do its work, and accomplish its intended objective of making disciples.

Let me apply this to your setting in ministry. Your church is God's idea and it belongs to Jesus; He is the Head of the church. At some point in time, God shared the vision for your church with a founding group of people who were led of **the Holy Spirit** to plant the church. Over time, it grew and developed under the guidance and direction of the Spirit, as it faithfully lived out its Gospel mandate. This was absolutely necessary, for a church cannot exist without the impulse of life that comes from the Holy Spirit, who quickens it and brings it to life. Without the Spirit, it is simply a charitable organization or a non-profit business, at best.

Your church was led by God to start in a specific community that is different from all other communities, at least in some ways. This is a part of the founding vision of the church. You need to understand your **environment** as well as you can, because it is impacting your church. But in addition, your church was intended to impact and influence its community, as well. Thus, it plans thoughtful, discerning ways to reach the people in the community in an attempt to see them become a part of the church. Their **input** into the church's life causes them to determine, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, to join the church with its **boundaries** that define membership and service

through the church. As these people grow and serve as disciples in the church, they are being **transformed** by the Spirit, who leads them through the process of becoming more like Jesus. The objective of the church (**output**) is that they will become fully mature disciples of Jesus Christ, and will serve as the Spirit calls and directs them. And of course, throughout the process the church is giving and receiving **feedback** on the growth of these disciples and the work of the church in effectively helping them mature, as they should.

This then is how churches operate.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Does your “church life” include the following components within your church system?

- Worship
- Prayer and Bible Study
- Assimilation
- Fellowship
- Leadership Development
- Finances and Stewardship
- Structure and Administration
- Communication, Internal and external
- Evangelism inside and outside the Body of Christ
- Service inside and outside the Body of Christ
- Mission efforts locally and beyond
- _____???

Where in your church system are they located? (Hint: most will be located in the transformer or in its input.) What is your church trying to accomplish in each component of church life mentioned above? How will the people involved become more like Christ, as a result?

For many of us, the results will not be what we hope for. For others, we may be thinking about this for the first time. In either case, you will need to fix these systemic problems by examining the system currently in place to see if there are any blockages or obstacles keeping it from functioning as it should. In order to do this effectively, you must understand two things: your intended or expected outcome, and what is actually happening in your transformer (what we might simply call, “the way we do church around here”).

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- **What is our anticipated or hoped for outcome of every person that comes into the church?** Check all that apply in your setting.
 - They are welcomed and loved
 - They come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord
 - They grow in their relationship with Him
 - They attend worship regularly
 - They give to support the work of the church and missions
 - They serve the Body of Christ through their giftedness
 - They share their faith with others
 - They hear God and apply themselves to His calling upon their lives
 - They _____???
- **What needs to happen through the Spirit's transforming work in the church to see a disciple become fully mature in Christ?**

At this point, you and your church leadership have to “own” whatever description you determine to be best and right for the church, according to the Scriptures. And you have to “own” the metrics to determine whether or not the participants have arrived at the point needed, or not yet. Remember: if your metrics are wrong, then your output will be too. In that case, you will have to revisit what happens in your typical church experience and tweak it, under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, until it produces the results intended.

The most obvious example that has received a lot of attention in the past two-three decades is the determination of a “discipleship pathway” in a church’s life. If you were to do a search on the Internet for “discipleship pathway” you would be met by hundreds and hundreds of diagrams and descriptions, attempting to illustrate the process one church uses to see a unregenerate person enter into a discipling relationship and system, grow and develop, so that he or she becomes a mature, reproducing follower of Christ.

A couple of cautions are in order here. **First, it would be easy to “cut and paste” a pathway from another church for your own use. Please don’t do this!** Study and learn from other examples, but allow the Holy Spirit to lead you and your church to personalize and customize the process for your own environment and setting. Make it uniquely you! **Second, don’t be**

overwhelmed by the creative or complexity presented elsewhere. Keep it simple and clear, so that anybody can understand it. Think of the directory you find when you enter a shopping mall for the first time. You want people to be able to find out “you are here” but also to chart a path to where they need to go on their journey. So strategize, develop, and implement a descriptive, visual process that shows them this without a single person present to interpret it for them.

And ideally of course, if you do this for “discipleship” think about developing a similar pathway for the other parts of your life together as the people of God (given in the checklist above), what we have called the “transformer” in your church. They don’t have to be as elaborate or complex as some of the discipleship pathways we’ve used to illustrate above. However, developing a plan or process on how you see to achieve these experiences as the members participate with you will be a step forward and provides greater potential in momentum and progress through the growth and development of your congregation..

Be sure to have inputs and outputs expected for each of these components in the church, too. This creates a “flow” that demonstrates how these elements are aligned and integrated to produce the results God has placed on your hearts.

Finally, make sure these newly developed plans and processes don’t conflict with any of the policies and procedures already governing church life. Check your constitution and bylaws, along with the statement of faith, to be sure. Follow the procedures in place to gain the approval of the church (or get these procedures changed; they may actually be a part of the bottleneck in your church), in order to implement and align the system for greater productivity and effectiveness.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- What components do we have in our church currently? Are we missing critical components or need to subtract something we current utilize? Change to “Which of the components we mentioned previously in a “QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION” exist in our church at this time? Do we need to add any new components or subtract any that aren’t helping us accomplish the mission?”

- Have we developed a clear “pathway” from one component to another in our church? How do people engage this component? What is our expected or anticipated result in the life of this participant? What causes us to think this process will bring about transformation?
- How does each pathway or process we have in place contribute to the overall system in our church, in order to help it function smoothly toward the intended output, the mission of the church? If each pathway doesn’t do this, what must we change to enable them to do so?
- Have we done the hard work of staying before God and letting Him lead us to do these things His way, as opposed to simply following someone’s else plan?
- Have we evaluated our current governance documents to make sure we are not creating conflicts with the processes it requires? If it does create conflict, are we addressing that through possible changes to the document or to the desired processes?
- Have we communicated and gained the necessary approvals required to implement these structural changes?

A final principle is in order here. ***No system is above improvement.*** This is true for many reasons, chief among them being our fallibility and limited perspective. We make mistakes. We think something will work that doesn’t. It fails to produce the desired result. Things in our world change. All of these and more reasons suggest there needs to be a plan to revisit these structural plans from time to time. A tweak here or there (remember the law of diminishing returns?) will probably be necessary to enhance and improve these plans. And some may plainly not produce the desired result or may create unintended/unexpected consequences. So, change these as soon as you can, but review all—even the working parts—periodically. Because we can all do something better than we’ve done it before. As we learn, grow, and mature we are able to represent God and extend His kingdom in greater ways. When you do that, you again bring glory to God. After all, it’s His church. Let’s serve it and lead it effectively.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- How will we address urgent concerns in our structural system when we are aware they are creating an unexpected situation or concern (a new blockage or bottleneck)?
- When will we evaluate the entirety of our structural system to see if there are ways we can now improve them? Who needs to be involved in that process?

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

For you and your church to be successful at implementing these thoughts and decisions, you will need to get your leaders to own the decisions themselves. That means, you will need to lead them in a discussion of church life as you currently experience it, the principles we have mentioned here, and the changes needed to implement a transforming strategy through your church to produce healthy, mature, reproducing disciples. We encourage you to plan a time for your leaders to be together and prayerfully determine what steps to take. A retreat setting would likely be best, but this can be done over a multi-hour gathering or even in parts over several months. Based on all we've written above, consider taking them through the process mentioned on the following pages (adapt and customize, as needed).

Our hope is that this process sharpens the focus on your church, and enables you to find and then tackle the obstacles that are hindering your church from operating at its optimal ability. Of course, this can NEVER happen, apart from much prayer and dependance on the Lord to lead you every step of the way. So, listen well, embrace the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:4), and take action to implement the steps necessary for your church to move one step closer to living out fully the God-given potential it has within the Kingdom.

To Him be all the glory!

A CHURCH SYSTEM EVALUATION

As a group, collectively determine what are the major components (including ministries, programs, and so forth) currently functioning in the church. For example, Sunday services (obviously, a worship element), Sunday School (is this a discipleship element?), etc.

- Sketch out together the pathway by which people move into, through, and out of each of these components. For example, is your website the “front door” for entry to the church? Does it lead to worship services predominantly for new participants? Do you want them to then include Sunday School in their progress and development? etc.
- Make sure you note how your components actually connect or don’t connect to each other and how they connect to the mission of the church, as a whole.
- Now, do a **SWOT** analysis of the current church experience. What are the **S**trengths of the church, the **W**eaknesses of the church, the **O**pportunities before the church, and the **T**hreats to the church? Record them.

OUTCOME

- What is our desired or intended result with every person that comes to the church?
- Describe what they will look like or be like when this is achieved.
- How do they know where they are at in this process?

HOLY SPIRIT

- How are we relying on the Holy Spirit to lead our efforts at renewal and transformation?
- What is He saying to us?
- Are we willing to obey His commands?

TRANSFORMER

- What are we doing (or not doing) to help them achieve the intended result?
- What is essential to this process? Not needed? Should be changed or modified in some way?
- Why are we doing anything else (other than what helps us achieve our intended outcome) that we are doing?
- How are we monitoring or measuring the progress made?

INPUT

- How are people reached by our church through outreach, evangelism, and community service?
- What other ways are we encouraging people to become a part of our church through word of mouth, publicity, etc?
- What needs to change?

ENVIRONMENT

- How are we responding to the people and place where God has located us?
- What makes our church unique and different from others?
- How can we maximize that?

BOUNDARIES

- What is necessary for people to become a part of our church?
- How are we making those interested aware of what they need to do to become a part of our church?
- Are there unnecessary hindrances that are keeping people from joining us? If so, what can we do about them?

CONCLUSIONS

- Together decide on which components (and various aspects and elements for each component) need to be included on the proposed reconstructed church's system design. Place these components in logical (but not necessarily linear) order.
- Check for gaps, hindrances, concerns until satisfied with the flow toward the mission of the church, as a whole.
- Determine what resources of time, people, money, etc. will be needed to implement this plan.
- Follow the required process for adoption and implementation, according to your leadership and governing documents.



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