

*"A book with gravitas and insight for our times."*

ALAN HIRSCH

*founder of Forge Mission Training Network*



# THE DISCIPLESHIP OPPORTUNITY



*Leading a  
Great-Commission  
Church in a  
Post-Everything  
World*



DANIEL IM

The big lesson of the last few years is that our discipleship has not held—that far too many people were being disciplined by their cable news and spiritually shaped by their social media. That’s part of why I am thankful that my friend Daniel Im wrote this book. He recognizes the problem, but he does more—he analyzes it with precision and offers indispensable insight into how to move forward for evangelism, discipleship, and preaching. The title is right. We have an opportunity; let’s seize it!

**ED STETZER, PhD**, dean of Talbot School of Theology

In *The Discipleship Opportunity*, author Daniel Im confronts head-on the current church realities of declining attendance, political conflict, and racial tension. In response, Im provides a framework that moves beyond the Sunday-gathering model and shows leaders how to develop genuine disciples that meet Jesus on a deep and meaningful level. The remarkable insights in *The Discipleship Opportunity* have the power to ignite a movement where God’s people take His love into the world in an authentic, life-changing way!

**DAVE FERGUSON**, coauthor of *B.L.E.S.S.: 5 Everyday Ways to Love Your Neighbor and Change the World*

In a world rocked by pandemics, wars, and weather events, Daniel Im’s *The Discipleship Opportunity* is the guide for Christian leaders in this post-everything era. Im’s book is punchy, insightful, and practical. Whether you’re a rookie or a seasoned leader, Im’s wisdom will equip you to lead and challenge others along the discipleship pathway.

**SAM CHAN**, lead mentor at EvQ School of Evangelism (a ministry of City Bible Forum) and author of *How to Talk about Jesus (without Being That Guy)*

Daniel Im has long been a significant voice in church planting and mission circles. Now he brings a lot of experience leading a generative church network in the increasingly secular Canadian context into the equation. The result is a book with gravitas and insight for our times.

**ALAN HIRSCH**, author of numerous books on missional churches, spirituality, and leadership; cofounder of Movement Leaders Collective and Forge Mission Training Network

Over the last several decades, church leaders have packed a lot of ideas, assumptions, methods, and mindsets into their travel bag to accomplish our God-given mission to make disciples. The basic equipment we were commissioned to carry by the Leader of the missional journey has become weighted down with ill-fitting garments and accoutrements. Daniel has done the hard work of unpacking the cultural extras, leaving the essentials for traveling lightly. He has done so not with a theorist's ideology but as a practitioner. This book is refreshing—and, frankly, relieving! A must-read for every weary traveler.

**DR. TAMMY DUNAHOO**, executive dean of Portland Seminary at George Fox University

Daniel Im has provided a gentle overview of a better pathway for discipleship in the local church. This book demonstrates the insights and skill of a pastor who is focused on discipling. Recommended for senior pastors and leadership teams.

**BOBBY HARRINGTON**, author and point leader of Discipleship.org and Renew.org

“Kindly confrontational” was the phrase that came to mind as I read *The Discipleship Opportunity*. In this book, Daniel challenges us to face our assumptions about how a church grows. With practical ideas and a simple tool, he shares concrete steps every church pastor can take to minister to the people in their church and beyond.

**JESSIE CRUICKSHANK**, founder of Whoology and author of *Ordinary Discipleship*

Serving and leading in the local church in our post-everything world feels eminently complex. We need wise guides to help us down the path toward better days ahead. My friend Daniel Im’s new book is such a guide. Leaning on years of pastoral and leadership experience, along with his distinctive warmth, humility, and deep love for the local church and its leaders, *The Discipleship Opportunity* is inspiring, accessible, and, maybe most importantly, a practically helpful and applicable tool for church leaders in almost any context. This is a book for our time and for the seasons ahead.

**JAY Y. KIM**, pastor and author of *Analog Christian*

What does it actually mean to be a pastor in a post-pandemic world? What does it mean to be the church in a post-everything society? Pastor and author Daniel Im is seeking to answer those questions. But rather than giving us a post-pandemic book, or offering a new hot take on church models, Im provides church leaders with hope, guidance, and a beautiful Jesus-way forward.

With a deep love for his audience, the church, and Jesus, Im has managed to create more than a playbook for discipleship; his words breathe new life into dry bones.

**AUBREY SAMPSON**, author of *Known* and *The Louder Song*, church planter, teaching pastor, and coleader of Chicagoland's New Thing Network for female church planters

Too often we try to lead churches with erroneous assumptions and misguided practices when what we really need is to trust the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we must work to develop a strong aptitude and strong attitude for pastoring and learn to never give up. In *The Discipleship Opportunity*, Daniel Im reveals many ways to engage the sleepers, seekers, and consumers in your church—how to entice and equip them on the discipleship path. He charts the promise Jesus makes to us all to live “life to the full.”

**KYLE IDLEMAN**, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church and author of *When Your Way Isn't Working*

Daniel Im sees where we need to go as leaders and presents us with a path to get there. In his latest book, *The Discipleship Opportunity*, he offers a compelling, practical, timely, and biblical framework for leading, discipling, and preaching differently yet effectively in today's post-everything, complicated world.

**BRAD LOMENICK**, author of *H3 Leadership* and *The Catalyst Leader*, former president of Catalyst

Provocative! This book, a must-read for any church leader, is the first book to give context and strategy to the post-pandemic “future church.” Daniel not only challenges the status quo but also provides practicable solutions for your church! Read this book, go through it with your team, and implement its recommendations.

**SEAN MORGAN**, founder of The Ascent Leader

There is an invitation that awaits us. Even after all humanity has endured, Daniel Im has a way with words and a Kingdom vision to change adversity into opportunity. In Daniel’s latest book, *The Discipleship Opportunity*, he bravely guides you in such thoughtful and accessible ways to better reach, preach to, and disciple your people in the way of Jesus. A must-read!

**STEVE CARTER**, pastor and author of *Grieve, Breathe, Receive*

There’s no doubt about it—our world is very different now than it used to be, which means the mission field of *every* church has changed as well. Rather than blaming our post-pandemic, post-Christian culture, we need to embrace the opportunity to revisit how we engage the gospel mission. It really *is* an opportunity. It’s a privilege. It’s our calling. By the time you finish this book, I hope my friend Daniel Im will have convinced you it’s time to revisit how to lead, teach, and engage the mission of helping people meet and follow Jesus.

**TONY MORGAN**, founder and lead strategist of The Unstuck Group



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NavPress 

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# Introduction

*[Jesus said,]*

*"I will build my church,  
and the gates of Hades  
will not overpower it."*

**MATTHEW 16:18**

**THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING IN THE NEARLY EMPTY ROOM.**

I stood on the stage with my head held high and my wife next to me, ready to accept the challenge of being the lead pastor of a local church in the middle of a global pandemic.

When our congregation was asked, "Will you embrace Jesus as Lord afresh today?" there was no response. And then when our denominational leader asked, "Will you pray for the Ims and hold Daniel in his office of lead pastor in high regard? Will you be slow to criticize and quick to encourage?" there was no sound. No chorus of amens, no indication of agreement, and no verbal affirmation.

As I stood in front of the video cameras to affirm my pastoral calling and share my first words as lead pastor,<sup>1</sup> I was desperately hoping that my family and the few "essential workers" in the

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building weren't the only ones listening. Did our congregation respond positively? Or had they just left the service on as background noise while they were making breakfast or doing laundry? There was no way to know.

This wasn't how I'd envisioned my installation service would go when we left Nashville and moved back to Edmonton to pastor Beulah Alliance Church. If this global pandemic—and the politicization of it—wasn't enough to baptize me by fire into my new role, my dad died a week after my installation. Then one of our beloved pastors died. Then a suicide shook our congregation. It was around this time that our church started both losing and welcoming people at such a flurried pace that it was hard to know where we stood.

How was I supposed to lead? How was I supposed to fulfill the pledge I'd made to our church to lead and disciple people to know Jesus deeply and experience being known by Him fully?

## THESE CHALLENGES ARE NOT NEW

Most pastors and ministry leaders would agree that leading a church through the pandemic years was tough. Every church leader has their own story of the struggles they faced during those dark and lonely days—pastoring their congregation through fear of a contagious illness, caring for sick congregants, navigating pandemic politics, making decisions about building occupancy and mask policies, and dealing with church members who didn't agree with their decisions.

Many of us found ourselves in situations that were highly

unsettling, and everything came at us so fast. We may have heard our church members say things like these:

“I can’t believe they actually said that.”

“But that’s not what I meant!”

“My goodness . . . they left too?”

“I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

If any of this sounds familiar, I want to tell you that I’m sorry and I feel your pain. For a while now it has felt like we’ve been strapped in on a relational, emotional, and spiritual roller coaster that has left many of us reeling from this adrenaline-spiking ride.

Just to be clear: This book is not about the pandemic and its effects on the church (or church leaders). The challenges we are facing are not new. The truth is that for years, much of the church has been slowly forgetting her identity; the pandemic simply accelerated what was already happening underneath the surface.

## THE PATH FORWARD

In a quest to regain a semblance of normalcy, some people believe that the path forward is backward—to get back to the way things used to be. While that strategy might work for some things, it won’t work for churches in this season.

One thing I’ve realized is that before 2020, instead of teaching our people how to live like the Light of the World, we let them settle with the shadow of *our* light. Instead of prioritizing discipling in our church, we elevated attendance as our key

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metric for success. And instead of equipping our people to do the work of an evangelist, we did it for them (and aren't some of us *still* doing this today?). In other words, the pandemic revealed what was already true of us—we're not as good at discipleship as we thought we were.

Meanwhile, our culture has become more divisive, political, tribal, indifferent, and impatient than any of us can remember it being before. Our world has changed, and people have changed; as a result, the way we lead in the church must change. The church's approach to discipleship, evangelism, and preaching needs to look different today than it did yesterday.

As the lead pastor of a multigenerational, multiethnic, and multicampus church, I've been wrestling with the following question: How can we navigate through today's challenging culture and become a stronger, healthier, and more on-mission church?

That's where the discipleship framework presented in this book comes into play. It will equip and empower you to lead, evangelize, disciple, and preach differently in today's post-everything world—since we literally seem to be post-*everything*! Post-pandemic, post-truth, post-Christian, and post-\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).

In part 1 of this book, you will learn how to identify the shifts you must make in your ministry to thrive in this new world. This book's discipleship framework is not prescriptive, so you're not going to find a time-bound and ministry-specific model offered here. And I'm not selling you a program or curriculum, either. You'll learn that the model of ministry most churches have followed since the 1950s was never binary. The people in your church aren't

solely Christian or non-Christian—the situation is more nuanced than that. Accordingly, the ministry framework described in this book identifies the discipleship needs of four kinds of people sitting in our pews.

In part 2, we will dive deep into each quadrant of the framework to understand the four different types of people in your church and what it will take to

- reach the spiritually sleeping and dead in your community,
- disciple your people to know Jesus deeply and experience being known by Him fully, and
- preach in today's post-everything world.

This book is a guide to help you chart a fruitful and hope-filled path forward for your church. The church isn't dead! This is hard for some pastors to believe, especially if their church isn't as full as it used to be, or if it's hard to tell who has left versus who watches services online.

But Jesus never said that He *might* build a few churches—if the conditions are ideal, or if He has the right leaders in place. No, Jesus said that He *will* build His church, and that nothing and no one can or will ever overpower, overcome, or prevail against her—not even the gates of hell (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus is the master builder and the cornerstone. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And we, the church, are His beloved bride. So no matter what comes our way, Jesus will always prevail and conquer—in His perfect timing—because He loves us, He cares for us, and He gave Himself for us.



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This means that regardless of what has happened to your church, or what is happening right now, He's got this. He is your shepherd and defender. He is protecting and leading you with His rod and His staff. And He will renew your life and your church by leading you along the right path for His name's sake (Psalm 23).

If we want to be healthier, stronger, and better able to fulfill Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations, we need a new discipleship strategy. This is the wonderful opportunity before us.

Let's get started!



PART ONE

# DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM AND SHIFTING OUR APPROACH



*Preparing  
the Way  
for the  
Discipleship  
Opportunity*





# THE ASSUMPTIONS WE CAN'T AFFORD TO MAKE

*If it does not work to the glory of God  
and the extension of Christ's church,  
throw it away and get something which does.*

DONALD A. MCGAVRAN,  
GOD, MAN, AND CHURCH GROWTH

"DO YOU KNOW WHY I STOPPED YOU?" the police officer asked.

My heart was racing. I could feel my body tensing up.

As I handed over my license and registration, I thought, *Why is he asking me this? I didn't do anything wrong! The light was green, and I think I was going the speed limit (or slightly above . . . but isn't that what everyone does?)*.

This was my first time seeing flashing lights directed at me. I had just gotten my driver's license earlier that year. So when the officer asked me this question, I didn't know how to answer. I was scared, nervous, embarrassed, frustrated, and bewildered—one after another and at the same time. After all, I hated getting in trouble. And then, after what seemed like an eternity (but was

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probably only a few seconds), just as I was starting to say something that sounded like a sentence, he exclaimed: “You cut me off!”

I wasn’t expecting *that*. I immediately blurted out, “I cut you off?”

“Yeah, you cut me off back there!” And then, pointing to my mirrors, he continued: “You can’t trust these things. You have to check your blind spots.”

Something I have learned in my almost twenty years as a pastor is that blind spots don’t exist just on the road. We all have blind spots in our leadership—and we always will. They affect the way we lead and how our churches are run. And though we’ll never be able to get rid of them, it’s important that we check them regularly.

Unfortunately, checking our blind spots is not as simple as looking over our shoulder. As church leaders, we must learn how to uncover what we’ve been blind to within our churches. My prayer and hope is that this book will help you discern the blind spots in your unique context, just as it has for me.

## UNPACK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

You’re busy. I get it. I have a stack of books I want to read, another sermon I need to write, congregants who are asking to meet, and more unread emails than I care to admit. So if you want to skip this chapter and flip to the framework part of the book, I understand.

But here’s why you shouldn’t: We must unpack our assumptions if we want to see our blind spots. And blind spots—when left unchecked—can lead to distressing and potentially disastrous consequences for you and your church.

## THE ASSUMPTIONS WE CAN'T AFFORD TO MAKE

As a church leader, you've likely found yourself wondering, *Why was giving down last week? Why was attendance up? Why aren't people growing deeper in their faith? Why didn't people laugh at my joke, and what can I do about it?* Your answers to each of these questions, except the one about the joke (sorry, I can't help you there), aren't as straightforward as they might seem.

Because we're living in a day and age when everyone seems to know *something* about *everything* (or at least pretends to), it's easy to assume that we already know the answers to these questions. In fact, your assumption might even be that *you* came up with that brilliant idea on how to break the two-hundred barrier or finally close the back door of your church!

Now, even if you did come up with those ideas yourself, would it be accurate to say that those ideas were *truly* yours? That they were 100 percent original to you?

Of course not! The best ideas are a synthesis of other ideas, so if you assume that the way you are leading is *completely* original to you, you probably have more blind spots than you realize.

After all, unless we consciously do otherwise, don't we teach the way that we've been taught? Lead the way that we've been led? Parent the way that we've been parented? And love the way that we've been loved? At least to some extent?

*Sure, Daniel, you may be thinking, but that doesn't help me disciple people well. I still have lots of questions.* Perhaps you're asking yourself, *How do I reach the spiritually sleeping and spiritually dead in my community? How do I disciple people to know Jesus deeply and experience being known by Him fully? And how do I preach in this post-everything world?*

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To answer these questions, we must first unpack the assumptions behind them. Before making a lane change, we need to shoulder-check the thought patterns that have been driving our models of ministry. This will help us avoid repeating past mistakes—and perpetuating ineffective and outdated practices.

### *Assumption #1: “Of Course, Church”*

A paradigm that has been highly influential in the Western church is the church growth movement,<sup>1</sup> which began in the 1950s. It was a movement of theologians and practitioners who advocated the idea that it is God’s will for every church to grow. If your church isn’t growing, the thinking went, then you must be doing something wrong.

After surveying the dominant thought leaders, books, paradigms, and principles of the church growth movement, I uncovered two of its foundational assumptions that continue to affect church practice today. The first is the assumption that everyone is still generally interested in the church.

The founder of the church growth movement, Donald A. McGavran, taught that “today there is unprecedented receptivity to the message of Christ. Today people are more winnable; the nations, the tribes, and the castes of the world are more responsive to the gospel than they have ever been before. There is no need to believe that pessimism and indifference outweigh God’s grace.”<sup>2</sup> The church growth movement perpetuated the assumption that if you have the right programs, meet the right felt needs, and are in the right location, then of course people will come. Of course, church!

I even heard one “expert” advocating the view that a church

should function like a car dealership. Your weekend worship service is the showroom floor where you display and sell the product, which is Christianity. The brands and models of cars that you sell are based on your denomination, tradition, worship style, and church model. And—since the bread and butter of every dealership is their service department—it's the church's programs that keep people coming back.

While I could spend the rest of this book deconstructing how grossly inappropriate and inaccurate this analogy is, I'll keep my observations to this: The church is not a business. We don't sell Christianity. We don't market Jesus. And we don't need to be the best show in town. The church is the holy bride of Christ, and we need to treat her with the love and respect she deserves. She is not a product that can be bought or sold.

Even though most church growth experts would likely agree with those observations, the assumption “of course, church” has nevertheless been shaping church practice for decades. Here are four misguided ways it continues to do so.

- *Misguided practice #1: Since people are interested in church, tell them about yours.* This practice advised church leaders to put on dramas and musicals, host leadership conferences, and use direct-communication tools to advertise their special services. The thought was that we could survey our community about their needs, and then meet them. Just get the word out, and people will come.

While there's nothing wrong with getting the word out about your church, this misguided practice tends to be more



effective at attracting Christians from other churches than non-Christians.

- *Misguided practice #2: Since people like to be with others who look, talk, and act like themselves, focus your evangelism.* This encouraged church leaders to reach out to people who look like your congregation because if they see others who look and sound like them in the pews, then they will want to stay, and your church will grow. Behind this strategy is the idea that evangelism is most effective when it doesn't cross racial, linguistic, or class barriers.

This misguided practice is also known as the infamous “homogenous unit principle,” which has been heavily criticized as racist, narrow-minded, exclusive, and antibiblical. And while the originators of this church growth principle certainly believed that the gospel is for all people, they also taught that “homogeneity aids the evangelistic mandate.”<sup>3</sup>

- *Misguided practice #3: Since people want their spiritual hunger satisfied, emphasize discipleship.* This taught leaders that people are interested in spiritual matters, so if your programming and preaching are discipling your people, then you won't lose anyone. Instead, you will attract people to your church because of your emphasis on discipleship. The church growth movement taught that “finding sheep running wild in the streets or hungry on the mountainside and bringing them back to the fold is not sheep stealing. It is engaging in Christ's work of finding and folding the lost.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, feed people with what

they want and aren't getting elsewhere, and they will come in droves.

While you shouldn't turn away newcomers just because they came from another church, neither should you automatically welcome them with no questions asked.

- *Misguided practice #4: Since people want their felt needs met, avoid controversial topics.* Many leaders believe that people experience enough division and controversy in their daily lives, so preaching and teaching should focus on how the Bible addresses felt needs. The idea is that if we show people how the Bible is relevant, they will keep coming back for more.

While the Bible is relevant and speaks to our every need, don't forget that it also speaks to the areas that your church may not want it to speak to.

### *Assumption #2: "Of Course, Growth"*

The second assumption from the church growth movement that continues to affect church practice today is that growth is the goal. "Lack of church growth is a serious disease, but in most cases it is a curable one"<sup>5</sup> was the mindset behind the movement. In fact, the assumption of growth became such a dominant theme that a shrinking church was seen as a sinning church.

Just consider the assumptions underneath this statement from the book *Ten Steps for Church Growth*: "Church growth is directly related to God's will. God wants his church to grow. . . . Any church not concerned with growth and discipleship is really disobeying

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God and is doing what is *not* pleasing to him.”<sup>6</sup> Consider also the assumptions behind this claim in the book *Your Church Can Grow*: “It is simply biblical and theological nonsense to argue that God is pleased when churches, year after year and generation after generation, lose members.”<sup>7</sup>

While it’s true that God wants His church to grow, isn’t there a distinct season for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)? A season to plant, a season to grow, a season to harvest, and a season to rest? And in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul makes it clear that a leader’s role is to plant and water, while God is the one responsible for the growth. So to assume that nongrowth is automatically sin is a gross misinterpretation of the Scriptures and an overgeneralization of how God works!

Take, for example, the benefits of a forest fire. While a fire might appear to be a bad thing that must always be prevented at all costs, periodic fires actually help a forest’s ecosystem by increasing soil fertility, releasing seeds, aiding seed germination, and destroying invasive species.<sup>8</sup> Much like forest fires, difficult seasons in our lives and ministries often have positive outcomes. This is one of the reasons the Bible encourages us to “consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:2-4). Fire, trials, and seasons of nongrowth have a purpose and shouldn’t be avoided or be automatically considered sin.

Here are three misguided ways that this assumption of growth continues to shape church practice today, just as it has been doing for the past several decades:

- *Misguided practice #1: If your church isn't growing, work differently.* Church growth expert C. Peter Wagner suggests five disciplines a pastor must practice to achieve growth: (1) assume responsibility because church growth starts with the pastor, (2) work hard since it's not easy to lead a growing church, (3) learn to delegate because you can't do it alone, (4) be a leader of leaders since you can't pastor everyone, and (5) reject nongrowth theology because God wants the church to grow.<sup>9</sup>

While these five disciplines might be solid leadership principles, they are not all biblical. And there's a clear absence of *spiritual* disciplines in this list.

- *Misguided practice #2: If your church isn't growing, disciple your church to want it.* Wagner has a parallel list of disciplines that the congregation needs to practice to achieve growth: (1) agree to follow growth-seeking leaders like sheep follow their shepherd, (2) give generously since church growth costs money, (3) invite newcomers into your life and start new small groups, and (4) enlarge the leadership circle by sharing power.<sup>10</sup>

This is what it looks like to disciple your church to follow your leadership and want growth—but we should actually be discipling people to follow Jesus and want His will, which may or may not be growth at this time.

- *Misguided practice #3: If your church isn't growing, preach differently.* Since we live in an entertainment-filled world, sermons must be entertaining, otherwise “dull and lifeless

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sermons will send all the guests and many members in different directions.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, “sermons must be simple, especially those that are designed to reach the largest number. More in-depth preaching and teaching must take place in settings other than the worship service which is designed to reach the unchurched.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the reasons that an increasing number of Christians are deconstructing their faith is because they were only fed with simple and shallow preaching.

## THE PROBLEM WITH THESE ASSUMPTIONS

Have you seen these two assumptions influence you and your church? Specifically, have you seen them affect strategic planning and decisions that have been made—and that you are now helping make—to reach the lost, disciple your people, and preach the Word? It’s unfortunate that some “experts” are still trumpeting the principles that arise out of these assumptions as the only solutions to your church’s problems. And as ideas that will help your church grow.

I’m not here to debunk and tear down all the meaningful work and fruit that the church growth movement has produced since the 1950s. And while I didn’t go to seminary during the heyday of the movement, my professors did. In fact, I got my master’s from the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, which was the hub of the church growth movement. On top of that, I’m the lead pastor of a church that has grown in part because of the principles of the church growth movement.

Countless numbers of people are following Jesus because of the fruit of this movement and its later iterations, like the seeker-sensitive movement. Because of these movements, learning effective leadership principles on strategy, change management, recruiting, equipping, and multiplication is now a normal part of the pastoral training process.

However, we would be foolish to expect the same results by simply copying and pasting all the principles from those movements into our context today. Those principles and tactics were written in a world—and to a world—that doesn't exist anymore. The blind spots back then are different from the blind spots today. And although I was able to distill the assumptions of the church growth movement down to two phrases (“of course, church” and “of course, growth”), I wouldn't be able to do that for today's post-pandemic reality because we're *still* working everything out. Things are *still* unfolding, and the future is *still* uncertain. That's why the phrase is “Hindsight is 20/20,” not “Foresight is 20/20.”

Since context matters, here is how our context has changed and why these two assumptions are problematic today:

- *Not everyone is interested in the church these days.* Pastoral abuse and sex scandals have happened too frequently to be the exception. One too many power-hungry church leaders have looked more like the world than like Jesus. And love of money seems to be as strong inside the church as it is outside it. Because Christians and church leaders are regularly and publicly falling prey to the temptations to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, people aren't as interested in the

## THE DISCIPLESHIP OPPORTUNITY

church as they used to be.<sup>13</sup> The principles that used to work don't work anymore, because the prevailing assumptions are no longer accurate. We're starting to look too much like the world. No wonder there's been a steady decline in confidence in the church and trust in pastors among Americans since Gallup started measuring this in 1973.<sup>14</sup>

- *We cannot assume growth anymore.* While the global Christian church is growing, the only growth that has recently been happening in the West is the growth of the “nones” and “dones”—those who have no religious affiliation, and those who are done with the church. For the last several decades, evangelism and church growth techniques assumed that people held a shared set of spiritual beliefs—such as belief in an afterlife, moral truth, and consequences to sin, as well as a belief that God (or a higher power) exists. So evangelism and church growth used to be as simple as connecting these “religious dots,” as Timothy Keller called them, to prove the truth of the gospel. But with the rise of the “nones” and “dones,” a growing number of people believe that the only thing we need salvation from is “the idea that we need salvation.”<sup>15</sup>

## DISCERNING YOUR PATH FORWARD

Decades ago, the founders of the church growth movement created a compelling case for the relevance of their principles, methods, and tactics, since *what was being done at the time* wasn't working for churches anymore. In fact, they wrote these very

words: “Many methods in current use . . . are supposed to bring people to Christ, but they don’t. They are supposed to multiply churches, but they don’t. They are supposed to improve society, but they don’t.”<sup>16</sup>

I believe we have reached an impasse once more. The time has come again for us to reevaluate what we’ve been doing and discern our path forward. It’s a discipleship opportunity that we should embrace! So if you want to disciple your people to know Jesus deeply and experience being known by Him fully; if you want to equip your people to reach those they live, work, study, and play with; and if you want to preach effectively in this post-everything world, then start by uncovering your assumptions, studying your context, and trusting the Holy Spirit.

## **UNCOVER YOUR ASSUMPTIONS**

In this chapter, we’ve unpacked two assumptions that have long undergirded church leadership: the assumption that everyone is still generally interested in the church, and the assumption that each church should always be growing. To make the most of this book, take some time to shoulder-check whether these assumptions are blind spots for you by answering the following questions.

1. Have you seen these assumptions shape the way you evangelize, disciple, and preach? If so, how?

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THE DISCIPLESHIP OPPORTUNITY

2. Have you seen these assumptions drive the way ministry happens in your church? If so, where?

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**STUDY YOUR CONTEXT**

Do you *know* the people in your church? I'm referring to your church right now, your regulars. I'm not just asking if you know their names or would recognize them at the grocery store. I'm asking if you know their stories, their pain, their joy, and how they came to know Christ. *Do* they know Christ? Did they come to know Christ at your church? Do they want to be known by Christ? Do they want to make Christ known?

I recognize these are difficult questions to answer for churches that are larger than fifty people, but it's important that church leaders try to take the spiritual temperature of their church from time to time. Let the following questions be your spiritual thermometer to gauge where things are at.

1. Think back to the last several people who were baptized at your church. What did their stories tell you about your church?

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## THE ASSUMPTIONS WE CAN'T AFFORD TO MAKE

2. What posture do people have when they gather on the weekends at your church? Are they expectant and hungry? Are they there out of obligation and tradition? Or are they somewhere in between?

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3. How often are your people inviting and bringing newcomers to your church? What does this tell you about their faith and your church?

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### **TRUST THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Have you ever considered whose responsibility it is to awaken the spiritually sleeping and dead into a vibrant relationship with Christ? Or whose responsibility it is to grow the spiritual seeds that you've planted and watered through your preaching, discipleship, and evangelism? While individual disciples and the gathered church have a specific role to play in each of those processes, the ultimate responsibility lies with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who will build the church and make sure that the gates of hell never prevail against her. Perhaps you believe this to be true, but do your actions show it? Answer the following questions to see how your methods and tactics line up with your theology.

## THE DISCIPLESHIP OPPORTUNITY

1. When you preach, are you trying to stir interest in Jesus?  
Or are you trying to facilitate an encounter with Jesus?

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2. How much time do you spend praying during your sermon preparation process, as you disciple others, and in your evangelism? How does this compare with the total time you spend doing each of these activities?

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3. Whom (or what) do you turn to when people leave your church? When your attendance goes down? When giving is behind budget? Or when there's political or social pressure against the church?

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## TEAM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you resonate with the assumptions related to church growth discussed in this chapter? Discuss how you've seen them in your church or another church that you've been a part of.

## THE ASSUMPTIONS WE CAN'T AFFORD TO MAKE

2. Are there other assumptions that drive the way ministry happens in your church? If so, what are they? And how do they drive ministry?
3. What did you discover about yourself and your church through answering the questions in the “Study Your Context” and “Trust the Holy Spirit” sections?