

Pastors and churches challenged to reprioritize discipleship

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The church has a discipleship deficit, declared Dr. Wanda Bolton-Davis.

She is the first lady of St. John Church in Southlake, the Truett Theological Seminary 2005 Preacher of the Year and an adjunct professor of social work at the University of Texas at Arlington. She also is the author of [*Victorious Disciples: A Practical Guide for Christian Discipleship and Mentoring*](#).

The problem is not the quality of offerings but that “the church has lifted up so many things in order to draw the masses” while neglecting to lift up Jesus, she said. If a church uses “dog and pony shows” to draw people, it has to “keep doing dog and pony shows to keep them,” and the people’s expectations for those shows grow continuously.

By focusing on getting people in the door of the church, churches have not engaged people sufficiently in the “ongoing process of becoming more and more like Jesus,” Davis noted.

Davis suggested eight reasons for the discipleship deficit and eight correctives.

Eight causes of discipleship deficit

1. Churches have given more emphasis to evangelism than to discipleship. The result is that the church grows in numbers but not in maturity. It grows “wider but not deeper.”

2. Many churches lack a discipleship process. They may teach people ways of evangelizing, but they don't have a strategy for maturing those who respond to the gospel.
3. Churches are not setting discipleship goals and lack a method for reaching any spiritual goals they set.
4. "Church calendars are overtaxed and consumed with wrong priorities," Davis said. They are over-programmed with busyness—like committee meetings—leaving the people little or no time for discipleship.
5. Many pastors and leaders lack personal discipleship and therefore are unable to model discipleship.
6. Churches focus on membership instead of discipleship. They are concerned with people becoming members of the church and may give little thought to those same people becoming disciples.
7. "Churches mistakenly believe they are making disciples when they are not," Davis said. Worship services and Bible studies are not sufficient for discipleship. More than a couple of weekly events, discipleship requires a whole environment.
8. Discipleship all too often is offered as one of many options, but it's not an option; it is integral to the Christian life, Davis said.

Eight ways to correct a discipleship deficit

The way to correct a discipleship deficit in the church is to do the opposite of the above eight causes.

Begin with prayer, and champion discipleship. Give discipleship emphasis

at least equal to evangelism.

Be intentional, and develop a “visible, clear and measurable strategy.”

Start discipling new members immediately, and evaluate those discipleship efforts.

Use small groups for discipleship. Pastors often are scared small groups will become separate churches, “but so what?” Davis challenged.

Three advantages of the discipleship vs. membership-focused model

Churches focused on membership tend to count their success by the numbers: bodies, buildings and budgets. They are concerned with the number of programs being offered.

Churches focused on discipleship tend to be concerned with producing ever more mature followers of Jesus Christ.

Davis named three reasons churches should be discipleship-focused rather than membership-focused.

1. Growing mature followers of Jesus Christ prevents the few from carrying the entire load—what is known as the “80/20 rule.” Eighty percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people.

2. Focusing on discipleship promotes the inclusion of new people in the life and work of the church and prevents an entitlement mentality among longer-tenured members.

3. Such focus creates the “expectation and accountability” for spiritual growth, “cultivating an environment that is conducive for growing fruit-bearing disciples,” Davis said.

Discipleship is about life change. "You don't want to hear, 'Preacher, that was a great sermon,'" Davis said. "You want to hear, 'Preacher, that sermon changed my life.'"