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WILL MANCINI AND CORY HARTMAN

FOREWORD BY ED STETZER

“Every now and then God chooses to plant someone on our planet with an extra measure of capacity and insight. Without question, Will Mancini is one such person. *Future Church* is more than a must-read. With the cosmic shifts we have experienced recently, the church must pivot to a new normal to remain relevant. This book provides the road map.”

Randy Frazee, pastor, Westside Family Church,
and author of *The Connecting Church 2.0*

“Will Mancini once again demonstrates a characteristic genius in helping churches and denominations to recalibrate around essentials, to recover their distinctive callings, and so to find wholesale renewal. A rare and timely gift.”

Alan Hirsch, author and activist

“*Future Church* is a fascinating consideration of why the church in North America has failed to create multiplying, disciples-making-disciples communities. Will Mancini and his team have been a consistently helpful guide to us for many years on creating good church culture. *Future Church* will help you grow this culture in your ministry as well!”

J. D. Greear, pastor, The Summit Church

“Will Mancini is one of the leaders I learn from and a thinker whose insights I trust. Smart leaders will dive into what Will has to say about the future church.”

Carey Nieuwhof, founding pastor, Connexus Church,
and host of *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*

“Through the years, Will Mancini has challenged me and the church I pastor to think deeply and critically about the church and its mission. This book adds to the list of tremendously helpful resources from Will, teaching us how to engage in the mission strategically and faithfully in the twenty-first century.”

Vance Pitman, senior pastor, Hope Church Las Vegas

“Most church leaders I work with have been wrestling with a gnawing feeling that something needs to shift in our churches. Are we truly making disciples or just entertaining followers? What should we be measuring? How do we know we’re accomplishing our mission? *Future Church* is an essential read for every church leader who is committed to defining real growth in a new era of ministry leadership.”

Jenni Catron, leadership coach and founder of The 4Sight Group

FUTURE CHURCH

SEVEN LAWS
OF REAL CHURCH GROWTH

WILL MANCINI
AND CORY HARTMAN



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Will dedicates this book to his father and mother, William and Leila Mancini, who model Future Church by being faithful to the organized expression of church over a lifetime without compromising fervent relational disciple making, even when the church didn't acknowledge it.

Cory dedicates this book to his children, Jack, Orphie, Arwen, and Israel, disciples of Future Church.

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FOREWORD

In January 2020, I read about a virus in Wuhan, China. I'm not sure exactly why, but I thought at the time this might be something big.

I began telling people in February we were going to see schools and churches close, and we would tell our grandchildren one day about this spring. People were pretty skeptical—for about a month.

Since I started preparing my staff at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in February for the coming virus, we were ready to provide a number of resources to churches early on when the pandemic hit.

I was probably patting myself on the back for my foresight when Donna, my wife, asked me, “So, if you saw this coming, why did you leave our retirement in the stock market?”

She was right. I did not see what I needed to see. And probably the only reason that I even took the virus seriously at first was I had watched the movie *Contagion* over the Christmas holidays.

You see, telling the future about anything is hard. Telling the future about culture is hard, and discerning the future church might be even harder. There are three things that we might want to consider as we think about the future of the church.

First, patterns are hard to break.

Even in the pandemic, churches discovered pretty quickly how hard it is to adjust to a dramatically different reality. Our church life, Sunday services, organizational approach, and general patterns of worship have really not changed that much for a generation.

Suddenly, every pastor in America became a televangelist. Ministers who resisted streaming their services suddenly embraced the technology; some who had criticized online services found themselves doing them. The coronavirus forced rapid change for a season.

However, my bigger concern is not that things will all change. It is that things will go back to the way they were. That's what happened during wars and economic downturns for centuries. The best predictor of the future is the immediate past. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.

If we are going to see God's people fully unleashed for God's mission, it will take some pattern breaking, and that's hard.

But the possibility for change is the greatest in tumultuous times. Things that have been building, perhaps unnoticed in the grind of day-to-day life, suddenly seem to accelerate in seasons of uncertainty. And the hope of real change is, I think, before us today.

Second, *change builds but then surprises us.*

As change accelerates there are breakthrough moments. Tipping points, some call them. There was John Huss and other dissenters who had concerns about the established church, and suddenly there's the swing of a hammer and Ninety-Five Theses are nailed on a church door. At that moment things tipped and the Protestant Reformation broke through.

We may be in one of those moments in regard to the church and its mission. We need to lean into the moment to see how God is moving in our midst.

Movements seem to spread out of nowhere, but their flood is preceded by tributaries preparing the way. What started as local change then becomes widespread in its impact.

We are in unprecedented times, yet none of this has caught God by surprise. He is the God of moments and movements.

What you will read in *Future Church* will help you perceive the movements breaking through our current moment. Will Mancini has seen a number of breakthrough moments in churches just like yours. Let his wisdom help you ride the wave of change.

Because that's what leaders do.

Finally, leaders play a major role in change.

Leaders give courage and guidance to ride these waves of change. This is why the early adopters and early majority play such a huge role in the diffusion of innovation, whether it's Apple computers with people like Steve Jobs or the rise of contemporary worship through places like Calvary Chapel.

We may be in one of those moments. It's a tumultuous time, and tumult is a catalyst for change. This is where Will Mancini and Cory Hartman's book can help us. In *Future Church*, you will read about the Seven Laws of Real Church Growth. At the heart of this is the question: What will you do with this ministry moment? Will is especially equipped to lead us in a moment like this.

We are never going back to the status quo before 2020 and COVID-19. That much is clear. What is less clear is how you will lead moving forward. In the following pages you will see not how to endure this season with a survivor's mindset but how to lead your church to its greatest disciple-making capacity in its history.

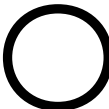
Since you are reading this book, you are thinking about the future. That's good. You won't get it all right, as my wife reminded me, but you can be better prepared for that moment of change.

Will began writing this book before the pandemic hit to help leaders look at the next twenty years of ministry. This year's events only accelerate the need for principles like he explains in these pages. You can lead the people God called you to lead, and this book can help you lead well.

Ed Stetzer, professor and dean at Wheaton College and executive director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

INTRODUCTION

Every Church's Primary Problem Today

n a single day not long ago, I (Will) spoke in two different cities with two very different pastors who put their finger on the exact same problem. After ten thousand conversations with pastors, two simple and unexpected statements converged with spontaneous and unbelievable insight. The convergence was as rare and unforgettable as a solar eclipse, only the effect was not a literal blocking of light but quite the opposite. The statements became a portal to see the future of the church.

I spent the first half of the day with the sixty-five-year-old pastor of one of the most successful Presbyterian churches in the country (according to attendance and giving standards, of course). This good man served the Lord well over his ministry and was now transitioning to a new life stage. Yet as he reflected on a lifetime of preaching, he privately expressed his quietly smoldering discontent about the condition of his church. “Will,” he told me earnestly, *“the church has got to be more than the Rotary Club with a choir.”*

After this conversation I hopped on a plane to another city. A thirty-five-year-old, newly minted lead pastor picked me up at the airport. He was still enjoying the favor that comes from the

honeymoon phase of a pastoral tenure at his growing, midsized Baptist church. There was much excitement about the future in his congregation. In the car I asked him about his number one challenge. “Will,” he replied, *“I have to convince my people that church is more than a show on Sunday with a few hooks in the water throughout the week.”*

And there it was: the beating heart of two passionate pastors testifying to the stopped heart of Jesus’s mission in the organized church. The problem was not conveyed as a meteor-colliding crisis but as the pervasive pressing concern. The short phrases revealed at least five metaphors for the church: business, club, entertainment, performance, and bait on a hook. I don’t think the young pastor had ever been to a Rotary Club, and I don’t think the retiring pastor had ever fished with a trotline. But they were certainly on the same page.

Two successful pastors—almost two generations removed in ministry experience, on opposite ends of the theological and stylistic spectrum—articulated the exact same problem. They lead churches that by all accounts are thriving, but they secretly suspect that many of their people have little clue about the church Jesus actually started. People come to church but don’t “get” church. The churches they serve feel like a pseudochurch. Something is missing.

My conversations that day revealed to me an extraordinary fact: it took one generation in time (from 2000 to 2020) for every

The church in
North America
is dramatically
overprogrammed
and underdisciplined.

generation of church leader in every faith tribe to feel the same primary problem—namely, that the church in North America is dramatically overprogrammed and underdisciplined. Of course, this challenge has been expressed at many other times in many different ways. But in our moment the named problem carries

an unprecedented gravity and rings with piercing clarity. It is more than the observation of those gifted to be innovators or a

courageous few. Instead, every pastor has begun to ask themselves with greater freedom and conviction, “Are we making disciples or faking them?”

Leaders like the two pastors I talked to feel the expectations of Church As We Know It weighing down upon them, but the pressures do not line up with what they are truly called to do. That’s what *Future Church* is all about: returning the organized church to the passionate conviction of disciple making in the way of Jesus.

To state the problem in its purest form I will articulate the substitute mission of the church that these two pastors are trying to correct. Think of this as the actual aim of local churches across the land that have so normalized mission drift that magnetic north barely registers on the compass. The functional Great Commission in North American churches has become:

Go into all the world and make more worship attenders, baptizing them in the name of small groups and teaching them to volunteer a few hours a month.

The purpose of *Future Church* is to provide a pathway that does not abandon the church to its current trajectory but boldly hails the need and reveals the opportunity to reset our compass in our cultural moment.

The *Future Church* Journey

Before we get started, I want to explain the authorship and the voice of this book. *Future Church* was coauthored by myself and my friend Cory Hartman, a writer and pastor. This book comes from both of us, and our ideas weave together throughout. Yet to make for a smoother and simpler reading experience, the book is written as if spoken by me individually. You can think of me as your guide on a journey crafted by us both.

To best help you, I start by escorting you uncomfortably deep into this problem that we are all familiar with but often do not fully understand. In order to awaken clarity and activate progress, I paint the contrast between faking disciples and making disciples in the church today. My goal is not to be simplistic or sassy but to apply my missional heartbeat and prophetic voice with a bit of grit. It has been said that prescription without diagnosis is malpractice. I want you to gain new appreciation for the breadth and depth of the dilemma. But I walk you deep down in order to lift you higher up—up with new vision and up with renewed conviction. There is a solution on the other side.

The journey of this book can be mapped this way:

- One problem
- Two rooms
- Three churches
- Seven laws
- One master tool

That is:

- **One problem** of faking disciples—the primary problem of every church today
- **Two rooms**—a simple picture that both unveils today’s crisis in the North American church story and gives you help and hope for your church’s story
- **Three churches** that when seen together become the most useful typology for understanding the North American church over the next twenty years
- **Seven laws** of organized disciple making for real church growth
- **One master tool** to map the way forward, which consists of **two funnels** derived from the modern ministry model and Jesus’s multiplication model

I got the idea for a book on Future Church when my thoughts startled me awake in the dark, quiet hours one night in 2016. Four years later, when we were putting the finishing touches on our first draft in the spring of 2020, many churches had stopped meeting for public worship because the COVID-19 pandemic had struck North America.

It astounds me that this book was being finalized under these circumstances. All of us had been hearing for a long time that the future was coming fast. But while this was being written, change overtook the church at supersonic speed. It felt like we passed from 2020 to 2030 overnight.

I realize that it's foolhardy to make sweeping predictions about something I am still living through in July 2020. Still, from this vantage point, I believe that the COVID pandemic probably constitutes the greatest innovation opportunity that leaders will have in a lifetime. Yet there is a danger that the church will miss the moment.

Shortly after the pandemic froze life as we knew it, my friend Neil Cole gave me perhaps the best way of thinking about the crisis as it pertains to the church. Neil said that COVID-19 is a shot across the bow of cultural Christianity. He meant that our inability to gather in customary fashion for weekend worship had the potential to dislocate and purge the lasting remnants of a Christianity rooted in local culture and social custom instead of a conviction to follow Jesus.

A warning shot is scary, but it's also gracious, just as God's confusion of the languages at Babel was a scary act of grace. In Genesis 1:28, God commissioned the human race to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." By Genesis 11, the human race was failing to obey the instruction. Instead of spreading out as instructed, people clustered together to make a name for themselves and rival God. With forceful mercy, God disrupted their construction to reengage their commission.

In similar fashion, the coronavirus forcibly and lovingly reveals what is true about the church in the early twenty-first century and

offers us the chance to renew our obedience to the Great Commission. When a church can't cluster together for weekend programming, it shows how faithful it is to the mission when it's scattered.

Meanwhile, every week of the pandemic we have been flooded by a hot mess of tips and tactics for how the church should respond. As useful as these might be for making quick fixes to keep things rattling along, they don't address the much greater vulnerabilities the pandemic exposes. At best they help leaders adapt, but they don't help them innovate.

Imagine, for instance, that the internet breaks tomorrow. The chaos it would wreak on the world would make COVID look like child's play. In addition, almost all the advice for church leaders on how to cope with the pandemic would become completely irrelevant overnight.

Yet, whether a pandemic strikes or the internet breaks or the church is driven into hiding, not a single word of this book you are holding would become irrelevant. Its principles were relevant before we sat down to write them, they're relevant today, and we believe they will remain relevant in all circumstances until

Christ returns. The church may be closed on weekends, but the mission of Jesus is never boarded up. The internet could disappear, but the word of God would still sound to the ends of the earth (Ps. 19:4).

This book begins by displaying the problem the church is mired in, but it ends by revealing the wonder of the mission that Christ has called us to. Our reason for journeying is to see the restoration of a body as

old as the apostles and as new as tomorrow, whatever tomorrow holds. Welcome to Future Church.

The church may
be closed on
weekends, but
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PART 1

FAKING DISCIPLES

THE UNCOMFORTABLE REALITY OF
LOWER ROOM LEADERSHIP

TWO ROOMS

The Best Picture to Expose the North American Church's Greatest Challenge

One of my favorite things about being a ministry consultant is that I get to meet a lot of people with interests and hobbies I never would have imagined. In recent months I met a pastor who collects chess sets from across the world, a denominational leader who hunts wild boar with a knife, and a missionary who makes guitars out of cigar boxes.

In comparison, my hobbies are a bit more conventional. I like Mexican food, snowboarding, looking at real estate, and fishing for smallmouth bass on a flowing river. But if I have a quirky hobby, it's this: I love useful tools that show important ideas *through pictures*.

Okay, I know that makes me kind of a nerd. But I love pictures; I can't get enough of them. I am an avid Instagrammer. My favorite part of writing a blog post might be picking the stock photos to go with it. I *do* judge a book by its cover (at first), and when I get a new book, the first thing I do is flip through to find the pictures. I am a super visual person, and I enjoy helping others engage the power of visual thinking.

So, as a consultant and author, I am known as a toolmaker—not the kind of tool you hang on a pegboard in your garage but the

kind you draw on the whiteboard in your office. I enjoy creating visual presentations of important ideas to create new perspective, deeper understanding, and ultimately permanent breakthrough. I have been doing this for twenty years and have made many tools that I love sharing with people in my books. But the visual tool I made that has done the most good for the most leaders over two decades of consulting has never been seen in print—until now.

The Four Most Common Reasons People Attach to a Church

The picture-tool begins with a question: *Why do people call your church “home”?* Phrased another way, *What connects people emotionally to your church?* If you could roll a soul X-ray machine in front of a person to see the real answer to that question, what would light up in their heart? I have found that most people in most churches answer with a combination of the following four attachments.

1. Place

Some people are emotionally tied to the church’s physical structure because of its convenient location, its architectural beauty, or their personal investment in dollars and sweat to keep it in good shape over the years. To them, in a real way, the facility is the church. Whether it’s a hip industrial campus downtown, a fabulous strip mall renovation, a suburban big box that would make AMC envious, or a beautiful steeple with a dash of stained glass in the rural countryside, we make our places and then our places make us. If you want to know how strong *place* is as a connection dynamic, just mention relocation in the next church business meeting.

A film roll of stories spins through my mind when I think of the role of place. One church in Amarillo, Texas, had so many donated-by signs on church fixtures that even the air conditioner condenser

unit in the backyard had a plaque on it. I thought to myself, “This church can’t even upgrade its A/C without offending someone!”

Perhaps the most dramatic personal experience with place for me came when the Willowdale Chapel near Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, called Auxano about ten years ago. The leadership at that time reached out for my help without realizing that it was my home church when I was in high school. I was going back to consult the church where I attended youth group and preached my first sermon. The most wonderful part of my first day back on the property came not when I took in the impressive worship center that had been built to accommodate growth since my day. It was when I walked into the dingy, cinder-block Sunday school rooms in the basement of the original chapel. A flood of memories came back with the familiar sights and smells of those small classrooms. I was instantly reminded of spiritual breakthroughs and meaningful relationships. At that moment I would have fiercely resisted any suggested changes to the basement because of my sentimental connection alone.

2. Personality

Some people are emotionally connected to a particular leader because of their amazing skill as a communicator, wisdom as a Bible teacher, or compassion in the ups and downs of life. To these people, the leader is the church. If you want to know how strong *personality* is, imagine how attendance would be impacted if your senior pastor suddenly announced he was leaving for a year, and that a guest preacher would be speaking the next fifty-two weeks.

One dramatic illustration of this is a stellar leader who planted a church in a midsized Midwestern city. After twenty years of leadership, the fruit of his ministry was significant. For several years his church even registered on *Outreach*’s list of the one hundred fastest-growing churches. While we were traveling together, he confided in me that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s

disease. Several months later, still before the disease had made any noticeable impact on his physical presence, he announced his condition to the congregation. Within four months the church's average worship attendance dropped by over ten percent. The elders wrestled with what the root cause of the decline might be. They finally concluded, "People like a winner. And evidently you can't be winning if you have Parkinson's."

No matter how you slice it, people in a church are deeply connected to the staff of the church. Even when a relatively ineffective pastor leaves a church of any size, there are always a handful of folks who check out.

Before moving on, it is worthwhile to pause and look at place and personality in light of church history. These two Ps are essential to Church As We Know It, but they are incidental to real church growth. From AD 100 to 300, the Christian movement spread like wildfire despite hostile conditions. While we cannot know the numbers for sure, we know that it grew in order of magnitude from thousands of believers to millions of them. Rodney Stark conservatively estimates that in AD 300 there were six million believers who made up 10 percent of the population. Alan Hirsch observes that in this two-hundred-year stretch, there were no such things as dedicated church buildings (place) or professional clergy (personality). The persecuted church became a force in the world without the supposed advantages that we take for granted as necessities today.¹

3. Programs

Some people are emotionally tied to the various activities and ways of doing things at church. This may be their favorite way of doing the Tuesday morning women's Bible study, their affection for home groups, missional communities, AWANA, kids' church, men's prayer breakfast, or how we make decisions as an elder board. To these people, the activities are the church. If you want to

test someone's connection to a *program*, just mention that church leadership is considering upgrading their favorite one with a newer one.

Early in my consulting career I learned the power of emotional connection to program. I helped a church in Virginia launch a contemporary worship service. Everyone was on board that it needed to happen, but there was deep division about *when* it should happen. The old guard wanted to keep it an early service at the crack of dawn, but the pastor was ready to launch at prime time—the 11 a.m. slot. I came to a board meeting perfectly prepared with a sequence of questions to sell the eleven o'clock option.

In the room of a dozen leaders, I ended up engaging in dialogue with Deacon Jim with the full attention of the rest of the board. “Jim,” I asked with quiet confidence, “if we launch the contemporary service at eleven o'clock, you do know that more families with young kids will attend, right?”

“Yep,” he replied.

“And Jim,” I continued, “you do know that some of those families will not have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, right?”

“Yep,” he repeated.

“And Jim,” I drove on, “you would gladly launch the contemporary service at the eleven o'clock time slot if you knew that an eight-year-old boy would find Jesus and a church home for the very first time, right?”

Jim didn't reply right away; instead, he looked reflectively into the distance. Then he finally spoke: “But I have been attending the traditional service since *I* was eight years old.”

My jaw dropped in disbelief. Eventually the church launched a fledgling contemporary service at 8:30 a.m.

4. People

Some people are emotionally connected to their friends at church, the *people* who create an atmosphere of acceptance and

first-name familiarity. It may be as simple as a fifteen-minute chat in the church entryway. Or it may be a solid, deep kinship in a long-running House Church. Or it may be somewhere in between like the warm connections amidst a yearlong weekday small group. For many, these interactions are the church. To measure the strength of this draw of people, imagine how a family may respond once they learn that their two best friends at church are relocating to another town. Would their connection to the church be threatened?

A funny feature of congregations is how people resist even small changes in worship service times. Let's say a church has two Sunday morning services at 9:30 and 11:00 a.m. As the church grows, an additional service time is required. Let's say the leadership decides to launch new service times at 9:00, 10:15, and 11:30 a.m. With additional service times you would think people would appreciate more options to suit their preference. But they don't. Church attenders resist the change because they resist the loss of the natural ebb and flow of friendships defined by the current schedule. Changing service times equates to "shuffling the relational deck" of the church. It might even boot you from your favorite auditorium seat or pew location with the invisible nameplate with your name etched on it.

I remind church leaders all the time that it's easier to find this kind of connection in a local bar than it is in a local church. It's a judgment-free zone where—cue the *Cheers* theme song—"everybody knows your name." All humans crave this whether they know it or not. And this sociological reality of life makes the world turn round whether a person is a believer or not. So when a person *does* find it at church, the last thing they want is to lose it.

At some point every effective disciple of Jesus must confront a natural tension. After a believer experiences salvation, the new saint will most likely experience some kind of biblical community, and many times it is downright wonderful. Yet, at some point, the believer will be confronted with the mission of Jesus, which presents a challenging question: "Is it more important to preserve the intimacy

of the fellowship or to unsettle that familiarity and warmth in order to add the next outsider?” To say it another way, “Will I intentionally walk away from the good vibes of my small group in order to multiply the group so that others may join?” To say it Jesus’s way, “Will I gladly leave the ninety-nine for the lost one?”

Generations of church experience testify to the challenge of the “us four and no more” Christian club. When people get their identity from friendships at church, they resist the proverbial open chair. As my friend Larry Osborne points out, most Christians are like LEGO blocks with all their connectors snapped together with other believers they already know.²

The Most Important Picture of Twenty Years of Consulting

Now that we have surveyed the four Ps, take a moment to picture the church as a two-story house. When people come into your church for the first time, what draws them in? When they decide to stick around the church, what moves them to make themselves at home? The answer to both is usually the four Ps of place, personality, programs, and people. Just as a person usually enters a house at ground level, people enter your church by walking into what I call the *Lower Room*, where the church’s four Ps are located.

When people engage with a church, they necessarily form opinions about the place, the personality, the programs, and the people. They cannot help but make or not make an immediate connection to all of the obvious things around them. These are the concrete things they can see and touch and will like or dislike. If someone talks about why they like a church, one of the four Ps usually takes center stage:

- **Place:** “The new building is close to where we live.”
- **Personality:** “Pastor Carlos is such a good teacher.”

- **Program:** “Emma and Aiden really love going to Kidz Zone.”
- **People:** “It’s the church our friends Joe and Sally attend.”

Because every person coming in contact with a church first encounters its Lower Room, every church should aspire to have attractive Lower Room features. I want to see a stellar Lower Room in every church I work with. I want them to have amazing facilities. I want the people to think the pastor hung the moon. I hope the programs are exciting and dynamic. And, of course, I want people to have great chemistry with friends they enjoy.

It follows that good church leaders pay close attention to the Lower Room. In fact, in order to grow the church, leaders spend much time making their four Ps more accessible from the outside and more irresistible on the inside. We upgrade our sanctuary like we upgrade our kitchen. We hire a young associate pastor to attract younger families. We roll out a new sermon series like a new season on Netflix. We attempt to make our guests feel as welcome as VIPs at Disney World.

Please note that in the lifetimes of today’s church leaders, this has been the tried and true formula for church growth: if you maximize the attractiveness of your place, the charisma of your personalities, the excellence of your programs, and the welcome of your people, your church will grow. It’s that simple.

At the same time, however, there remains a disturbing question lurking in the house’s shadow. Is capturing people in the Lower Room *real* church growth? Is this what Christ called us to do: tie people emotionally to a place, personalities, programs, and people? Does a church where most people are most attached to facility, leaders, activities, and relational chemistry correspond to what the church *is* according to the Bible?

Of course it’s not! Jesus gave *every* church a dynamic mission and *each* church one-of-a-kind potential. In addition, people prefer to be emotionally connected to a much bigger idea, a more transcendent cause. The life that Jesus offers to each of his disciples

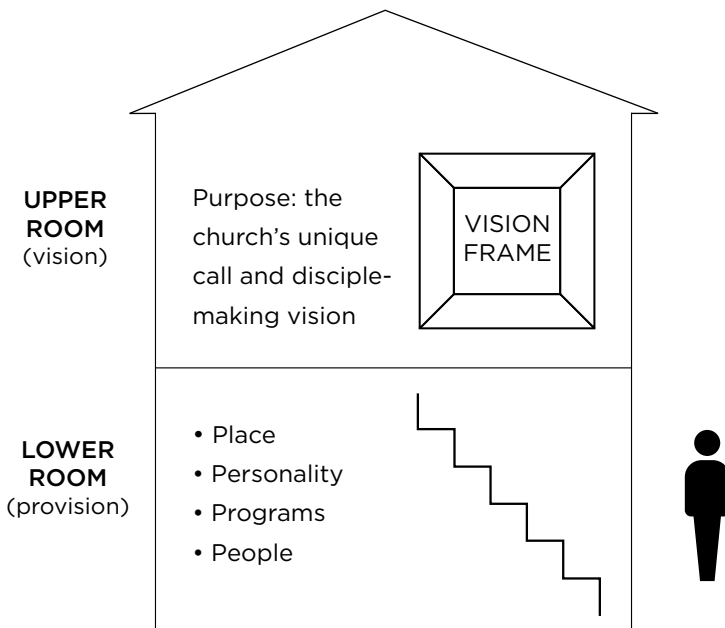
through this amazing thing called the local church can hardly be captured in *the Lower Room alone*.

We need another room. I call it the *Upper Room*, and it changes everything.

The Upper Room

The Upper Room offers an alternative answer to the question “Why do the people in your church call it ‘home’?” People in the Upper Room are emotionally attached to a sense of purpose beyond place, personalities, programs, and people. Being in the Upper Room means that a person knows and names *God’s unique disciple-making vision for a church*.

Figure 1 – Two Different Motivations for Church Attenders



People in the Upper Room not only like the vision but have fallen in love with it. Imagine a Jesus-following college girl excited about her new boyfriend. Picture her sharing with close friends all about his charming personality and commitment to God as she beams with a sense of attraction. Now imagine a church attender excited to share about her church in a similar way, talking up the specific dream of the church's gospel impact. People in the Upper Room call their church home because they are passionate about how God wants to use their church family as it gathers regularly and scatters daily. Most importantly, they have given themselves to this holy cause, wholly.

Let's evaluate the two rooms through a simple comparison. If you were to ask an eight-year-old boy what he wanted most for his life, every answer would be tangible: an electric scooter, a Play-Station, et cetera. But if you were to ask the parents of the eight-year-old boy what they wanted most for their son, every answer would be intangible: a vital relationship with God, acceptance, confidence, and so on. We wouldn't really fault the boy for wanting the next best toy. But we would find the parents alarmingly myopic if not downright irresponsible if they aimed at a tangible thing. Why? Because it would completely miss the beauty and opportunity of being human. We might say the boy is emotionally connected to a Lower Room of life while his mature parents live in the Upper Room.

Here is another way to look at it: what quality do place, personalities, programs, and people have in common? *They change*. And not only do they change, but virtually every leader understands that they *must change* over time to ensure the viability of both the organization and its higher purpose. The building needs remodeling. The pastor retires. Programs get tired. People move away.

Think of this incredible advantage of the Upper Room: even when the place, personalities, programs, and people in the Lower Room change or fall away, the commitment of Upper Room people

does not waver. In fact, I have routinely seen the conversion of people who used to resist change now insisting on it. The secret is this: people don't resist change; they resist loss. (If you offer someone a 15 percent raise today, chances are they will not resist the change!) If people are emotionally connected to the Upper Room, they don't have anything to lose when the Lower Room changes. The four Ps do not compel them to claim the church as their own. Rather, Upper Room people truly identify with the church's Vision Frame—that is, its disciple-making mission and disciple-shaping values, worked out through its disciple-moving strategy toward disciple-defining measures of success in light of its disciple-inspiring vision.

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You will hear leaders in both the church and business world attest to this dynamic of change management. Andy Stanley teaches leaders to “marry your mission but only date your model” as he encourages them to adapt and update methodology.³ In his classic book *Built to Last*, Jim Collins uses a yin-yang symbol to contrast a leader's relationship to continuity and change.⁴ Organizations that endure must have an undying commitment to a core ideology on the one hand but a ruthless commitment to change everything else on the other. This ironically becomes the only way to stay true to your core. I put it this way when I talk to church leaders: the Upper Room is what you etch in marble, the Lower Room is what you write in the sand.

In the end, the supremacy of the Upper Room does not make the Lower Room a bad place, but it does put it in its place. The four Ps of the Lower Room are useful to bring people into an environment that supports disciples of Jesus, but disciples are not supposed to remain there. They do not truly become friends of Jesus who do what he commands (John 15:14) unless they ascend from the Lower Room to the Upper Room. The Lower Room is meant to draw people in, but the Upper Room is meant to draw

people up. The Lower Room is the *provision* of the church, but the Upper Room must be the vision. The Lower Room can and will change; the Upper Room is enduring.

We can easily see both rooms in Jesus's ministry. When he feeds the five thousand men (a crowd that could have been up to twenty thousand men, women, and children), we see Jesus providing compelling teaching and miracle bread to the masses. It's a Lower Room environment. The Gospel of John testifies that people came primarily motivated by the benefits Jesus provided, which included a free Happy Meal for the kids. But at the end of Jesus's ministry, how many disciples are gathered who have signed their pledge card with ink not pencil? One window to this number is the 120 in the literal upper room recorded in Acts 1:15; another possibility is the five hundred Jesus appeared to at one time after the resurrection, according to Paul (1 Cor. 15:6). If you were to have asked Jesus, "How big is your church?" how would he have answered? I probably would have

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leaned toward the five-digit attendance figure, especially if I was reporting to my denomination. I think Jesus would have reported 120.

Unfortunately, in many churches, including in churches that appear to be thriving, few people dwell in the Upper Room. When someone tells me they lead a big church, I immediately wonder which room they are talking about. I tend to see the attendance on weekends as the size of the Lower Room; it is the size of the immediate ministry opportunity, not the size of the church. The true size of the church is the Upper Room. I would rather lead an Upper Room church of 120 than a Lower Room church of 1,200. The first is a force in the community. The other is an event in the building.

Confessions of a Consultant

In 2001, I started consulting with churches full time and eventually launched an organization called Auxano. At that time I introduced a new process for helping each church articulate its unique disciple-making mission and model revolving around the concept of vision. Since then I founded the Future Church Company, comprising Younique, which delivers gospel-centered life planning to individual disciples; Denominee, which helps networks, multichurches, and denominations bring value to congregations; and Pivvot, which brings the principles of *Future Church* to the local church.

When I began helping churches overcome barriers to growth, I was thinking about more than merely accumulating attenders. Rather, I was thinking about real church growth born from the Word's effect on the human heart and developed through the pattern of disciple-making disciples—men and women who value, practice, and model new skills in living the way of Jesus.

For two decades my primary work has been to help each church assess, articulate, and advance how God has shaped it to make disciples according to its unique context, its one-of-a-kind congregational makeup, and the particular callings of its leaders. I call it Vision Framing. The goal in building a Vision Frame with a church team has nothing to do with an event-based retreat to articulate a new mission, vision, and values. Rather, it involves a disruptive and challenging process where the team rethinks its existence at a core level and remakes its church operating system from the ground up. My calling is all about applying essence; a Vision Framing process penetrates to the essence of a local church and pushes it through to application. Vision Framing isn't complete until the empowered local leadership can articulate with convictional clarity how they will live out their own disciple-making model *in their time* with a specific dream for dramatic gospel good *in their place*.

The Vision Frame answers five irreducible questions of clarity. These answers become the codified vocabulary that defines

the Upper Room. First, this makes it accessible to people; vision transfers through people not paper. Second, it enables the church to reevaluate, realign, repurpose, replace, remove, or renovate the Lower Room stuff in order to promote and propel the Upper Room vision.

For as long as I and many others have been leading church teams through Vision Framing, we've never faced a lack of interest. The demand for our tools testifies to the church's hunger to make the main thing the main thing. Churches understand what it means to have no growth or fake growth; every church I have worked with wants real growth by making disciples of Jesus.

Yet I have a confession to make: some of our work has contributed more to the illusion of fluency in disciple making than it has to the real thing. If I could have seen this clearly as it was happening, I would have called it out. But in real time, my hopefulness overpromised on what my helpfulness delivered. With rearview mirror visibility on a twenty-year report card, I would sort my clients into three buckets: a leading third that soared in fulfilling the mission of Jesus, a middle third that demonstrably picked up the pace, and a lagging third that only messaged the mission—all talk, no do.

I now see that although no church—large or small, traditional or contemporary, Baptist or Presbyterian, mainline or new start—disagrees with Jesus's mandate for his church to make disciples, many fundamentally fail to do so *even while they become more adept at articulating disciple-making outcomes as their core reason for being*.

Words Create Worlds

I love the phrase “words create worlds,” attributed to Abraham Joshua Heschel. That mantra expresses the conviction I bring to churches to help them name what they can do best as communities of disciple-making disciples. I am an idea architect and words

are construction material. I often teach that the secret to getting people in the Upper Room is building a staircase, one that is not made of wood but of words—the shared, codified vocabulary of the Upper Room. Words are the leader’s primary tool, after all. If we can just say it well, say it together, say it often, and say it with feeling, surely people will catch the vision; surely they will taste and see the biggest ideas of God!

This is my conviction, and I have found it to be the strength of my ministry. It works. But there is a weakness in overrelying on the technology of getting words right. Yes, words create worlds. Yes, the pen is mightier than the sword. But it’s also true that talk is cheap.

I now understand more clearly how a church that is not making disciples can walk through an intensive Vision Framing process and come out the other side a spiffier-sounding church still not making disciples. Even when a church’s disciple-making language improves, the Upper Room remains inaccessible.

I do not believe the Vision Frame has been fatally flawed; not only myself but also the consultants, denominational leaders, and pastors I’ve trained and certified have seen tremendous fruit. Yet I do believe that, as every reflective person and organization eventually discovers, our greatest strength carries with it our greatest weakness. In our case, we have helped people appreciate and even personalize the disciple-making *words* of Jesus, but that has not automatically propelled them into the disciple-making *works* of Jesus.

The bottom line is that I underestimated the power of the Lower Room. Its gravitational pull is not the tug of a minor moon but the force field of a black hole. Our consulting work is extensive, but it has not always broken through to the church’s essence. When I thought I was installing a new operating system, some churches were merely installing a new app only to abandon it for the next silver-bullet app a year later.

The Seven Laws of the Upper Room as Visionary Planning Prequel

In my first clarity book, *Church Unique*, I unpacked the problem of photocopied ministry, and I unveiled the process of articulating a Vision Frame that enables church leaders to answer the five irreducible questions of organized disciple making for their unique congregation. The Vision Frame is an operating system designed to help leaders shape their church's culture and guide their church's growth. It helps a pastor lead from a unique disciple-making mission and model.

In my second clarity book, *God Dreams*, I showed church leaders how to discern and develop a long-range vision for their church and then install a simple execution plan to achieve it. Built on the Vision Frame, *God Dreams* features the Horizon Storyline (also known as the "1:4:1:4"), a tool that expands and deepens a church's answer to the fifth irreducible question, "Where is God taking us?" These books are volumes one and two of a visionary planning methodology used by churches of every faith tribe (see the appendix).⁵

When a Vision Framing process is done well, the end result is always one of a kind. This is what I live for. In all my years as a consultant, I have been Mr. Uniqueness. I have never lost my abiding passion to see each church (and, through my organization Younique, each individual believer) live out its special calling from God, to do what ten thousand other churches could never do. I urge churches not to short-circuit God's missional potential by cutting and pasting someone else's playbook. I designed the Vision Frame as the tool to help leaders know and name the beautiful, one-of-a-kind features of its Upper Room.

Yet I now see that all the work that goes into furnishing the Upper Room makes little difference if leaders are not acquainted with the Upper Room itself. If well-intentioned leaders are locked in a Lower Room mindset, all the great words they craft do not

take people upstairs; they keep everyone, including themselves, circulating on the ground floor. They use more vivid, purpose-filled language to keep drawing people into the Lower Room, and they overlay Upper Room expectations onto Lower Room actions.

Consequently, before I walk a church team through the five irreducible questions of organized disciple making—the Vision Frame—it is not safe to assume that we all share the same convictions about disciple making that the Vision Frame is founded on. That means I have to introduce leaders to the Upper Room so that they commit to it themselves before I help them bring the rest of their church upstairs. So, when I walk into a church today, I no longer start with the five questions but with seven laws.

That's what *Future Church* is all about. *Future Church* is my first book on the church's general calling—the disciple-making principles that ought to characterize every church. This book does not describe a boilerplate ministry model to be imposed on every church. Rather, it describes the fundamentals that every church must hold and operationalize if its own unique model would take people where God yearns for them to go.

Think of *Future Church* as the prequel to *Church Unique* and *God Dreams*—the episode released later in the series that tells how the whole saga begins. I wish every pastor, church leader, and ministry I have ever served as a consultant could have read it before we started working together.

This is even truer today, because every church and leader in North America is at a crossroads. Over the next twenty years, each church will increasingly resemble one of three types. Which one yours becomes has everything to do with its Upper Room, its Lower Room, and where people's greater attachment lies.