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From Building a Megachurch to Making Disciples: A Journey towards Spiritual Maturity

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FROM BUILDING A MEGACHURCH TO MAKING DISCIPLES: 
A JOURNEY TOWARDS SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Written by

JOHN B. GORIN

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary
upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

Tom Schwanda

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FROM BUILDING A MEGACHURCH TO MAKING DISCIPLES:
A JOURNEY TOWARDS SPIRITUAL MATURITY

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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JOHN B. GORIN
OCTOBER 2017
ABSTRACT

From Building a Megachurch to Making Disciples:
A Journey towards Spiritual Maturity
John B. Gorin
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2016

Through the application of a biblical model of discipleship in a small group format, this project seeks to further the spiritual maturity of Abundant Life Christian Fellowship (hereafter, ALCF), an evangelical multicultural church. In recent years, various church crises and splits have raised many questions at ALCF, including its discipleship efforts. The primary consideration now is how we can blend specific discipleship values with our own calling as a mid-sized church in the Silicon Valley.

Part One of this project details the context and ministry challenge facing ALCF in this time. Chapter 1 provides the community context in which ALCF exists by looking at the social and spiritual demographics of Silicon Valley. Chapter 2 describes the ministry challenges, beginning with an overview of ALCF’s “spiritual DNA” followed by the way successive leadership failures have revealed the need and priority for deeper spiritual maturity through intentional discipleship.

Part Two provides the theological foundations for the subsequent ministry strategy by reviewing the relevant literature that speaks to vision, content, and forms for discipleship (Chapter 3), while Chapter 4 examines the ecclesiological context and background of ALCF that informs and shapes what discipleship looks like in context. Chapter 5 provides biblical and theological reflection to show discipleship’s priority in Scripture and its praxis, specifically the necessity of discipleship done in community.

Part Three presents a ministry strategy for deeper discipleship at ALCF. Using the concepts presented in Part Two, Chapter 6 presents a model for small group discipleship that specifies the vision, content, and form that is relevant to ALCF. Chapter 7 moves this model to reality by presenting a two-phase process: 1) an initial phase of pilot groups lead by elders and pastors, and 2) the next phase of small groups led by lay leaders, with survey-based evaluations following each phase.

Content Reader: Tom Schwanda, PhD

Words: 299
To my wonderful wife, Victoria,  
whose love, prayers, help, encouragement, and ministry partnership  
made this work possible and a joy  

And to the brothers and sisters at Abundant Life Christian Fellowship  
who have taught me so much about  
the love of God  
and that  
we grow in Christ as we grow together
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INTRODUCTION

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” so begins Charles Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities* in describing both the hopes and the challenges brought by the French Revolution in which the story is set.\(^1\) It is also an apt description for the current time in which my church, Abundant Life Christian Fellowship (hereafter, ALCF) finds itself. It is the best of times because the series of pastoral departures and church splits over the past six years have awakened the congregation’s awareness of the importance of discipleship, particularly as lived out in small group communities. Much as a forest fire burns away scrub brush and debris that has choked out new growth, so these difficult times of destruction have the redeeming possibility of bringing new and deeper spiritual life. It is also the worst of times because developing and organizing a deeper form of discipleship theologically and practically has to be carried out within a church family that is hurting, looking for direction, and wondering what is next for the church as it seeks to faithfully live out its calling in the fast-paced and rapidly changing culture of Silicon Valley.

In many ways, our recent church experience is not unlike that of the church in Corinth. Paul was writing to a church that had divisions on the inside and pressures from the outside. It was situated in a strategic part of the Roman world in terms of spreading the gospel. How it responded to both these internal and external challenges would determine how much this body of Christ would glorify him and impact the Mediterranean world for time and eternity. ALCF is aware of these parallels. From an outside

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\(^1\) Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1911), 1.
From an internal perspective, the divisions within ALCF first became apparent in 2009 at the height of our ministry, when after twenty years of service and growth that saw over six thousand people attending weekend services, the senior pastor abruptly resigned. Within a year after the pastor’s departure, a third of the congregation left. The succeeding pastor left four years later for different reasons, and this time, two thirds of the congregation went with him. Now as a church of approximately six hundred, operating under the elder board because of the pivot to a “plurality of leaders” model, the question at hand is how to refocus on our common call as a church of disciples.

The hope and promise of this project is that as ALCF regains its focus and faithfully lives out its calling, we will have the opportunity of having a worldwide impact for generations to come. At the same time, we must make sure that the divisions that have undermined our witness and effectiveness no longer have sway. Instead, they need to be replaced by a deeper call to discipleship—to truly living exclusively as followers of Jesus with its radical calls to loving one another, living according to God’s Word, serving

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2 “In just two years, the percentage of Americans who qualify as ‘post-Christian’ rose by 7 percentage points, from 37% in 2013 to 44% in 2015. Across the United States, cities in every state are becoming more post-Christian. . . The West Coast is also fairly well represented among the top 15 cities, with San Francisco [metro], CA (66%) climbing up the rankings from 6th place (2013) to top the list as the most post-Christian city in America.” The Barna Group, “2015 vs 2013 Top 15 Post-Christian Cities in America,” accessed November 7, 2015, https://cities.barna.org/america-more-post-christian-than-two-years-ago/.
the community sacrificially, and as we do so, raising up more men and women as
disciples to carry this life forward.

This discipleship project is divided into three parts. The first part describes the
surrounding cultural, socio-economic, ethnic, and spiritual diversity in which ALCF lives
out its calling. The rapid changes in all of these elements present opportunities and
challenges for any church, but particularly for ALCF with its unique history. ALCF has
been a multicultural church almost since its inception, yet with the increasing diversity in
the Silicon Valley, we must look for ways to extend this value to new groups of people,
such as those from India and Latin America. ALCF is also an aging congregation, and
therefore it needs to actively look for ways to extend the grace and love God has put in it
to the millennial generation who make up an increasing segment of the Silicon Valley
population. ALCF needs to do these things by operating out of its “spiritual DNA,” that
is, the values and experiences—both easy and difficult—that make up who we are.

Part Two of this project provides the theological foundation for the priority of
discipleship within the church and the necessity of doing so in a small group format. The
New Testament and the witness of the Church speak sufficiently on this subject to
provide the foundation for a structure of small group focus for discipleship. The
necessity and efficacy of this discipleship structure has been proven throughout Church
history, particularly by the Wesleyan tradition which is the basis for ALCF’s
denominational affiliation with the Church of God of Anderson, Indiana. More recently,
the church movement within North America from large megachurches to smaller
communities, even house churches, provide helpful theological understanding and
practical information for how to form and strengthen discipleship around small groups.
Out of Parts One and Two comes the basis for the ministry strategy for deeper discipleship, which is the focus of Part Three. This section begins with a description of the model for small group discipleship that specifies the vision, content, and form that is relevant to ALCF’s spiritual DNA and context. More specifically, this section addresses the spiritual practices that reflect deeper discipleship and ways that we can disciple others, and in doing so, become more like Christ. An effective discipleship model must reflect ALCF’s spiritual DNA with its value for preaching and outreach to the community among other qualities. In addition, it needs to function within the wider ministry context of the church. In other words, it must consider how the larger fellowship gatherings, such as the women’s ministry or men’s ministry, reflect or support the focus on discipleship through small groups. It must also consider whether some of the outreach ministries, such as the ministry to the homeless, become places where deeper discipleship through small groups is taking place.

The second half of Part Three focuses on the practical implementation of the model. The implementation begins with Phase I, a pilot project that involves some of the elders and pastors. If this move to deeper discipleship is to become church-wide, it has to start at the top. An assessment of the pilot phase is then described in order to learn lessons and make important adjustments before a wider rollout to the church, which will be Phase II. A Phase II assessment is also presented to measure progress. It is important to note that the move to deeper discipleship through small groups is an arduous journey, due to the challenges of a declining church and the need for greater leadership. Nevertheless, there is great comfort in the biblical truth that discipleship is advanced by adversity.
PART ONE

CONTEXT AND MINISTRY CHALLENGE
CHAPTER 1

ABUNDANT LIFE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP:
A REFLECTION OF SILICON VALLEY MULTICULTURALISM

This chapter explores the unique setting of the Silicon Valley, which ALCF calls home. Following the demographics of the region, the spiritual landscape is discussed. This chapter also presents the history of the church, from its beginnings as a small African American church, to its heyday as a multicultural megachurch, to its current state as a mid-sized church recovering from crisis and loss.

Silicon Valley: The Opportunity and the Challenge

Silicon Valley has a population of more than 2.5 million people and is one of the richest, best educated, most innovative, widely diverse regions in the world. At the same time, it is one of the least spiritual places in the country—the only region in America, according to some, without a major Christian revival in its history. Many of the social challenges that face the country such as income inequality, a shrinking middle class, immigration, and marginal living are accelerated in this region. It is in this environment and in the heart of this area that ALCF has been called to live out its purpose as an
evangelical, multicultural church that desires more and more people to come to worship God, grow in Christ, serve one another, and reach out to all in love and deed.

As a region, Silicon Valley is commonly seen as comprising three counties: San Mateo, Santa Clara, and about half of Alameda (see figure 1.1).

From north to south, this area is about seventy miles long and west to east, and twenty-four miles wide. ALCF is in Mountain View, the heart of the valley. One can walk from the church to Google’s world headquarters in twenty minutes or drive to Facebook’s world headquarters in fourteen minutes. While driving the six miles to Facebook on surface streets, one would pass by ALCF’s previous three locations, including its original
location in East Palo Alto, when this town of about thirty thousand mostly Hispanic and African Americans was considered “the hood.”

Today, with the influx of high-tech workers and the high incomes that come with them, the local towns within Silicon Valley, including East Palo Alto, are undergoing rapid changes. While the increasing number of billionaires in Silicon Valley makes the headlines, what has far greater impact on the demographic changes in the area is the increasingly high cost of living. Earnings here are among the highest in the nation at $116,000, which means goods like housing are also among the most expensive.1

With the average home costing over $750,000 and rents increasing around 10 percent annually to $2330 per month over the past few years, it is no wonder that those workers in the middle class who are not part of the high-tech boom are finding it harder to keep up and remain in the area.2 Most cities in the region have their neighborhoods of “low-skill, low-wage people,” who are lower-income families defined as earning less than $27,000 annually. This group finds living in this area especially challenging. Families in this category will often seek some form of public assistance or share a living space with a greater number of others in order to make ends meet.3 In 2014, one in ten

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2 Ibid.

3 “Nearly 30% of the region’s population does not make enough money to meet their basic needs without public assistance.” Joint Venture Silicon Valley, 2015 Silicon Valley Report, 26.
people in the region came to the region’s largest food bank, Second Harvest. Often, the recipients are working hard to make ends meet, including working two jobs, renting a room, and the like. Given the economic dynamics at work at present in the region, it is likely this will continue.

The congregation at ALCF is composed of people from every earning group. In its heyday, the church had a good balance of the three groups. Since the split of early 2014, the church is composed more of middle- and lower-earning groups. Consequently, we have said goodbye to a number of families who have had to move to more affordable parts of the country.

Silicon Valley is incredibly ethnically diverse. According to the 2015 Silicon Valley Report, “Half of Silicon Valley’s population speaks a language other than English at home.” Few regions of the country can match Silicon Valley in terms of the diversity of ethnicities and races. Caucasians comprise only 36 percent of the population while Hispanic and Latino people make up 26 percent. Silicon Valley’s population is 31 percent Asian (including people from India). African Americans compose only 2.5 percent of the area’s population, compared with 5 percent for the entire state and 13 percent in the country.

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5 Abundant Life does not capture income data from its membership, so statements of this kind tend to be based on my own observations as a pastor at ALCF for the past twelve years, since 2004. For the most recent six years (2010-present), I have served as the executive associate pastor.


7 Ibid., 6.
Immigration has been a substantial contributor to the wide range of races and ethnicities present. Of the Silicon Valley population today, 37 percent of is foreign born, compared with 27 percent in California and 13 percent of the United States. Even as foreign immigration to the region has increased almost every year for the past twenty years, so domestic migration out of Silicon Valley has increased for most of the years in the same period. This is due primarily to cyclical economics of the region, such as building booms and dot-com bubbles, as well as the increasing unaffordability of living in the area.

On any given school day in the more affluent communities, such as Cupertino, Mountain View, and Los Altos, it is not uncommon to see a fleet of minivans arriving at elementary and middle schools immediately following school dismissal to take students off to another two hours of tutoring or test preparation. This reflects the growing, almost Darwinian conviction of many parents that academic achievement from the earliest age is necessary to gain the right university placement, which is necessary to have a career and income at the highest levels. In less affluent communities, particularly ones in lower socio-economic categories, such as East Palo Alto, East San Jose, and the like, academic achievement is barely on the radar of many families. Dropout rates remain about the same as the rest of the state, and far fewer of those who do graduate from high school are qualified for the University of California or California State university systems.  

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8 Ibid., 15.

9 Ibid.
Spiritual Landscape

More than any other region in the country, Silicon Valley reflects the acceleration of our culture into a post-Christian era. In just the past two years, according to the Barna Group, the San Francisco metro area (including Silicon Valley) has moved from sixth to first place in this category of “Post-Christian.” The term is used to designate those who do not have an active belief or engagement with God or a Christian church. Today, 66 percent of the people in the area are considered post-Christian. This region is also home to the highest percentage (61 percent) of unchurched people compared with 38 percent of the United States as a whole. There is a confluence of factors that contribute to this, including the following: a higher percentage of millennials in the Silicon Valley who are also the largest age demographic of those who claim to have no Christian affiliation; the large immigrant population in the area, many of whom come from countries without a

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10 According to the Barna Group’s criteria, “post-Christians” include individuals identified as atheist or agnostic, or who may have once considered themselves practicing Christians but now have no ongoing Christian practice of church attendance, Bible reading, or giving. The Barna Group, “2015 vs 2013 Top 15 Post-Christian Cities in America,” accessed November 7, 2015, https://cities.barna.org/america-more-post-christian-than-two-years-ago/.

11 The Barna Group defines “unchurched” as composed of “dechurched,” that is, those “who used to attend regularly but have not attended at all in the past six months” and those who are considered “never churched,” including those who “have never in their lives regularly attended a church.” By this measure, Barna estimates that in the San Francisco metro region, 14 percent of the population is “never churched,” compared with 9 percent of the US population in this same category. The Barna Group, “Churchless Cities: Where Does Your City Rank?” May 1, 2015, accessed November 20, 2015, https://barna.org/barna-update/culture/718-churchless-cities-where-does-your-city-rank#.Vk4NidDqtSo.

12 People aged 25 to 44 (roughly the older side of the millennial generation and the younger side of Generation X) are 39% of San Francisco County’s population and 30% of Silicon Valley’s population, compared with 28% for California and 26% for the United States. Joint Venture Silicon Valley, 2015 Silicon Valley Report, 11. Millennials are less likely than other Americans to have attended church the previous week and the most likely to have not attend church within the past six months. See Jon Tyson, Sacred Roots (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 16-17. The Barna Group’s findings that the San Francisco Metro Region is the most post-Christian city in America correlates with the high percentage of millennials. The Barna Group, “Churchless Cities: Where Does Your City Rank?”
dominant Christian tradition, such as Asia, particularly India;\textsuperscript{13} and the high-tech jobs boom that attracts people at the higher end of educational achievement (particularly people in the immigrant and millennial categories), correlates to less belief in Christian faith and practice.\textsuperscript{14} In short, the younger and/or more educated are less likely to hold to a Christian evangelical faith.

With these basic spiritual demographics, it is no wonder that traditional spiritual practices of church attendance and Bible reading remain low. Church attendance in Silicon Valley is among the lowest in the nation. Only 25 percent of residents attend a weekly service in Silicon Valley or read the Bible at least once a week, compared with approximately 40 percent nationwide. The weekly attendance figures for some groups, like Chinese Americans, is in the single digits.\textsuperscript{15} Spiritual practices with greater participation reflect the more self-focused, less communal part of the spectrum. Thus, personal prayer is practiced daily or weekly by more than two-thirds of the Christian population, and meditation is practiced by about half of this group.\textsuperscript{16} These participation rates exceed the more community-oriented spiritual practices of small group meetings.

\textsuperscript{13} Silicon Valley is 36.3\% foreign born, with people from Asian countries (not including India) composing 37\% of that total and people from India composing 11\%. Joint Venture Silicon Valley, 2015 \textit{Silicon Valley Report}, 6.


\textsuperscript{16} Pew Research Center. “Religious Landscape Study.” See section titled, “Frequency of participation in prayer, scripture study or religious education groups among Christians who are in the San Francisco Metro Area.”
and weekly religious education, which are practiced by about one in three Christians.\textsuperscript{17} The fact that spiritual practice is more individually oriented rather than community oriented does not mean that Christians are not concerned about their community. As the Barna Group reports, “Although faith engagement activities like prayer and reading the Bible are consistently low in San Francisco, engagement with non-profits remains strong (19% volunteer their time and 80% donate their money).”\textsuperscript{18}

These trends are reflected in the spiritual demographics of ALCF, but to a lesser degree, due to the fact that approximately half of our congregation is African American, which is a group with outsized representation in the spiritual life of the Silicon Valley. Indeed, while African Americans comprise less than 3 percent of the Silicon Valley population, they are 12 percent of those who call themselves Christian in the area. This reflects national trends as well. According to the Pew Research Center, blacks nationwide have the highest participation in spiritual practices of church attendance, daily prayer, and the study of Scripture when compared with other racial groups, such as whites, Asians, and Latinos.\textsuperscript{19}

While the impact of the trend towards a post-Christian culture may be less acute at ALCF, the trend towards a younger demographic poses more near-term challenges for our church. There are more people between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four (that is, older millennials and younger Gen Xers) in Silicon Valley than in the nation as a

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{19} Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study.” See section titled, “Belief in God by Race/ethnicity (2014).”
whole,\textsuperscript{20} yet there are far fewer millennials participating at ALCF at present. This is due in large measure to the aging leadership at ALCF, including a pastoral staff and elder board in their mid-forties and fifties, and the lack of priority given to identifying younger leaders and making and mentoring them accordingly.

**History of Abundant Life Christian Fellowship**

This section discusses the history of the church, exploring its roots as the Church of God of East Palo Alto, its transition to a megachurch in the 1990s and 2000s, and its point of crisis in 2009. The size of the church has fluctuated dramatically over the course of its history, and the demographics of the congregation have shifted as well. This brief presentation of the church’s history sets the stage for the project at hand.

The Early Years of the Church of God of East Palo Alto (Founding to 1989)

The precise date of the founding of the Church of God of East Palo Alto is no longer known, as local records passed from one church secretary to another over the years, and eventually were misplaced. What is known is that the church had existed for decades prior to 1989, when it called Paul E. Sheppard to be its next pastor. The church was located on Saratoga Avenue in the heart of East Palo Alto, a predominantly African American community on the San Francisco peninsula. It was a congregation with many of the features that are common to the black church experience, such as preaching for emotional impact, choir-led worship, whole congregational fellowship often centered

around lunch after church, and a church governance that included a pulpit committee, trustees, and a senior pastor.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1989, the church had fewer than one hundred members—all African American. Like many small churches, it had a tendency to focus much of its attention inwardly. In the 1980s it had had a succession of senior pastors, and by 1989 the church was looking for another senior pastor. While Pastor Paul had heard of the Church of God of East Palo because his brother Horace W. Sheppard, Jr. had pastored there in the late 1970s, he was content to be the youth pastor at the West Oak Lane Church of God in Philadelphia where his father, Horace W. Sheppard, Sr., had been the senior pastor for the past twenty years. Like his father, Paul had a growing reputation as a gifted preacher.

After about five years of serving as youth pastor at West Oak Lane Church and as he passed his thirtieth birthday, Paul believed God was calling him to establish a significant work on the west coast, so he made his way to California.\textsuperscript{22} The new work that Pastor Paul believed God was calling him to was described this way:

By the end of 1988, the details of the Vision unfolded: a radio broadcast called Enduring Truth, large church growth, reaching and discipling thousands of unsaved and unchurched people, reverent worship of God in an informal atmosphere, practical teaching of the Bible, the development of believers who would influence others on their jobs and in their communities, and a church that would have a major impact on the Bay Area for Christ.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Anonymous members of ALCF, interviews by author, Menlo Park, CA, 2002-2004.

\textsuperscript{22} “As Pastor Paul says, ‘I was that rare prophet who receives honor is his own country. I made a good living and had a good life. There was no apparent reason to leave.’ Yet, in 1988, God gave Pastor Paul a vision of pastoring thousands of people in another part of the country.” Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Receiving the Vision,” Abundant Living (Winter 2009): 3.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
Paul Sheppard was called by the thirty-four African American members of the Church of God of East Palo Alto to be their senior pastor in 1989.

Within the first year of his becoming the senior pastor, Pastor Paul initiated significant changes to bring his vision into reality. One of the first was to drop the “dress code” of formal Sunday attire of suits for men and dresses for women in favor of more casual wear in order to appear welcoming and open to receiving those with little or no church background.24 Another significant change was renaming the church Abundant Life Christian Fellowship. The name was inspired by John 10:10, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”25 There was also benefit to not being affiliated with any particular locale, particularly one like East Palo Alto with its troubled reputation and “small community” ethos.26 Such aspects worked against a hope of reaching thousands in the Bay Area. One of the more established, “mandatory” features of black church culture is the choir. Pastor Paul changed its role as well. As one member of the congregation recalled, “We had a typical choir in the black church that would robe up and march down the aisle, and we’d . . . feature the choir that leads us into worship. . . . As soon as he came, he sat the choir down and taught [that] we would all worship the Lord.”27

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24 Ibid., 9.

25 Ibid.

26 One member of the original East Palo Church of God described the motivation for the name change to Abundant Life Christian Fellowship this way: “We [the city of East Palo Alto] were supposed to be the murder capital [of the nation], and Pastor Paul wanted to help eliminate the stigma attached to the community.” Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Fulfilling the Vision,” 9.

Pastor Paul began to make changes to his preaching style as well. It migrated from a form very familiar in black churches where “ministers combine rhythm, rhyme, and music when delivering a message from the pulpit,” to one that was more of a “teaching one with a mixture of humor and practical applications to Scripture.” As this new preaching style took hold, he launched a brief radio broadcast called “Enduring Truth” on one of the smaller radio stations in the Bay Area.

The final change made during this time was in the church’s governance. Believing that a board of elders was more scriptural, the leadership agreed to replace the pulpit committee with a board that would oversee the operations and spiritual welfare of the church. All these changes were made in less than a year. It was clear that these changes were essential if “new wineskins” were going to be put into place. The new wine that was hoped for included preaching to reach the unchurched, transformed lives, spiritual growth, and community change. What was also clear was that ALCF would need a new location if it was going to grow and escape being pigeonholed as another small church in East Palo Alto.

New Wineskins:
From Black Church Culture to Multicultural Congregation (1989-1995)

In late 1989, ALCF moved out of the Saratoga Avenue location and rented the Cubberly Community Theatre in Palo Alto to hold its Sunday services. The theatre would give the church more room to grow. Though East Palo Alto and Palo Alto are adjacent,
their demographics are noticeably different. Palo Alto is more affluent, more Caucasian and Asian, and less African American and Hispanic.\textsuperscript{31} Despite these demographic differences, no one expected that this location was to be the start of God building a multicultural church. Some in the church recount that the first non-African Americans who visited ALCF at Cubberly were intending to visit a different, predominantly Caucasian church located in the adjacent Cubberly Community Center. However, when they heard the gospel worship coming from the theatre, they went in—and stayed.\textsuperscript{32}

Pastor Paul would describe the transformation into a multicultural church that started at Cubberly as “a God thing.” Pastor Paul had no idea that God would make ALCF a multicultural church. In fact, he was so convinced that this was God’s doing that he regularly turned away requests from people to speak about how ALCF became racially diverse or multicultural. He did, however, lead some conversations around racial reconciliation, particularly during the Rodney King trial in 1992.\textsuperscript{33}

The years at Cubberly from 1989 to 1995 were a time when the defining characteristics of what would become a multicultural megachurch began to take shape. All of this occurred because of what God had planned and the steps of faith that Pastor Paul took to realize the vision God had given him. The church grew in diversity, in number, and even in staff as the first staff person was hired during this time. Enduring Truth continued to grow in terms of its listener base as it moved to KFAX, a more

\textsuperscript{31} In 1990, East Palo Alto was 43% black and 31% white, while Palo Alto was 3% black and 85% white. Bay Area Census, “Selected Census Data from the San Francisco Bay Area,” accessed November 7, 2014, http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov.

\textsuperscript{32} Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Fulfilling the Vision,” 9.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
established Christian radio station with broader reach in the Bay Area. As ALCF reached 250 people, there was the sense that a new facility would be needed.\(^{34}\)

Megachurch and Intentional Growth (1995 to 2004)

In 1995, ALCF moved to O’Brien Drive in Menlo Park. O’Brien Drive is on the east side of Highway 101, which means the demographics of this area were more like those of East Palo Alto than Palo Alto. The new facility was a 14,000-square foot warehouse, now converted to a sanctuary of 350 seats with an overflow room that could handle another 250.

The move to O’Brien Drive marked the start of ALCF becoming a multicultural megachurch. In the nine years that the church was at this location (1995 to 2004), the church grew in diversity in a number of ways. Racially, more people from different ethnic backgrounds began to attend. It was common to see not only Caucasian and Asian people alongside African Americans, but also Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, as well as some from the technology centers of India. Eventually, African American members of ALCF would comprise a little over 50 percent of the weekend service attendance.\(^{35}\)

While racial diversity was increasing, so also were socio-economic and inter-generational diversity. Joining the original ALCF members from East Palo Alto, who generally had middle-class income and education levels, were people from more affluent areas like Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Mountain View, and Los Altos. College students from nearby Stanford began to attend regularly, as ALCF grew in popularity with many

\(^{34}\) Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Developing the Vision,” 8.

\(^{35}\) This observation was repeated by the former executive pastor of ALCF in staff meetings over the years. I was present for many such staff meetings in which this observation was made.
students because of Pastor Paul’s preaching and because the church was living out a multicultural church family environment. One Sunday, Chelsea Clinton who was an undergraduate student at Stanford at the time, attended one of the morning services, complete with Secret Service detail.

More people from the high-tech industry arrived as this period of time coincided with the influx of hiring for the dot com boom from 1996 to 2000. Pastor Paul would say—more than once from the pulpit and in the new members’ classes—that ALCF is a place where you can find a PhD sitting next to someone with a GED, where you can find a CEO sitting next to someone who just got out of jail. More people from the high-tech industry arrived as this period of time coincided with the influx of hiring for the dot com boom from 1996 to 2000. Pastor Paul would say—more than once from the pulpit and in the new members’ classes—that ALCF is a place where you can find a PhD sitting next to someone with a GED, where you can find a CEO sitting next to someone who just got out of jail. More people from the high-tech industry arrived as this period of time coincided with the influx of hiring for the dot com boom from 1996 to 2000. Pastor Paul would say—more than once from the pulpit and in the new members’ classes—that ALCF is a place where you can find a PhD sitting next to someone with a GED, where you can find a CEO sitting next to someone who just got out of jail. More people from the high-tech industry arrived as this period of time coincided with the influx of hiring for the dot com boom from 1996 to 2000. Pastor Paul would say—more than once from the pulpit and in the new members’ classes—that ALCF is a place where you can find a PhD sitting next to someone with a GED, where you can find a CEO sitting next to someone who just got out of jail.

36 Inter-generationally, there was a healthy balance amongst the generations. Pastor Paul was in his early forties—the sweet spot of appeal to generations on either side of his own. Young families came, attracted by the active children’s and youth ministry, while older people who had been in homogenous churches most of their lives were attracted to this dynamic teaching and multicultural body. Life statistics from this time bear this out: ALCF officiated ninety weddings and dedicated one hundred babies.37 During the same period, the church officiated at forty funerals or memorials.38

The nine-year period at O’Brien Drive saw a ten-fold increase in membership—the most rapid growth in ALCF’s history—and corresponding ministries including children’s ministry, youth ministry, many community-focused outreach programs, and

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36 This observation was repeated by Pastor Paul from the pulpit during his tenure to illustrate the diversity that characterized ALCF. As a member of the ALCF pastoral team, I was present for many such sermons.


38 Ibid.
various age-and-stage fellowships, such as marriage and family and recovery ministry. It was towards the end of this time at O’Brien Drive that ALCF became noticeably intentional about its discipleship by creating growth groups, which were small groups meeting in homes in the Bay Area, and a discipleship course of core classes called the Institute for Biblical Studies (hereafter, IBS).

Arriving at the facility with 250 members in 1995, the church would make its next move to Mountain View with 2500 members in 2004. With such rapid growth came new ministries and a rapidly expanding staff to accommodate it. From just one staff person at Cubberly, the church’s team grew to thirty-one full-time employees, ten of whom were pastors on the executive team. 39 The staff reflected the growing multiculturalism at ALCF. 40

Outreach ministries were thriving during this period with the creation of a juvenile hall ministry to complement the jail ministry that was already in existence. Invitations to receive Christ after every church service and in other venues saw 1700 people respond with public decisions for Christ. Seven hundred people were baptized during this time. 41 Not everyone who made a profession of faith attended ALCF, and not everyone who was baptized was a new believer—some had been believers already and baptized as children. Yet even making allowance for these variables, it would be fair to estimate that about one thousand or 40 percent of ALCF’s membership in this period was

39 Ibid.

40 ALCF’s staff grew in proportion with the needs to be met. In 2004, approximately 50% of the team were African American, 42% were Caucasian, and 8% were Asian. Of the thirty-one staff members, thirteen were men and eighteen were women, including two of the pastors.

composed of new believers. This encouraging data does not begin to capture the sense of joy felt by the staff and congregation at seeing God bring people into relationship and change their lives.\textsuperscript{42}

The O’Brien facility was a substantial improvement over the rented Cubberly Theatre, but as ALCF’s church family grew ten-fold, it became apparent that it was not going to “house the harvest” very much longer. In response, Pastor Paul started a capital campaign called “Housing His Harvest,” which soon saw significant response. At the same time, a 71,000-square foot building for lease was found in Mountain View at 2440 Leghorn Street. It was five times the size of the O’Brien facility, but there was much work to be done to convert it from its previous purpose as a light industrial place to a worship center. Work began in 2003 and was completed by April 2004.

The Leghorn Years, Part 1 (2004 to 2009)

ALCF’s worship center continues to this day at the Leghorn Street location; yet the first five-year period of its time here marks a time of continual increase in ministry and participation, with 2009 being the high-water mark. The two-story worship center campus was built with increasing growth in mind. The sanctuary had 2100 seats; the children’s ministry had ample space downstairs, while the junior high (now called “the House”) and the senior high (called “GX”) had separate rooms upstairs, along with rooms for special needs children and for adult discipleship classes. A chapel, fellowship hall, kitchen, senior pastor’s office, green room, and various other rooms completed the structure.

\textsuperscript{42} This information is based upon my own personal recollections and observations as a pastor at ALCF during this time.
During this period, ALCF grew from 2500 to over 6000 people. It was during this time that ALCF truly became a regional church. People not just from Silicon Valley but all around the Bay Area attended one of the four weekend services (two on Saturday afternoon and two on Sunday morning). It was not uncommon for some to drive fifty miles to get to church.\textsuperscript{43} Supporting discipleship ministries grew correspondingly during this time as well. By the end of 2009 there were 127 growth groups serving over 1400 people; 750 children and young people participated each week in the children’s or youth ministries. A ministry to special needs children, called Special Adventure, was begun at this time. These and other ministries were supported by over 1600 volunteers.\textsuperscript{44}

Outreach ministries saw great expansion during this time as well. Jail ministry expanded to include a juvenile hall ministry, and an outreach to the homeless in the area through the giving of food and clothing was established. International missions also came of age during the first five years at Leghorn, as over 160 people were sent from ALCF on both short-term and long-term mission trips to over twenty-one countries.\textsuperscript{45} Closer to home, active evangelism was encouraged through classes such as “Out of the Saltshaker” and even a church-wide conference led by Becky Pippert on sharing one’s faith.\textsuperscript{46} One of the foremost outreach efforts during this time was the creation of a worship arts group. A pastor experienced in worship arts was hired to develop a way to

\textsuperscript{43} The best data in support of this comes from the growth group ministry, which during this time had three groups meeting in Oakland (45 miles away), two groups in Tracey (60 miles away), and three in San Francisco (40 miles away).

\textsuperscript{44} Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Developing the Vision,” 11.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} This class and conference are based upon Becky Pippert’s definitive work on relational evangelism. See Rebecca Manley Pippert, \textit{Out of the Saltshaker} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1979).
present the gospel story through the arts. What resulted was an annual Easter production based on the gospels that averaged about fifteen thousand attendees per year. Invitations to receive Christ were given following each performance. This effort, along with the weekly invitations to receive Christ, saw an average of six hundred people per year indicate decisions for Jesus.

With the level of ministry growth taking place, it is no surprise that ALCF’s staff grew at all levels. The pastoral team grew from seven to eleven, while the total employee number climbed to seventy. Diversity among the pastors and ministry directors also changed during this time. African Americans comprised 50 percent of the team, followed by Caucasians at 44 percent, and one Asian pastor representing 6 percent of the team. Though this period saw an increase in Hispanic people in the area and a corresponding decrease in African Americans, even in East Palo Alto, the church did not move in the direction of building a Spanish-speaking ministry. Members of the congregation whose first language was Spanish were encouraged to join one of the three Spanish-speaking growth groups. The additional support staff of ALCF reflected a wider diversity than the pastors and directors, with more Asian employees as well as the addition of Pacific Islander and Hispanic staff members.

By 2009, ALCF was “firing on all cylinders.” The church truly was as its slogan said, “an exciting fellowship of growing believers,” with around seven thousand believers from all kinds of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Growth was phenomenal

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47 Even while the black population in East Palo Alto has declined from 23.0% to 16.7%, and the Hispanic population has increased from 58.8% to almost 66% of the city’s population, ALCF remained noticeably African American. Bay Area Census, “Cities: East Palo Alto,” accessed February 11, 2016, http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/EastPaloAlto.htm; http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/EastPaloAlto70.htm.
thanks to stable leadership, a clear vision, and dynamic preaching. In the middle of that year, ALCF celebrated Pastor Paul’s twentieth anniversary at the church. Guest speakers, including some notable preachers with national radio ministries, came to preach and join us in giving thanks for Pastor Paul’s ministry and the fruit that it was producing. The church was operating on a budget exceeding $11 million, and there was a sense that this was going to continue and that soon Leghorn would not be big enough to house the harvest God was providing. A series of congregational meetings were held to determine the next strategic facility decision: whether to begin multisite campuses or “build a bigger barn,” which would be a new five thousand-seat worship center to house the harvest.

Perhaps Jesus’ warning parable in Luke 12 about building bigger barns should have been heeded, because as 2009 came to a close, the congregation received the sudden and shocking news that the beloved founding pastor, Paul Sheppard, was stepping down immediately due to previous “moral failure.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the context of Silicon Valley and ALCF. It has presented the demographics of the community and commented on how the church reflects this community and its values. This chapter has also discussed the history of the church, highlighting it rise to prominent megachurch status. The next chapter summarizes ALCF’s priorities and ministry focus, and it continues the story of the church as it encountered multiple crises that significantly impacted the congregation.
CHAPTER 2

CHALLENGE: RECENT YEARS OF CRISIS REVEAL SHORTCOMINGS OF ALCF

In December of 2009, the world of ALCF, with its congregation of more than six thousand, had been shattered by the sudden resignation of the founding pastor. Thus began a new and unwelcome season in ALCF’s history that continues to this day, one marked by a succession of leadership crises and their corresponding negative impacts on the lives of many people and on the ministry of the church. To understand these most recent six years more fully, it is helpful to understand the “spiritual DNA” of the church.

ALCF’s Spiritual DNA

The spiritual DNA of a church is that which describes its self-understanding, forms the basis of its practice of ministry, and is passed on to new members and succeeding generations of the church family. ALCF’s self-understanding has evolved over the years and has been described in various ways, including its purpose statement, the content of the core adult education class, and most thoroughly as a set of twelve core values known by the acronym, “ABUNDANT LIFE.”¹ The essence of each of these

¹ The ABUNDANT LIFE acronym stands for: Accommodating the unchurched, Believing God for miraculous answers to prayer, Unity rather than uniformity, Numerical growth, Diversity in worship
efforts over the years reveals that ALCF’s spiritual DNA is composed of five core values: outreach, service, unity not uniformity, worship, dynamic preaching, and discipleship.

Outreach

At ALCF, the word “outreach” means living out our evangelical calling to present Jesus as Savior and Lord and inviting people to receive him as such. We describe ourselves in part as “an evangelical church that preaches salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Acts 4:12; Eph 2:8).” Our emphasis on proclamation by word is found in many forms: from an altar call at the end of each Sunday service, to years of putting on Easter and Christmas productions of the gospel stories, to evangelistic preaching in prisons, recovery events, and missions trips.

Outreach has also taken place in the surrounding community. The black Church has a rich culture, born of necessity, of helping those in need in the immediate community. Consequently there has not been a strong tradition of black churches prioritizing missionary efforts around the world. This would develop over time at ALCF, but the missions team meetings have typically had fewer than eight members, and the missions budget has been confined to just a handful of overseas missionaries.

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3 This information is based upon my own personal recollections and observations as a pastor at ALCF during this time. In particular, I oversaw the Global Missions Team in 2007 and gleaned other information from my participation in staff meeting discussions.
At present our value for outreach is encapsulated by the phrase, “Reach out to all.” We want our light to “shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). Consequently, we continually encourage members to take the “Out of the Saltshaker” class, participate in a particular outreach effort, or start one in their own neighborhoods. Corporate times of prayer as well as those within the small group community regularly focus on praying for “not-yet-believers” in our lives. Thus it would be hard for someone who has spent any length of time at ALCF not to understand and imbibe the focus on outreach.

Service

The conviction that every member of ALCF “should use whatever gift you have to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pt 4:10) has been an enduring value and practice. It is seen in the hundreds of volunteers who sustain ministries within the church body, such as leading small groups, affinity ministries, worship service ministries, children’s programs, and the like. This value of service has also benefitted the local community as members of the congregation support local food charities, homes for teenage mothers, after-school clubs for kids, crisis pregnancy centers, homeless ministries, convalescent home visitation, and the like. The focus on the surrounding area, chiefly East Palo Alto, has its roots in the black church tradition of being concerned primarily for the pressing financial and material needs of its immediate members and community. Even after being in Mountain View for the past eleven years, most of the local service efforts remain focused on the East Palo Alto community.

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Unity Not Uniformity: Life within This Diverse Body

The value of “unity not uniformity” preceded the multicultural transformation of ALCF. In many ways this value laid the foundation for a church that welcomed people from different racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. This value was grounded in Scriptures like Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 1:10, which spoke against division over different levels of Christian liberty within the Church (Rom 14) or over preferred styles of preaching and leadership (1 Cor 1:10). Originally, ALCF wanted to convey that it was welcoming of people from different Christian traditions. It would no longer practice a unity based on a mono-cultural expression of what it meant to be a church. Almost immediately upon reconstituting as ALCF, Pastor Paul shifted the worship from choir based to praise team led, and expanded the selection of worship songs. In fact, “diversity in worship and music styles” was called out as one of the twelve core values of ALCF.5

As ALCF began to move away from the parochialism of its black church expression of faith while preserving its spiritual vitality, it also intentionally sought to include “all races, ages, and socio-economic groups,”6 as the people of God would all eventually, according to Revelation 7:9, be a part of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.” Therefore, as God’s people on earth, it made sense to reflect this eventuality now as much as possible. It should be said that this multiethnic aspect of ALCF’s values developed over time. When Pastor Paul shared his call from God to start a work in which “thousands of people are reached for


6 Ibid.
Jesus Christ,” he thought they would be thousands of black people.⁷ He never imagined that God would bring people from all different races and ethnicities to be part of the ALCF family. As Paul saw what God was doing, he would remind the congregation of the values that provided the foundation for this work of the Lord.

Dynamic Preaching: Iconic Leader as Senior Pastor

While the core values of unity not uniformity laid the foundation for ALCF’s multicultural dynamic, it was Pastor Paul’s preaching gift that God used to build the church into the multiethnic church that it became and remains today. Through a combination of biblical teaching and everyday applications often accompanied by humorous illustrations, Pastor Paul brought a consistent message that appealed cross-culturally. Whether the listener was black or white, rich or poor, a college professor or a high-school dropout, he or she could find God speaking through the message each week. Pastor Paul’s was a rare gift indeed.

The focus on preaching at ALCF was reflected in a cluster of its core values, such as “teaching God’s Word in a plain way (Acts 20:20),” “accommodating the unchurched (1 Cor 9:22-23),” “addressing felt needs (Mt 25:35-36),” and “numerical growth (Lk 14:16-23).”⁸ In order to live out these values, sermons focused on areas of life common to all. Sermons were composed more of preaching—designed to produce change by focusing on a theme or topic from Scripture—rather than expository teaching of God’s Word. They steered clear of “disputable matters” that had divided countless churches,

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⁷ Pastor Paul regularly mentioned this fact in sermons and in the new member classes. God began to bring people from different backgrounds once ALCF moved from its Saratoga Avenue address in non-white East Palo Alto to the Cubberly Center, which was in predominantly white Palo Alto.

⁸ Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Our Core Values.”

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such as eschatological debates on the merits of pre-tribulation, a-tribulation, or post-tribulation, or particular ministry practices that tilted heavily in one denominational direction over another. Thus, while ALCF believes in the full expression of the spiritual gifts today, one rarely heard a word of prophecy or tongues spoken or interpreted. The wisdom of this approach recognized that in addition to its demographic diversity, ALCF also had a wide range of Protestant traditions within its body.

From the beginning of his pastorate, Paul understood that preaching was the gateway to reach thousands of people for Jesus in the Bay Area. Immediately upon coming to the Bay Area, he started a radio broadcast on the only AM station in the area. This later developed into a radio ministry called Enduring Truth. Paul’s daily twenty-five-minute broadcast was aired twice each day. This exposure of his teaching brought in many people and was significant in growing the church twenty-fold from 1996 to 2009.9 People heard the broadcast and were willing to travel from all points in the Bay Area to become a part of ALCF. Equally as important, people began to invite their friends. Over time, ALCF became known as a “preaching center,” where one could confidently invite their Christian or not-yet-believing friend to a church service.

Spiritual Growth: Growth Groups and Adult Education

Towards the end of his life, George Whitfield expressed regret for his lack of organizing those converted by his preaching into discipleship groups.10 He expressed

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9 Enduring Truth later expanded its reach nationwide through the Salem Communications Corporation’s group of stations. Eventually, Pastor Paul became part of board of the National Religious Broadcasters.

10 George Whitfield is noted as saying, “My Brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected,
admiration for John Wesley’s efforts to do so, believing them to have made the difference in how one lived for Christ following convension.\footnote{Ibid.} ALCF’s story on this subject represents a migration from the Whitfield neglect to the Wesleyan practice. The church did believe in the spiritual growth of believers, such as their lifelong pursuit in growing in holiness or sanctification. The core values of “facilitating the spiritual growth of all members (1 Jn 2:12-23)” and “every member a minister (1 Pt 4:10)” speak to the priority of spiritual growth in the life of the church.\footnote{Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Our Core Values.”}

From the outset of ALCF’s ministry, however, this was largely done through adult education. There were classes for new believers and ones for mature believers, mostly given during off-work hours. Members could find the curriculum that best suited their stage of spiritual growth. This effort became both more formal and academic by the development of an Institute of Biblical Studies (IBS), which was originally intended to be high caliber enough to be accredited to offer certificates in biblical studies. Small groups were a later development in ALCF’s spiritual growth plan. Even as a church of 2200 members in 2000, there were only about ten small groups.

Through the influence of Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in 2001, ALCF became convinced that small groups were the best way to provide spiritual growth for its rapidly increasing membership. Vision was cast for this and a pastoral position was created for which I was hired in February of 2003. The first groups were launched in the summer of 2003. Groups were designed to do three things: apply God’s Word to one’s

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and my people are a rope of sand.” D. Michael Henderson, \textit{John Wesley’s Class Meetings} (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 1997), 30.
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\footnote{Ibid.}
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\footnote{Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Our Core Values.”}
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life, share life together, and pray for one another. Originally there were twelve small
groups, or growth groups, meeting in locations around the Bay Area. This represented
about 5 percent of the church family. At the church’s height in 2009, there were 127
growth groups representing 1450 people, which translated to about 23 percent of the
church family.

**Years of Loss (2010-2014)**

It is hard to adequately describe the toll of Pastor Paul’s resignation on the church
that he effectively founded. From the moment when his letter of resignation was read to
the congregation by the executive pastor to this present day, this event started an
avalanche of consequences. These consequences have noticeably diminished ALCF’s
impact and greatly altered our approach to leadership, ministry, and discipleship.

Paul’s resignation suddenly thrust the elder board, the biblical and constitutional
overseers of the church, onto the center stage of leadership. Up to this point, like many
elder boards, they had been content to be in the background, working with and largely
supporting the senior pastor and the executive pastor. Now they were being called on to
provide both pastoral and definitive leadership. Pastoral leadership was needed to come
alongside a devastated congregation experiencing the range of grief symptoms from
disbelief and denial to anger and resignation. The board relied heavily on the team of ten
pastors in this regard.

Definitive leadership was needed to address the question that came from many in
the congregation, “Can Pastor Paul come back?” In other words, could he go through a
process of biblical restoration and return to the pulpit at some later date? The question of
restoring a fallen pastor to his or her previous position is one that has divided the evangelical community at times, so it was no surprise that there were a range of opinions on this question within ALCF. There had been no specific teaching or position on this within ALCF’s history, so the elder board sought to be deliberate, prayerful, and biblical in its response. After about three months, the board announced that it did not believe that it was appropriate for Pastor Paul to be restored to ALCF’s pulpit.

Around the time the board was deliberating about its response to the question of restoration, Pastor Paul was pursuing restoration through a team composed of three senior pastors from outside ALCF. By October of 2010, Pastor Paul, along with his team’s concurrence, announced that the restoration process had been sufficiently completed so that he was able to resume his calling as a senior pastor and teacher and would be starting a new church called Destiny Christian Fellowship (hereafter, DCF), which would meet in a rotation of hotel locations around the South Bay Area. The advent of Paul’s new fellowship helped resolve the differences among the congregation on the question of his restoration by introducing the first church split. Those who believed in restoration could now join him at DCF; those who did not, or those with other reasons for staying, could remain at ALCF. Approximately one thousand people left ALCF at this time to attend DCF. This figure is in addition to the approximately two thousand people who had already left ALCF in the wake of Pastor Paul’s resignation.13

13 Author’s estimation of the number of people who left at various times.
Missing Members Indicates Missing Discipleship

The two waves of departures that cut the attendance of ALCF in half during 2009-2010 reveal two key implications for our discipleship practice. Many of the first two thousand people who left between Paul’s resignation and the announcement of DCF generally had little to no involvement at ALCF aside from attending one of the weekend worship services. This group would be what Rick Warren calls “the crowd” and are characterized more by a consumer mindset than a discipleship one.\(^\text{14}\) As consumers, they would be naturally attracted to Pastor Paul’s dynamic teaching of practical spiritual truth served up with humor. Thus, when Paul left, they simply departed. Whatever sense of community existed or was of benefit to them or their children through the various youth ministries were not sufficient to justify their ongoing participation.

As Jesus’ own ministry demonstrated, every dynamic preacher will draw a crowd. The hope and prayer is that this will be but a first step in each member of the crowd following Christ more deeply. Certainly, ALCF, including Pastor Paul, gave regular encouragement and exhortation in the worship services for people to join a small group and to serve in a ministry. And generally speaking, those who did were the ones who stayed involved at ALCF beyond Pastor Paul’s resignation. Yet the fact that one third of the congregation did not remain is notable. It raises the question about ways our discipleship through small groups and serving in ministries could have been more of the centerpiece of our spiritual DNA, rather than the extraordinary preaching of the senior pastor.

The second wave of departures that took place when Pastor Paul started DCF revealed a different aspect of discipleship that was missing—biblical teaching about authority and governance in the church, how it is established, what its obligations are, and how it is accountable. Since none of these topics had been taught on with any frequency or consistency by Pastor Paul or through the adult education classes, members of the ALCF family were left to rely on their own ideas or teachings from another Christian ministry to figure out their stance on this issue. Having said that, it is unlikely that such classes and teaching would have outweighed the great attachment many felt to Pastor Paul, particularly when compared to a board of elders who were much less well known and far less visible.

The departures of long-time church members also raised questions about the goal of discipleship at ALCF. Is the church “mission-minded” and thus committed to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19), regardless of who the senior pastor is? Or are we “personality driven,” meaning our practice of discipleship will potentially be subordinated to other concerns and priorities of growing a large church as determined by the leading of the senior pastor with his outsized gifts and persona? If the former, then we will be a church that operates the way God intended churches to operate; if the latter, then the threat of division and distrust will overhang the efforts of discipleship. This happened to the Corinthian church when it divided over personalities, and it happened again at ALCF for similar reasons.
The Second Church Split

By 2011, ALCF was half its size in weekend worship attendance, had lost a third of its income, and had laid off about a third of its staff. This situation for the remaining members made the question of leadership even more acute. Even as the elders began to speak about biblical churches being led by a “plurality of leaders,” they were looking for a pastor who could teach but who would not act as a senior pastor. In the second half of 2011, the elders discovered Pastor Hurmon Hamilton, who was then serving in his eighteenth year as the senior pastor of a small African American church in the inner city of an East Coast city. He had a preaching gift that was recognized by his appointment as an adjunct faculty member for preaching at Harvard Divinity School, but his more fruitful gifts were in leadership and pastoring. These saw their fullest expression in his community organizing, in which he sought solutions to local social challenges through the galvanizing of various faith communities to work together.

Pastor Hurmon was installed as ALCF’s teaching pastor officially in January 2012. At this point, ALCF had lost about another six hundred members, in no small part due to fatigue in waiting for the next leader to be introduced and the preaching ministry to be stabilized. The congregation sought a more consistent, gifted voice rather than the then current rotation of pastoral staff members and guest preachers. Indeed, Pastor Hurmon’s tenure in 2012 brought a measure of stability to both the congregation and the staff as he operated in his preaching and leadership gifts. Key ministry areas of discipleship, such as growth groups, children’s and youth ministries, and the annual marriage retreat, continued to operate and in some cases even gain participants when new elements were added.
Though ALCF looked to be stabilizing, by mid-2013 it became apparent that a difference was emerging between Pastor Hurmon and the board about what level of leadership he was to exercise in the congregation and on the staff. The fact that the congregation had only known a senior pastor leadership model meant that for the most part, they regarded him as the senior pastor regardless of what his official title was. It was also clear that many in the congregation were responding to his significant leadership and pastoral gifts. These people felt more connected and cared for with Hurmon’s advent than in the previous two years of the interregnum following Paul’s departure. Sadly, as the human frailties that underlie so much church conflict gained the upper hand in the discussions, positions hardened, communication became stilted, and common cause and fellowship diminished. The board, Pastor Hurmon, and thus the congregation were on an inexorable path to a church split.

Pastor Hurmon’s separation from ALCF was announced to the congregation in January 2014 and proved to be far more devastating than Pastor Paul’s departure. When Pastor Paul had left, the board and pastoral staff had stayed united. Pastor Paul’s departure could be considered “self-inflicted.” When Pastor Hurmon left, however, division was created within the body from top to bottom, starting with the board and going right through the pastoral team, the church staff, and engulfing the congregation. Worse yet, within weeks of his departure, Pastor Hurmon announced plans for a new church located less than four miles from ALCF. This new church, perhaps somewhat self-referentially called New Beginnings Community Church of the Bay Area (NBCC), was up and running within three months, drawing about 1200 of ALCF’s 2100 people.
Another approximately 300 people left ALCF to go to other churches at this time, leaving our church with about 600 people.

A cursory survey of the visible damage of two church splits between late 2009 and early 2014 reveals an incredible toll on multiple levels. It is easier to see the external impact of these events on the outward ministry of ALCF. In just over four years, ALCF went from a growing congregation of 6000 people, with a staff of about ninety and a budget greater than $11 million, to one of about 600 people, with a staff of fifteen and a budget that remained undisclosed but which by 2011 had already been cut by almost 40 percent.¹⁵ Entire ministries were virtually wiped out with the split in 2014, including marriage and family, worship arts, and our high school ministries.

Even more devastating was the personal and spiritual toll that these splits have taken in countless lives of ALCF’s church family. There are stories of some who have walked away from an active faith or at least regular church participation. Numerous families had disagreements about where to worship. Nearly all those with whom I have spoken at the time and even at the time of this writing—two years later—have had to find their own way of working through the devastation and tremendous sense of loss, regardless of which “side” they chose in the most recent split. They have had to wrestle with the understandable questions of why God allowed this to happen and, even more pointedly, how it is that those charged by God with shepherding the flock (elders and pastors) let themselves become divided over questions of leadership. Many still feel noticeable emotional pain about these events.

The substantial change in ALCF raised key questions about how it should go forward, humbled and faithfully following the Lord’s leading. Among the many questions raised was what form our commitment to discipleship should take. The original “spiritual DNA” process of preaching people into the body and then inviting them to participate in an affinity ministry or small group was going to have to change. The following questions were discussed: What new forms of discipleship made sense in this new season? Had we even been asking the right questions about our discipleship, or did we need to start with the basics of what a disciple is? Did we still have a clear understanding of what ALCF’s vision and mission was in this new reality? These and other questions had been asked prior to the split in 2014, but they became even more urgent after it.

**Emerging Leadership and Direction (2014 to the Present)**

Immediately following the resignation of Pastor Paul in 2009, the elder board began some in-depth reflection, prayer, and discussion on the biblical model of leadership. They concluded that while most megachurches in the United States were led by a “man at the top,” such as a senior pastor or lead pastor, who did the significant vision development, vision casting, and most of the weekly teaching, it was counter to what Scripture revealed. The board saw in the gospels, in Acts, and in Paul’s instructions to Titus (e.g., Mt 28:18-20; Acts 6:1-4; 15:4; Ti 1:5) that a church is to be overseen by a plurality of leaders. No one person was responsible for all the key leadership roles. The aftermath of hurt, division, and loss that the congregation experienced following Paul’s resignation revealed the inherent vulnerability of relying on one man to be the vision
giver, teacher, and overseer of church ministries. In the years between Pastor Paul’s departure and Pastor Hurmon’s calling, the board would reinforce the plurality of elders as the leaders in the church in periodic teachings given to the church. This emerging conviction is one of the primary reasons why Pastor Hurmon’s call was limited to being a teaching pastor rather than a senior pastor.

With the extensive church split prompted by Hurmon’s departure, the plurality of leadership came to be exercised primarily by the elders. The remaining four board members recruited three longstanding ALCF men to join the elder board. This new board of seven men became far more operational, while the pastors’ function became restricted to overseeing their immediate areas of ministry and carrying out pastoral duties. Elders developed the budget, approved most major expenditures, and dealt with any and all human resources-related issues. They fielded most questions and proposals for new ministry ideas and became far more active in selecting the speakers for the Sunday service. Pastors who had once been part of the budget and employee decisions, particularly from 2010 to 2014, now had limited visibility into these areas and less responsibility for them.

While the elders assumed primary responsibility for the operations of the church, the caring for this wounded congregation was the responsibility of both elders and pastors. The elders became more visible. They set aside more individual and corporate time to listen to the congregation, hear what they were feeling, and respond accordingly. The pastoral team also shared in this level of caring, paying particular attention to the lay leaders in the church body to make sure they were encouraged so that they could
encourage others. The small group and affinity group ministries became a key place for people to connect and find support for coming to grips with what had happened.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for many was the loss of so many spiritual leaders and brothers and sisters in Christ. As a congregation, we turned more to times of corporate prayer and encouraged the small groups to do the same. Along with the question of “How do I move forward?” came the question, “Where are we going as a church now?” The answer to this second question was framed more in terms of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The biblical church is one that is made up of disciples and one that is committed to “going and making disciples of all nations.” Thus, as we began to speak about growing spiritually, we spoke as often about growing as disciples.

There was agreement that a renewed discipleship should be the focus of our spiritual life as we go forward in the aftermath of the split. What was less clear was how this should be done. One option was to modify our “business as usual” by emphasizing that a disciple is one who lives out the values of ALCF, that is, one who worships God, grows in Christ, serves the body, reaches out to the world. An alternative that was discussed early on was to keep the small group and affinity focus while adding back the “adult Sunday school” classes that had diminished over the years. These internal discussions bore little fruit, other than to prepare the hearts of the leadership for a new church model that Francis Chan had recently started in San Francisco.

Francis Chan and the elder board began talking about a shared interest in a house-based discipleship model within five months of the split with Pastor Hurmon. Chan is a renowned pastor, who resigned as pastor of Cornerstone Community Church in Southern California after transforming it from a small group to a megachurch of over five
thousand. His book, *Crazy Love*, put him on the *New York Times* best-selling author list. Chan had left his church in part because he saw that megachurches were often about attracting consumer Christians rather than raising up disciples. He believed this to be a major mistake by the Church and sought to lead a church much more in keeping with the design for the Church revealed by the New Testament.¹⁶

As Chan studied, prayed, and thought about the New Testament Church, he was drawn to the impact the underground church in China was having. Over the decades, it had reached 100 million people without big worship centers, high-octane church programs, or paid full-time pastors. It was opposed by the government and needed to operate circumspectly, yet it was clearly spreading by attracting and discipling new believers. He wondered what the North American Church could learn from its Asian brethren. From this process was born Chan’s current focus, based on the house church model, called “We Are Church” (hereafter, WAC). By the time Francis connected with ALCF, he had been overseeing WAC in the poor parts of San Francisco for a couple of years.

WAC is an effort to reflect the essential ingredients of church as it is presented in Scripture and not as it has been (mis)shaped by our American evangelical culture with its high-production, low-commitment values. WAC is based on four values: family (the church is a community marked by love and unity), mission (the church is to fulfill the Great Commission), training (true disciples make disciples), and gathering (the church

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¹⁶ This biographical data comes from multiple sources: Francis Chan, sermons delivered at ALCF from September 2014 to March 2015; Francis Chan, personal interviews by the author, Menlo Park, CA, September 2014 to March 2015; and in various writings by Chan, including Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013).
meets regularly for the purpose of teaching, prayer, and communion). Discipleship is central to its understanding, and the small or house church emphasis provides an environment where every person can grow as a disciple and not just attend, or hide as the case may often be, in a larger church setting, believing that they are living out God’s purpose for their lives.

The idea was compelling that every member of ALCF would grow as a disciple and thus live out our calling to worship, grow, serve, and reach while avoiding the sins of division, discord, consumerism, and the like. By August 2014, Chan joined the elder board as an elder in the same vein as the Apostle Paul at Ephesus. That is, he would be with us for some period of time (six months to two years) to help move ALCF into this new era of discipleship through house church communities.

The excitement of having Chan help lead us in this direction and give the church some much needed credibility in the aftermath of the split overshadowed the significant legacy issues, challenges, and questions that remained unaddressed prior to his joining. Chief among these was how ALCF was going to use its substantial worship center. The house church model does not need a 71,000-square foot facility.

Another question was that of pastoral leadership for the staff and congregation. Churches operating under a plurality of leadership nevertheless have a few people who are the visible leaders and whom the congregation recognizes as the ones who move the congregation in a particular direction. With a plurality of seven elders, this question remained unanswered. Was part of Chan’s call to provide visible leadership?

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Finally, with the addition of someone of Chan’s spiritual caliber and reputation, particularly among the millennial generation, change was bound to come to ALCF. The question was whether we had sufficiently prepared the congregation for this change. Was there a genuine sense of excitement and corresponding sense of sacrifice to welcome new and younger attenders to join us in this disciple making venture? Or would such efforts be met with resistance and comments about how “this is not the way we do things around here”?

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of ALCF’s priorities and ministry focus, that is, its “spiritual DNA.” It recounts the story of crisis points in the church’s recent history, notably in 2009 and again in 2014. The chapter ends with a discussion of where the church is presently, and where it hopes to go in the future. The next chapter presents a literature review of various sources that inform this project.
PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR BIBLICAL DISCIPLESHIP
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW: MODELS OF DISCIPLESHIP WITHIN CHURCHES

Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature that speaks to the vision, content, and form of discipleship within churches. While all six works selected speak to the essential nature of small group communities for the practice of discipleship, each of them also has a specific contribution to make on some aspect of the vision, form, or content of discipleship. Two of the books (Bill Hull’s *The Disciple-Making Church* and Henderson’s *John Wesley’s Class Meeting*) speak to the benefits of doing discipleship through interdependent communities of small groups and affinity groups, such as women’s or men’s fellowships. These are based on gender or age and stage of life. Three of the books (Francis Chan’s *Crazy Love*, Tim Chester’s and Steve Timmis’s *Total Church*, and Bill Donahue’s and Russ Robinson’s *Building a Church of Small Groups*) provide rationale and encouragement for making small groups the centerpiece of the church’s discipleship efforts. Donahue and Robinson, along with Peter Scazzero in *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, also speak to practical aspects of making groups work, such as the content, format, and leader training of those groups in order for all participating to
experience transforming discipleship. Each section below reviews the salient points and assesses them in terms of their value and practicality for ALCF’s context.

*The Disciple-Making Church, by Bill Hull*

Bill Hull’s book, *The Disciple-Making Church*, offers the most comprehensive view of how today’s evangelical Church—with its many ministries for spiritual growth such as small groups, affinity ministries, adult education, and outreach—can be organized around the central call and task of making disciples. Consequently, it is a very useful work to help ALCF understand how its many ministries can be marshaled towards the goal of making disciples.

Disciple-Making as a Vision for the Church

For Hull, a disciple is the name for someone who is spiritually born again. Contrary to the way many evangelical churches use the term, *disciple* is not limited to mean someone who is more spiritually mature than others. All believers are disciples, according to Matthew 28:18-20. In this foundational passage, believers identify with Christ through baptism and learn his commands and way of life so that they can become like him and make him known to others. Those who respond to this invitation to receive Christ are then baptized and taught Jesus’s commands and way of life. In this way, disciples make disciples. Like a newborn babe, a disciple is one who from the moment of

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2 Hull writes, “Technically, from the moment of spiritual birth, every Christian is a disciple.” Ibid., 26.

3 Ibid.
spiritual birth is on a path becoming more like Christ throughout his or her life. The ultimate proof of this maturity is the use of one’s life to make new disciples.

To make disciples is the call and the core of the local church.\(^4\) Too many churches have lost sight of this, causing Hull to ask the question, “What can be done about the last three generations of Christians who have been trained to evaluate their spiritual lives by how much they enjoyed the worship service?”\(^5\) As Hull digs deeper into the Church’s failure to make discipleship the centerpiece of its efforts, he identifies two reasons for this. The first is a flawed view of salvation that somehow sees accepting Christ as separate from life transformation, the result being that evangelism is emphasized and “discipleship” is confined to the approximately 25 percent of church members who have a heart for it through small groups and Bible studies.\(^6\) The second reason is a disconnection between the Church’s understanding of itself and the gospel. The Great Commission is a call upon every believer, not just those who are “Christocentric,” or those who seek to earnestly follow Christ through Bible study, evangelism, and outreach. Such likeminded individuals are at the core of parachurch and missions organizations, but the very narrowness of their focus means that their approach “hasn’t worked in the church at large because it does not fit its variety.”\(^7\)

\(^4\) Hull writes, “I work from the thesis that the discipling church is the normal church. Disciple making is for every Christian and every church . . . because: 1. Christ instructed the church to take part in it. 2. Christ modeled it. 3. The New Testament disciples applied it.” Ibid., 17.

\(^5\) Ibid., 14.

\(^6\) Ibid., 12, 34.

\(^7\) Ibid., 34.
Hull’s remedy is a model of discipleship described by the rather discordant term, “churchocentric.” In this model, the local church’s role is to make disciples by preaching, creating small groups, and establishing a leadership development culture. This is done along a continuum of spiritual growth divided into four stages: “come and see;” “come and follow me;” “come and be with me;” and, “remain in me and go and make disciples” (see Hull’s flowchart in Appendix A). The church will have different emphases at each stage, and the expectation is that most if not all people will be flowing through each stage as they mature as disciples. Preaching features noticeably in the “come and see” phase of the disciple’s growth, where the church is being taught who Christ is and why discipleship is essential. Small groups are the centerpiece of the “come and follow me” phase because it is here that believers study God’s word, learn what it means to build one another up, and begin to focus on serving others within the body and within the community. Leadership development is the hallmark of the “come and be with me phase.” Here, disciples begin as apprentice leaders, usually within a small group and then by leading their own groups. At the same time, they are growing in word and deed while they use their spiritual gifts and time to minister to others. The final phase, “remain in me and go and make disciples,” is where the local church releases a group of disciples to go to another place to live out Matthew 28:18-20.

8 Ibid., 19.

9 Ibid.
Implications for ALCF’s Vision and Leadership

There are significant implications for ALCF from Hull’s work, particularly in terms of outlining clear priorities, ministry inclusion, small groups, and leadership development. Hull provides a clear priority and focus for preaching, teaching, and organization of its small groups and outreach ministries. He sheds light on the importance of small groups as the primary vehicle by which discipleship is lived out. Hull calls out the need to be purposeful about raising up non-staff leaders from within the church—something ALCF has not had to do in the past because of the default plan to hire a staff person to oversee a new ministry. With far fewer people and income, this is no longer an option.

In terms of ministry inclusion, the churchocentric model provides a rationale for ALCF’s current ministries, including its affinity and outreach ministries, even while it focuses them on making disciples. The affinity ministries, including those for men, women, young adults, seniors, and so on, have a place in Hull’s model—they are places where people who want connection can find it and then be invited into small groups where discipleship is furthered. This combination of age/stage-based “congregations” along with small groups can be considered a hybrid model of discipleship when compared with more streamlined models, such as Francis Chan’s *We Are Church*, or the *Total Church* values of Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. The churchocentric model foresees a time when disciples would be sent from ALCF to start new church communities.
Hull’s vision for churches affirms the central role of small groups, or “growth groups” as they are called at ALCF, in the life of the church. They are the primary place where people meet to apply God’s word to their lives; share challenges, difficulties, and needs; and support one another practically and in prayer. There is room to have them facilitate connection with God through experiences of worship and spiritual practices like communion.

The leadership development that is essential to the churchocentric model clearly needs attention at ALCF. There has been nothing systematic or public about it. For the most part, it has been left up to each church staff member to identify and train lay leaders for his or her particular ministry. This must evolve to the place where ALCF leaders at the highest levels, like elders and pastors, are united on who we are asking leaders to be and what we are asking them to do; these leaders must also be committed to setting the example. As the leaders do this together, a common leadership practice should emerge that can be passed on to apprentice leaders, who will look for new apprentice leaders as they become leaders themselves. In this way, a new leadership culture focused upon the central mission of making disciples can be developed throughout ALCF.

*The Disciple Making Church* is a detailed plan for how a church can move from a place of spiritual complacency to one of becoming a dynamic fellowship of disciples who make other disciples, yet it suffers from two limitations. The first is that while Hull’s work is a comprehensive plan, it provides no real world experience about how his church implemented this plan in their context. Plans are easy to come by, but the experience of

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10 For example, Hull writes, “The best way to reach the most people in the most meaningful way [to become disciples] is through the small group.” Hull, *The Disciple-Making Church*, 19.
implementation and the adjustments that often are needed along the way is where so much additional benefit could be provided to church leaders reading this book.

The second limitation is that no evaluation criteria for gauging progress is presented. To be sure, Hull does speak to biblical criteria for seeing individuals grow spiritually. For example, Hull briefly exegetes Ephesians 5:19-21 to show that the maturing believer is a Spirit-filled person who displays a control over his or her speech, a worshipful heart towards God, a thankful spirit, and servanthood.\(^\text{11}\) However, this falls short of the thorough feedback-based systems that Willow Creek has pioneered when they discovered that ongoing evaluation was necessary to making their plans a reality.\(^\text{12}\) There is much ALCF can learn from The Disciple Making Church about the priorities a church should have in order to make disciples, but other works are necessary to identify the challenges, obstacles, and ways to overcome them along the road of implementation.

Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community, by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis

In their book, Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community, Chester and Timmis lay out compelling reasons why a house church-sized community of believers is so effective in discipleship.\(^\text{13}\) They focus on being “word-centered,” “mission-centered,” and “community-centered.” Their ideas have implications

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 172-173.

\(^{12}\) Two examples of Willow Creek’s evaluation priority and methodology are cited in this dissertation. These include Building a Church of Small Groups, which is discussed later in this chapter, and Follow Me, referenced in Chapter 6. Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, Follow Me (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2008).

\(^{13}\) Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).
for ALCF as it continues to commit to a small group model and as it considers benefits of the house church model as well.

House Church Model Overview

The house church is not the starting point of discipleship, but it is the resulting “structure” that comes from the biblical priority of “gospel and community.” God’s word, the gospel, is what informs and forms us around who God is and how he calls us to live. As followers of Jesus, we acknowledge that the gospel is based on his word, making us “word-centered,” and reaches out to those not yet in community, making us “mission-centered.” Believers are also called to live this out together, making us “community-centered.” When Christians prioritize the truth of the gospel and form its fellowship around the living word, it shows up in lively discussions about the meaning of passages, prayer over them, and thoughtful ways to apply them in the surrounding community.

At the same time, being the community of God is equally important. Chester and Timmis see the gospel as more than “the story of God saving individuals”; instead, they see it as God “creating a new humanity.” Community, shaped by God’s word, then becomes the kernel of this new humanity lived out in local contexts. The fullness of this God-formed community should be what is on display through the love, care, provision,

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14 Chester and Timmis write, “Our identity as Christians is defined by the gospel and the community.” Ibid., 16.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 19.
and life-on-life relationships that happen throughout the course of a week.\textsuperscript{18} The community intentionally seeks to draw in “outsiders” to experience this new humanity so that they too become part of the people of God. This is often done by the local body actively helping to meet the social or material needs at the local level and reaffirming the community’s identity as belonging to Christ through the practice of baptism and communion.\textsuperscript{19}

With these two priorities of gospel and community, it is easy to see the advantages of a house-church model. First, it is small enough to enable real life-on-life community. Second, the discussions around God’s word at each gathering do not necessitate a full-time trained pastor because the Holy Spirit is doing the transforming work through the communal discussion. Third, there are no facilities to maintain. And fourth, it is easy replicable in other houses as the church community grows.

Assessment of the Vision and Form in ALCF’s Context

While Chester and Timmis believe that their essential description of the church can work with churches of any size, their experience and heart seem to be for the house church. This at once makes their constructs helpful for ALCF’s small group communities in terms of content and purpose, but not very helpful to us in terms of helping the church move forward in rebuilding ministries that require a large facility and legacy ministries that still produce spiritual fruit. Thus, small groups from the \textit{Total Church} point of view can be seen as embryonic house churches because they would be shaped as a community

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\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 43.\\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 41-43, 112-113.
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by doing the very things that define a community of God’s people (hearing Scripture, experiencing loving fellowship, reaching out to others in practical way, and participating in the sacraments). As ALCF is able to further develop its small group and even affinity ministries along these lines, disciples would be far more active in discipling and more people would experience something of the blessings of the new humanity. In this, the seeds of potential new church plants and Christian communities will be found.

The Total Church model calls out the need for effective leadership and pastoral care. Both of these are exercised in a house church setting by lay people. Consequently, they need training, support, and mentoring. Groups that do not have people developing in these areas will find difficulties down the road in the form of weariness, dissension, spiritual laxity, and the like. Thus, specific attention needs to be given to providing regular times of equipping, encouragement, and biblical teaching for these leaders. Oversight for both support and correction is also needed.

The missional focus of these small house churches should excite ALCF’s small groups even while it challenges them. The excitement comes from the opportunity for groups to do something in their own neighborhoods or communities. If groups are open to this, they are no longer in need of the “all-church outreach ministry,” such as feeding the homeless near church once a month. At the same time, reaching out locally requires a level of effort not really seen in most ALCF small groups or affinity ministries to date, so this would be a growth edge.

The benefit of Total Church is its ability primarily to shape ALCF’s small groups and affinity ministries rather than the large church ministries of worship and outreach. This is because Chester’s and Timmis’s insights are limited by their experience as church
planters. Like builders of new homes, they specialize in building small churches from scratch, whereas ALCF is more like a house that needs remodeling. It already has a large structure and a family inside, but it needs some overdue fixes and upgrades. There is a level of ministry and structure at ALCF, vestiges of its megachurch days that remain extant at ALCF and are in need of rehabilitation and refocus. But its history and complexity make many of the desired improvements beyond the experience of *Total Church*. The insights from Chester and Timmis are most applicable to small groups in helping develop principles for discipleship, leadership development, and pastoral care shaped by God’s word and community.

*Building a Church of Small Groups*, by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson

*Building a Church of Small Groups* stands as a modern classic for any church that wants to understand the connection between raising disciples and the role of small groups, and how to implement a small group ministry that produces disciples who are experiencing Christlike life change.\(^20\) The book’s content is based on Willow Creek Community Church’s own journey in discipleship as it grew from a congregation that fit into a movie theatre in 1975 to over 20,000 people twenty-five years later.\(^21\) In its initial stages of growth, the small groups ministry was one of many ministries Willow Creek attendees could participate in, but people had a hard time connecting with each other and

\(^{20}\) Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 11.
growing in their faith. In 1992, Willow Creek made small groups the central organizing principle of ministry so that the church would be a place “where no one stands alone.”

Small Groups as the Primary Form of Discipleship in Large Churches

There are two fundamental reasons why Willow Creek was able to make this transition to becoming a church of small groups. First, they viewed each group leader as a shepherd. Second, they chose an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, strategy for migrating existing ministries into using a small group structure. Willow Creek sees its small group leaders as shepherds who provide both “care” and “discipling”: “care” means that the leader provides pastoral care in the form of prayer, comfort, and being alongside of someone spiritually, and “discipling” focuses on teaching and helping group members move along the spiritual path of greater Christlikeness.

As Willow Creek sought to connect all its people into small group communities, it recognized the value of being deliberate and not hasty in rolling this out to the congregation. The church knew that there needed to be multiple “entry points” for people to connect, such as through age/stage ministries, recovery ministries, seeker-sensitive ministries, and other affinity groups. The church wanted to preserve the good work of these ministries while at the same time “moving [them] in the right direction.”

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22 In 1991, Willow Creek had roughly 15 percent of its people in a small group of some description. Donahue and Robinson write, “We were a large, growing church with a genuine problem of connecting people to the church and caring for them.” Ibid., 11.

23 Ibid., 11, 13.

24 Ibid., 105, 110-117.

25 Ibid., 182-183.
Consequently, Willow Creek adopted a “phased approach” to implementation.\textsuperscript{26} Nine years later, when Donahue and Robinson wrote this book, they acknowledged that it had been a “bumpy ride,” but also said, “Today we just simply cannot imagine our church without group life, without the countless stories of transformation and growth because people gathered in the name of Christ to live out the many ‘one another’ commands of the Bible. The road has been difficult, but the reward is well worth it.”\textsuperscript{27}

Implications for ALCF’s Small Group Structure

There are three areas where ALCF can benefit from Willow Creek’s experience. The first is in how to assess and incorporate existing affinity groups into the move toward small group discipleship. The second is in how to train and support lay leaders so they can give meaningful spiritual care to those in their group. The third area is in how to phase in the deeper commitment to small groups within the ALCF context.

In terms of assessment and integration with current ministries, one of the challenges of moving a church’s discipleship model to being more centralized around small groups is what to do with current ministries, such as the monthly men’s fellowship or the weekly seniors’ Bible study. It is not uncommon to experience resistance from current ministry leaders to a move towards small groups if this transition is not well handled. Based on its own experience in becoming a church of small groups for

\textsuperscript{26} In the initial phases, vision, communication, and leadership participation occur. In the later phases, more and more ministries and lay people are included until the congregation completes the transition. There is latitude in the number of phases in the rollout. Donahue and Robinson speak of four phases: Model group (church leaders in a group establishing values and practices); Pilot group (incorporating “a limited number of groups” into the new small group focus so that any issues or concerns can be revealed); Start-Up group (more groups are started throughout the church and training of leaders is a priority), and Going Public (the new small group structure is mature enough to include many more church members into groups). Ibid., 195-202.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 208.
discipleship, Willow Creek exhorts churches to meet this challenge head on. They advocate building “a Long-Range Structure,” or a blueprint, in order to make these changes sustainable. This structure is comprehensive and therein lies the challenge.

Just a brief glimpse at the outline of this long-range structure reveals that there is a lot of work involved, likely more than the church leadership can make time to develop and communicate consistently to the congregation. Thus, ALCF’s journey in making small groups a key part of its discipleship will likely be less comprehensive and more incremental.

The second take-away from the Willow Creek experience involves training and supporting lay leaders so they can give meaningful spiritual care to those in their groups. In ALCF’s original rollout of small groups, leaders are called “facilitators” because they facilitate the two-hour meeting to ensure that the group moves through the agenda of application of God’s Word, sharing of life events, soliciting prayer requests, and praying together. Willow Creek’s model sees a more active spiritual role for small group leaders that includes the concept of “span of care” where a leader is providing spiritual care for those in the group (ten or fewer) through prayer and times of one-on-one connection. This expanded role for ALCF’s small group leaders would require them to be trained in the twin priorities of pastoral care and how to move people towards spiritual maturity.

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28 Ibid., 165.

29 Donahue and Robinson write, “As you design a structure for the church you envision, look at every part of your church. Plan how you’ll transform existing boards and committees into little communities. How will you inject small groups into ministry to children, men, the hurting, missions, and other target groups? Pinpoint which staff and volunteers will be affected and whether some programs won’t be needed anymore. Discuss how your current nomenclature will work in the new structure. Assume low-, mid-, and high-growth scenarios; each will present different challenges to your design.” Ibid., 167.

30 Ibid., 178.
Consistent assessment of the leader’s effectiveness should also be a part of this leadership culture.

The third take-away is Willow Creek’s concept of phased implementation. When moving from being a church with small groups to being a church of small groups, a phased-in approach is necessary.\textsuperscript{31} The authors recognize that each church’s experience in implementing small groups will vary. Given ALCF’s coalition of discipleship endeavors, such as Growth Groups, affinity ministries, and adult education classes, it make sense to adopt at least a two-phased approach to discipleship through small groups. Phase one foresees a pilot group of elders and pastors where the values, norms, and practices of the new small group ministry are formed. Phase two would be a general rollout of the resulting small group praxis from phase one that would incorporate the current Growth Group leaders. Training of these leaders would be a part of this phase.

It is clear that Building a Church of Small Groups has much to offer ALCF, but it also has its limitations. The first is that the underlying theology for small group participation is underdeveloped and weak. Donahue and Robinson encourage people to join small groups to “[become] like Christ,”\textsuperscript{32} but most of the discussion is centered on how one’s personal life is benefited by interacting with others in a small group. The authors neglect a discussion of being image bearers of Christ, of our identity as now

\textsuperscript{31} Willow Creek proposes a four-phase approach: it starts with a model or “turbo group” of church leaders who live out, practice, and adjust the values and practices of the small group ministry; then it moves to a few “pilot groups,” who embody these values and practices while also developing small group leaders; then it moves to a “start-up phase,” where more lay leaders are empowered to develop and test particular small groups, e.g. for age/stage ministries; and finally the idea “goes public,” and the church is able to invite and accommodate all who wish to participate. Ibid., 196-202.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 77.
being new persons in Christ, and how small group community is designed to help us experience more of the fullness of Christ (e.g., Eph 4:11-13).

The second limitation is that Willow Creek’s model for moving a church incrementally towards becoming a church of small groups appears to be far more resource intensive than is acknowledged by the authors. Just the sheer number of tasks associated with communication, leader training, and assessment presupposes a level of staffing that is beyond the capability of most churches, including ALCF. Despite these limitations, however, Donahue and Robinson provide an excellent resource for helping focus on small groups at ALCF.

**Crazy Love, by Francis Chan**

*Crazy Love* was originally written to speak to Christians who struggled with the fact that their reasonably comfortable American church experience was so much less than the radical, transforming nature of the church that is presented in the New Testament.³³ The fact that this book sold over two million copies means that Chan struck a chord with many people who long to see their lives reflect genuine discipleship, that is, that which sees loving and serving God as its highest priority and the use of one’s earthly time, talent, and treasure for that purpose.³⁴ Genuine discipleship is not satisfied with giving God “the leftovers”; rather it focuses on giving God our best.


³⁴ Ibid.
The Mindset and Heart of Genuine Discipleship

Giving God our best would be more at the center of our lives if we realized how much this holy, all-knowing, Almighty God loves us and how little time we have on earth to live out our calling as his disciples.\textsuperscript{35} The biggest problem in giving God our best is our satisfaction with being “lukewarm.” Like the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3, those who are lukewarm today practice a form of following Christ, but their hearts and affections are much too attached to the things of this world. The result is that people “say they love Jesus, and He is, indeed, a part of their lives. But only a part. They give Him a section of their time, their money, and their thoughts, \textit{but He isn’t allowed to control their lives}” [emphasis added].\textsuperscript{36} The essence of the lukewarm life is prioritizing oneself over following Christ, which manifests in such things as a reluctance to share one’s faith, playing it safe, and showing little regard for the poor. The result of such priorities is to make the professing believer’s life barely distinguishable from that of the unbeliever.\textsuperscript{37} The worst part of the lukewarm life for Chan, however, is that it provides false spiritual security. He puts it bluntly, “Churchgoers who are ‘lukewarm’ are not Christians.”\textsuperscript{38}

The antidote to lukewarmness, writes Chan, is to “be obsessed” with the “incalculable, faultless, eternal God who loves the frail beings He made with a crazy kind of love. Even though we could die at any moment and generally think our puny lives are pretty sweet compared to loving Him, He persists in loving us with unending, outrageous

\textsuperscript{35} This is the theme of Chapters 1 and 2.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 72.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 195.
love.”  We need to let God change us by his love, and so we need to pray for his help in loving him and others.  We know this is a journey, and we know we are making progress along the way to authentic discipleship as we see our hearts changed and our lives reflecting that change in new priorities for our time, focus, and resources.

Chan’s revised and updated version of *Crazy Love* includes his own discipleship journey during the five years between the original and the revised versions. In that time, Chan left his successful church in Simi Valley to eventually come to minister and make disciples serving the inner city of San Francisco. He writes, “Most of my time is spent making disciples rather than speaking to crowds. I am working in partnership with other pastors who want to awaken believers to their responsibility to be His witnesses and make disciples. It has been a wonderful season of life.”

**Implications for ALCF’s Context**

The primary blessing of *Crazy Love* for ALCF’s discipleship strategy is that while other books have provided helpful definitions of discipleship and described effective ways to structure small groups to develop disciples, this book, more than most, provides the content of what discipleship is. *Crazy Love* goes to the kind of heart, mind, soul, and strength transformation that should be seen in the lives of people as they follow Jesus.

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39 Ibid., 127. Chapter 8 is called, “Profile of the Obsessed,” and it provides insight into how we can faithfully follow the biblical teaching of being “consumed with Christ and faithfully live out His Words. The Holy Spirit stirs in us a joy and peace when we are fixated on Jesus, living by faith, and focused on the life to come.” Ibid., 65.

40 Ibid., 103-104.

41 Chan asks a key question: “Has your relationship with God actually changed the way you live? Do you see evidence of God’s kingdom in your life? Or are you choking it out slowly by spending too much time, energy, money, and thought on the things of this world?” Ibid., 67.

42 Ibid., 175-177.
with all they are and all they have. As members of ALCF embrace and live out the biblical insights from *Crazy Love*, we should see a deeper desire to love God and live only for him. Such a desire would be fueled by a heart to really hear and obey the words of Christ afresh, without letting familiar interpretive filters tamp down their meaning.

We should notice a growing concern for the needs of those in our community. We should notice an increasing and sacrificial generosity of one’s money and time to others, and we would be bolder in sharing our faith in word and deed, knowing that time is short. We would gather together regularly to praise God and pray to him for all that we need to love and honor him and to love others. We would not be content with any version of discipleship that lets people be satisfied with lukewarm faith.

Chan’s book also has implications for ALCF in regards to forms of leadership. If lives at ALCF are going to be transformed in these “radical” ways of discipleship, it needs to start with the leadership of ALCF, specifically the elders and pastors. Our lives need to actively reflect these priorities, and our life together needs to have times of prayer, spiritual conversations, and stories about what God is doing as we seek to be followers of Jesus marked by this crazy love. We would not be content to measure our leadership by the number of seats filled on Sundays, the amount of giving, or the manageable level of complaints from the congregation. As the elders and pastors live out these priorities in community, we should be able to call the small group and affinity ministry leaders into community to join us in these priorities and, in turn, reflect them in the groups that they lead.

In regards to forms for small groups, life in the weekly small groups should be designed around the priorities that *Crazy Love* speaks to. Thus, focusing on hearing and
understanding God’s Word afresh needs to be a key aspect of small group life. As small groups look at God’s Word, concern for the poor and hurting around them will increase, which should be manifest in tangible, generous action on their behalf. Group members should be moved by the needs of some in their community, talk as a group about how those needs might be met, and then make plans accordingly. Life within the small group itself should reflect the love and grace that is exhorted in Scripture, particularly in the epistles. Those in small groups should be known by their love for one another. They should be quick to forgive offenses so that they avoid the hurt feelings and lack of unity that too often characterize group dynamics below the surface. Groups will be true disciples of Jesus when they let themselves be transformed by God’s Word and his love for others in word and deed, and live as a loving family.

Chan’s call to genuine discipleship and letting go of lukewarmness is prophetic in tone and force. The limitation of his work is that it offers no practical way of moving a church with various ministries onto a path of deeper discipleship. This limitation raises the risk of his insights being seen by some as impractical. For ALCF, the strength of Chan’s work is in his inspiration and call to change.

*The Emotionally Healthy Church, by Peter Scazzero*

As the title implies, Peter Scazzero’s book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives*, addresses a vital and often missing ingredient in the discussion of discipleship within the evangelical church context—actual transformation. Scazzero explores how this takes place, particularly in
the area of emotional development. This discussion is relevant for ALCF as it seeks to lead members forward into transformed lives.

Discipleship Focused on Interior Transformation

The transformation into Christlikeness, as manifested through the interior qualities of love and devotion to Christ (the first great commandment) and through external attitudes and actions reflecting God’s love towards others (the second great commandment), is too often presumed and thus ignored in the literature on discipleship. Many writers on the subject focus instead on the process of discipleship, e.g., vision, strategy, organization, and training, trusting that as a church implements these steps, growth in Christlikeness will naturally follow. The contribution that Scazzero makes to this discussion is to reveal the shortcomings of this thinking and to directly link emotional health with spiritual growth. For Scazzero, it is not possible to have one without the other; that is, one cannot be a spiritually mature disciple without growing in emotional health.43

Emotional growth is viewed much like the stages of a person’s physical growth: infant, child, adolescent, adult.44 Those towards the “emotional infant” side of the spectrum, like a baby, look for others to take care of them and are often unable to articulate their needs beyond some emotional display, such as crying, anger, and so on.

43 Scazzero writes, “I believe the thesis of this book—that emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable—will amount to a Copernican revolution for many in the Christian community. It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.” Peter Scazzero, The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 50.

Their world is about them. Relationships, responsiveness, and a sense of personal contentment are based on what others are doing for the emotional infant or child. On the other side of the spectrum, emotional adults, or emotionally healthy individuals, are those who are content with who they are and are not overly dependent on validation from others. Consequently, they can relate to others out of a sense of joy and have a heart that desires to give to others more than it desires to receive. They practice honest communication, appropriate relational boundaries, and live within the limits of God-given priorities and abilities.

How one progresses from the earlier stages of emotional development to the latter stages is the primary focus of the book. Chapter by chapter, Scazzero unfolds six principles in the process. First, readers must look beneath the surface of their outward lives to uncover strong influences that they are often unaware of. Second, they should break the power of the past by looking at family of origin influences, which are often the source of our emotional lack of health. Third, those who seek emotional health must live in brokenness and vulnerability, which means seeing weakness as that which brings blessings, not something to hide or deny. Fourth, they ought to receive the gift of limits, that is, accept the fact that it is impossible to do it all or to save everyone. Instead, it is important to understand that we all need rest and a sustainable rhythm of life. Fifth, readers must embrace grief and loss because these are paths to maturity; they lead us, at times, to forgive others. Sixth, readers ought to make incarnation the model for loving well, which means being present in the lives of others while not letting go of who God has made them and what he has called them to do.
Much of what Scazzero discusses comes out of his own experience as a pastor who was emotionally unhealthy in the initial years of his pastorate. Eventually, he made the necessary changes to become emotionally healthy after a prolonged time of study, thought, counseling, and prayer. From his own experience, Scazzero draws two conclusions about how a church can become emotionally healthy. First, it is hard. Second, it starts with and is driven by the church leadership, especially the senior or lead pastor.

Assessment of the Vision and Content for ALCF’s Context

The value of *The Emotionally Healthy Church* for ALCF lies in calling us to link spiritual maturity with growing emotionally. It is important for ALCF to call this out in our small group curriculum and leadership development. Scazerro’s work serves as a caution against thinking that spending our time and energy on structure, processes, and leadership development will help people grow without also being purposeful about helping people grow emotionally.

As Scazerro describes the principles of building emotional health in the church, he also emphasizes that it begins with the leadership, and herein lies the challenge for ALCF. Put bluntly, while the elders and pastors may agree that emotional health is an important, they see it as the outcome of spiritual maturity, not the foundation of it.

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45 Scazzero writes, “To truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength requires that we know not only God but also our interior—the nature of our own heart, soul, and mind. Understanding the world of feelings, thoughts, desires, and hopes with all its richness and complexity is hard work. It also takes time—lots of it.” Ibid., 55.

46 Scazzero writes, “The starting point for change in any nation, church, or ministry has always been the leader: As go the leaders, so goes the church. . . . When you do the hard work of becoming an emotionally and spiritually mature disciple of Jesus Christ, the impact will be felt all around you.” Ibid., 36.
ALCF’s leadership views transformation through a more traditional lens, e.g., “putting off your old self . . . and putting on the new self” (Eph 4:22, 24). Maturing as a disciple means living out the Apostle Paul’s mandate for church leaders (see 1 Timothy and Titus). Given this conviction from the church leadership, there is little appetite to spend time and effort on “looking beneath the surface” or “breaking the power of the past” by doing genograms, or some similar process.47

This anticipated resistance from the church leadership reveals some important limitations of Scazzero’s work. The first is that its reliance on principles for emotional health are shaped and expressed by concepts from our therapeutic culture, which is viewed with some mistrust by some in ALCF’s congregation. The second limitation is that before implementing Scazzero’s recommendations, which requires looking at one’s emotional health, it would take a considerable effort to make the case and communicate it well to the church family. As he recounts in his book, Scazzero’s own pivot towards teaching emotional health in his church came out of profound personal and marriage crisis. For churches whose leaders have not shared similar crises, the leaders may not be as committed to focusing on emotional health as a key relational dynamic, simply because they have not had the same experiences as Scazzero.

The limitations described above mean that the value of The Emotionally Healthy Church is primarily in training small group leaders to recognize the value of emotional

47 Genograms are a methodology whereby one creates a “family tree” with their parents, grandparents, and possibly great-grandparents identified, along with corresponding emotional health issues (e.g., anger, envy, addiction, etc.) or events (e.g. death, divorce, illness, or poverty) for each ancestor. The principle behind this process is that Christlike transformation requires breaking from our past—a past which is significantly shaped by family of origin issues. As individuals come to understand the family influences that shaped them, they can better identify the emotional health work that is needed and let their small group help in that process by being a “healthy family” that provides a degree of “re-parenting.” Ibid., 87-107.
health for themselves and to begin to look for ways to model it for themselves and encourage the group members to do likewise. In this way, the emotional health value in ALCF’s discipleship could grow organically from the bottom up.

*John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples,*
*by D. Michael Henderson*

*John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* provides foundational thinking and practical insights on small groups with a goal of discipleship. Wesley’s commitment to piety and spiritual growth for all believers is a model that churches still benefit from following today. A church structured as ALCF, with its weekly service, affinity groups, and Growth Groups, can use all of these elements in making disciples.

**Wesley’s Integrative Approach:**
*An Interdependent Structure of Societies, Classes, and Bands*

For Wesley, Methodism’s chief aim was “to spread holiness throughout the land,” and this would be achieved as people made progress in both internal piety and external displays of ethical and moral behavior. Wesley was a master organizer, and each element of fellowship—societies, class meetings, and bands—served a particular purpose in advancing this goal. They were designed as an interlocking system, supporting one another and working together to achieve the aims of Methodism.

The society meeting was similar to today’s weekly church service, in which a congregation meets for corporate worship and instruction from God’s word by a minister.

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Henderson makes the point that the ministry of the society was largely cognitive, that is, designed to instruct the society member. Each society was then segmented into a number of class meetings in which each class was meant to be “an intimate group of ten or twelve people (usually co-ed) who met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth.” The goal was to encourage change in attitude and actions towards the things of God. Participation in class meetings was mandatory. The class meeting was operated according to a set of rules which specified behaviors that were prohibited, ones that were encouraged, and the encouragement of practical actions which were known as “means of grace.”

According to Henderson, the class meeting was by far the most innovative and results-producing aspect of the Methodist system. Henderson notes its many benefits: 1) providing a place for members to talk about their experiences and feelings as they sought to apply Methodist teaching; 2) being the primary place to introduce newcomers to the ways of Methodism; 3) serving as a “gate-keeper” by handling difficulties, dissent, and sporadic participation at the class level so as not to impact the larger society gatherings; 4) identifying and training the next generation of leaders; and 5) providing a tight system of accountability through the recording of attendance and the collection of the penny.

49 Ibid., 95.

50 Henderson writes, “Every Methodist became a member of a class and attended it regularly—or else he or she was no longer a member of the society.” Ibid., 95.

51 Ibid., 97.
tithe. Given these benefits, it is no wonder that Wesley’s class meeting is often seen as the archetype of today’s small group methodology of discipleship.

The most potent gathering for discipleship was the band. Unlike the class meetings, the bands were voluntary and composed of about six people from the same gender, age, and marital state, who met weekly for the purpose of making sure the affections of their hearts were directed towards the requirements of holy living. Members of a band met to converse candidly with one another about the state of their souls. The conversation was organized around a set of penetrating questions which required direct responses. While this was Wesley’s personal favorite structure of discipleship, it was also the one least practiced by Methodists.

Assessment of the Vision, Content, and Form for ALCF’s Context

The vision of Wesley’s Methodism is well in line with the purpose of ALCF’s discipleship through small groups. Like Methodism, ALCF uses the concept of interlocking groups, seeing the Sunday service as a place to instruct and cast vision for deeper connection with Jesus through community with others. The community can be an affinity group which is organized along gender and age/stage criteria with teaching specific to these communities, or it can be a small group community (often co-ed) where people meet to apply God’s word, encourage one another, and pray together.

52 Ibid., 110.

53 The five questions that each band member answered at each meeting were: 1) What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? 2) What temptations have you met with? 3) How were you delivered? 4) What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? 5) Have you nothing you desire to keep secret? Ibid., 118-119.

54 Ibid., 112. Of the limited appeal of the bands, Henderson cites records from Wesley’s Foundery Society in London, which “show that of 2200 members in its society and class meetings, only 639 were involved in the bands.” Ibid., 119.
Another implication for ALCF is the notion of accountability. In Wesley’s class meetings, weekly accountability regarding attendance and participation was key to ensuring that society members were growing in holiness. At ALCF, accountability is frankly minimal. A semi-annual report is asked of the leaders so that the ministry knows who is regularly attending and what blessings they have experienced and challenges they continue to face. A more rigorous accountability seems unlikely at ALCF given our culture of invitation to participate rather than mandatory participation. There is room however to equip small group and affinity leaders to better encourage participation.

Henderson’s work points out the history and value of accountability for small groups, but it makes no attempt to adapt Wesley’s methodology to today’s church environment. This omission limits the value of his insights to ALCF’s context. It would have been helpful to have an appendix to the book that provides some current examples of churches using an interlocking system of groups with effective accountability practices.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the literature of models of discipleship provides a start for ALCF to think about how to move forward in developing its people as disciples. The resulting effort must take into account not only the appropriate model of discipleship but also keep in mind our church’s own spiritual heritage—a heritage born out of the Protestant tradition and shaped by contemporary movements from megachurches to house churches. We turn our attention to this in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4
ALCF: A RICH PROTESTANT HERITAGE FOR TODAY’S DISCIPLESHIP

ALCF today is a wonderful combination of Protestant influences founded on the principles of holiness and unity, tempered by the realities of American’s racial history, and guided by contemporary movements. These contemporary movements have included an “upward direction” to the megachurch influence in our growth phase and a subsequent “downward direction” to the perceived spiritual potency of the house church movement following seasons of pastoral departures and church splits.

The essence and forms of discipleship at ALCF have their roots in our association with the Church of God of Anderson, Indiana, which saw its purpose as bringing about a “reform movement” designed to restore holiness to the central place in the Christian life and transcending the denominational differences that undermined effective Christian witness to the surrounding world. This movement’s founding principles of holiness and

\[1\] “The Church of God (Anderson, IN) is a Christian reform movement dedicated to a return to central biblical teachings and serious Christian living. . . . Following the Civil War, the religious scene in the United States was dominated by a neglect and even denial of much that had previously been held as basic within the Christian community. The Church of God movement (Anderson) emerged out of this scene as part of the larger Holiness Movement. It was a ‘reformation’ movement that sought to ‘come out’ of the competitive and compromising chaos of divisive denominationalism. David S. Warner (1842-1895) was a primary pioneer of this movement.” Barry L. Callen, “What We Teach,” accessed August 20, 2016, http://www.jesusisthesubject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/WhatWeTeachFINAL.pdf, 1-2.
unity, rooted in Pietism and Wesleyan theology and praxis, provided the foundation for the original focus of discipleship which continues to be a part of the Church of God’s growth worldwide. Likewise, the expression of these priorities through the African American form of the Church of God called the National Association of the Church of God became the historical and theological context out of which ALCF came to be.

As ALCF grew, megachurch models began to be sought, notably from Saddleback Church, as well as insights from large black churches. These larger churches have influenced ALCF to see itself more as a church of disciples and not just believers, as active and not passive members of the kingdom of God. ALCF has attempted to live out this calling within multicultural small group communities. ALCF’s recent church split, however, has meant that we are no longer a megachurch, and this has caused us to evaluate how we are to live out our call as disciples in our new reality of fewer people, resources, and scope of ministry. The addition of Francis Chan to the elder board for a season has brought values and priorities from the house church movement to help shape our small group discipleship and praxis as we go forward.

2 Since 1891, when the movement’s first missionary was sent to Mexico, the Church of God has continued to grow into a multinational community of faith. Average weekend attendance in the congregations of the United States and Canada totals approximately 250,000. There are approximately 2,300 congregations in the United States and Canada. Globally, the movement has work in eighty-nine countries and territories, representing more than 7,300 churches and 875,000 believers. See Church of God, “Our History,” accessed August 19, 2016, http://www.jesusisthesubject.org/our-history/.

The Church of God: A Spirit-Led Movement

The Church of God, Anderson (CHOG) was founded in 1881 in Anderson, Indiana as “a movement emphasizing unity and holiness.” It sought to counter the numerous divisions and denominations that developed in the Protestant Church because of differences in doctrine or praxis or both. To the founders of the Church of God, notably Daniel Warner, such divisions were a blight on the gospel and an embarrassment to the one Church that was formed by Christ and whose unity would be an ongoing testimony of submission to his lordship. The Church of God set out to be a church that overcame these divisions by living out the priorities of holiness and unity. Both priorities were clearly to be seen in the Scripture, and both could only be manifested by the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness was viewed as the steady progress in one’s life in becoming more Christlike. As one matured in Christ, the human passions that inflamed divisions, such as pride, ambition, and self-seeking, would be brought under the control of the Holy Spirit and unity would be manifest. Despite the Church of God’s self-understanding as directly in line with the true church, and “above” denominations, its emphases on holiness and the Holy Spirit owe more to its Pietistic roots and later Wesleyan adaptations.

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4 The denomination’s website states, “The Church of God, with U.S. offices in Anderson, Indiana, began in 1881 as a movement emphasizing unity and holiness.” Ibid.

5 Early leaders such as Daniel S. Warner sought to forsake denominational hierarchies and formal creeds, trusting solely in the Holy Spirit as their overseer, and in the Bible as their statement of belief. These individuals saw themselves at the forefront of a movement to restore unity and holiness to God’s Church. Their aim was not to establish another denomination, but to promote primary allegiance to Jesus Christ and transcend denominational loyalties. See Church of God, “Our History.”
Pietistic Roots

When Daniel Warner and the early leaders of the Church of God emphasized the individual reading of Scripture, the reliance on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide, and the regular meeting of the saints in small groups, they were tacitly acknowledging a debt of gratitude to Philipp Jakob Spener and August Franke, respectively the founder and developer of Pietism in the seventeenth century. Spener was a Lutheran pastor in Germany who felt that Lutheranism, with its emphasis on right doctrine, had become cold and increasingly inadequate for helping believers navigate through the storms of life, particularly the effects of the Thirty Years’ War and other conflicts. He began to preach about a way to connect with God that prioritized the “renewed study of the Scriptures, the initiation of group meetings . . . the practice of the priesthood of all believers, and the practice of piety. . . . [He introduced] small prayer and study groups . . . who met for mutual encouragement in individual faith and practice.”

These practices, novel at the time, became the foundation for how subsequent Protestant denominations practiced their spiritual development, including the Church of God movement. On the one hand, pietism expanded the experience of salvation beyond its Protestant Reformation foundation of rational, reasoned theological orthodoxy to include more emotional, experiential criteria, such as “the direct, inner, psychological

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8 Ibid.
illumination of the believer.”³⁹ On the other hand, it was this very move to include the experiential that rendered pietism suspect to some because it “relegated doctrine to a secondary position and elevated experiential piety, personal assurance, and a high moral and devotional life, in practice if not in theory, to the rank of saving graces.”¹⁰ Despite the misgivings of some, pietism grew in its forms, influence, and geographical reach.

The Moravian Church, led in the eighteenth century by Count Zinzendorf and reestablished at his estate called Herrnhut in Saxony, became one of the most visible expressions of pietism. The Moravians saw themselves as an ecclesiola in ecclesia (a church within a church); they were a revival movement within the larger Church that emphasized “personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the bedrock of the Christian faith.”¹¹ The Moravians were also concerned with a person’s spiritual growth in Christ and so organized classes and groups in accordance with steps of spiritual progress.¹² Furthermore, the Moravians prioritized evangelism, and they spread the gospel of knowing Christ as savior through the inner witness of the Spirit and the accompanying joy of his presence.¹³ It was this very effort and emphasis that reached out to other countries in Europe and North America and which found John Wesley in Aldersgate in 1738.

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³⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid. Erb writes, “What offended Pietism’s opponents perhaps more than anything was its emphasis on the emotional aspect of religious life.” Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Watson, Accountable Discipleship, 27.

¹² Watson comments, “Within these classes there was mutual oversight for the furtherance of spiritual growth, members being identified as ‘dead,’ ‘awaked,’ ignorant, ‘willing disciples,’ or ‘disciples that have made a progress.’” Ibid.

¹³ Erb, Pietists, 21.
Wesleyan Holiness

Almost universally, scholars who have written about Wesley’s Methodism speak of the seminal influence of the Moravians and pietism. In like fashion, the Church of God’s self understanding is indebted to Wesley’s Methodism in two key ways: the clear articulation of the priority of holiness in the lives of believers, and as a model of a reform movement within the Church. A. L. Byers, writing in 1921, pointed to the fertile soil of the Holiness Movement of the later nineteenth century in which the seeds of the Church of God were planted.

The decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties of the [nineteenth] century witnessed a special revival of the doctrine of holiness, or sanctification. . . . In short, it was the doctrine of Christian perfection, the state of loving God supremely and of living victorious over every form of sin. This doctrine was nothing more nor less than one of the great Scriptural truths that had been obscured by the apostasy. It had been taught by the Wesleys, but through the denomination-building zeal of their followers it had become to a great extent a dead letter in their articles of faith.

For Warner and the early leaders of the Church of God, holiness meant striving after the “higher experience” of sanctification, which the founder called “the second work.” Holiness was the mark of the true church, manifested by its continual dependence on the Holy Spirit’s leading and the use of Scripture as the sole and highest authority, which then required steadfast obedience to its commands and precepts. In

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14 For example, Erb comments, “Pietism was the source of much of John Wesley’s spirituality and through him . . . it touched North American nineteenth-century revivalism and the Evangelical movement of the twentieth century.” Ibid.


16 Warner wrote a book called Bible Proofs of the Second Work of Grace. He was a writer of books and articles, and later became the publisher of the The Gospel Trumpet, the official publication of the Church of God. See Byers, Birth of a Reformation, 131, 210, 253.
weekly gatherings, congregation members expected the Holy Spirit to be constantly accessible and leading and at times manifest in direct and powerful ways, such as prophetic words and miraculous healings. Hymns were both written and adapted that reflected these spiritual priorities.17

The problems with holiness from Warner’s perspective is that it had not been carried to its full promise—that of unifying all believers. This is the “apostasy” referred to by Byers and why Warner saw his own task as “another step, another reformation, which should bring the church to her fullness of glory, and visualize her unity and solidarity.”18 The full impact of holiness had been compromised by its failure to escape the bonds of denominationalism. But now Warner and the Church of God leaders sensed a new revival was going to break out based on holiness and manifest chiefly through unity of the Protestant sects. Like Zinzendorf’s Moravian community and Wesley’s reform movement within the Church of England, derisively labeled “Methodism” at the time, the Church of God would be a spark to ignite the church towards full holiness, a movement that would reform the Protestant Church so that it was more befitting of its role as the bride of Christ.19

National Association of the Church of God (NACOG):
The African-American Tradition

It should be no surprise that the Church of God movement’s emphasis on unity and holiness through the truth of Scripture and reliance on the Holy Spirit’s power would

17 Ibid., 407.
18 Ibid., 271.
19 Ibid.
have great appeal to African Americans in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{20} The promise of the movement would be everything many in the African American Church, which had grown in a segregationist society (both North and South), had hoped for.\textsuperscript{21} As black and white came together in worship, unity would be demonstrated and true equality experienced. So it is perhaps one of the great ironies and tragedies of the Church of God movement that it capitulated to division based on race. Its self-proclaimed \textit{raison-d’etre} of unity could not overcome the social pressure of maintaining “the color line.”\textsuperscript{22} And it is directly because of this failure that an African American-centered community of the Church of God, eventually called the National Association of the Church of God (hereafter, NACOG), came into being.\textsuperscript{23}

NACOG had its roots in the camp meetings that were a staple of holiness denominations in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Camp meetings were places where many congregations in a denomination could gather for a time teaching, fellowship, and

\textsuperscript{20} James Earl Massey writes, “African Americans are today the largest ethnic minority within the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.). . . . The reasons for this . . . [are] due, in no small measure, to the appealing and promising unity ideal that is the heart of the Church of God message, an ideal forever allied in the church’s message with the call of scriptural holiness.” James Earl Massey, \textit{African Americans and the Church of God Anderson, Indiana: Aspects of a Social History} (Anderson, IN: Anderson University Press, 2005), 20.

\textsuperscript{21} Massey writes, “Along with the teaching about Scriptural holiness, which provided a corrective against the undisciplined membership allowed in some other church groups, the teaching about the unity of believers gave promise for a needed social cohesion; it promised acceptance, regard, and a new structure for togetherness that was denied by life all around them.” Massey, \textit{African Americans and the Church of God Anderson Indiana}, 18.

\textsuperscript{22} The “color line” was a common expression for separation based on race. E. E. Bynum, the successor to founder, David Warner, addressed the race issue in practical rather than theological terms. According to Massey, Bynum “announced that separate worship of whites and African Americans was wise and prudent in places where custom is strongly against racial togetherness. Bynum’s statement provided a rationale for racial separation in the church, and as such it began to dull the prophetic edge of the reform.” Massey, \textit{African Americans and the Church of God Anderson Indiana}, 18.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 72.
worship on a level well above their ordinary church experience. These meetings became showcases of dynamic preaching, revivalists, and new worship hymns. To speak at a camp meeting often meant one was confirmed as a leader in the movement or was seen as a potential future leader. In the early 1900s under the visionary leadership of Ernest Wimbish, the black members of the Church of God felt moved to purchase and build their own campground and did so in West Middlesex, Pennsylvania. The West Middlesex camp meeting to this day remains the focal point for black and multiethnic congregations affiliated with NACOG to meet annually for the same purposes that originally brought them together. NACOG eventually became headquartered in West Middlesex and provided credentialing and ministerial training for affiliated churches.

ALCF’s roots are steeped in association with NACOG and the West Middlesex camp meetings. Paul Sheppard’s father, Horace Sheppard, Sr., was a renowned evangelist in his day and spoke at the camp meetings. Pastor Paul and some of the original members of ALCF attended camp meetings at West Middlesex. In addition, key influencers and mentors of Pastor Paul as he was starting and building ALCF, including Bishops Benjamin Reid, Gilbert A. Thompson, and Timothy J. Clarke, have preached and served in various capacities with NACOG. A robust hymnody was also a feature of the

24 Ibid., 74, 82.
25 Ibid., 72-76.
26 Ibid., 82.
27 Pastor Paul Sheppard has made numerous references in staff meetings and sermons to the influence of Bishop Benjamin Reid in his life and ministry. Bishops Gilbert A. Thompson and Bishop Timothy J. Clarke have spoken at ALCF in years past, and provided expressions of appreciation for Paul Sheppard’s ministry on the occasion of the celebration of twenty years of ministry at ALCF. Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, Abundant Living (Winter 2009): 31, 35.
camp meetings, and even now one or two selections (e.g. “What a Mighty God We Serve”) remain a part of the set of worship songs we sing as a congregation.

Many of ALCF’s “Core Values” and aspects of its culture spring from its Church of God roots and NACOG expression. For example, the priority of holiness is reflected in ALCF’s values of “Letting the Holy Spirit lead,” “Believing God for miraculous answers to prayer,” “Addressing felt needs,” “Teaching God’s Word in a plain and practical way,” and “Facilitating the spiritual growth of all members.” 28 The diversity that underlies the unity of a body of believers is reflected by the values of “Unity rather than uniformity,” “Diversity in worship and music styles,” and “Including all races, ages, and socio-economic groups.” 29 As it lived out these values, ALCF grew in number and in multicultural diversity. In 2002, ALCF was the most diverse church within the Church of God and among the fastest growing. 30 This growth was outpacing the models of discipleship then in use, which centered upon attending the Sunday service and joining one of the fellowship or service ministries (e.g., men’s or jail ministry). Thus, if ALCF was going to continue to help people grow as disciples, new models of growth and discipleship beyond the familiar Church of God environment needed to be sought.

**Influences from the Megachurch Movement**

As ALCF grew, it found new influences primarily in the megachurch movement. Saddleback Church, led by Rick Warren in Lake Forest, California, was the first of these influences. ALCF drew upon Saddleback’s commitment to helping members grow in

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28 Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Core Values,” in *Exploring Membership at ALCF*.

29 Ibid.

maturity through commitment to small groups, ministry, and mission. ALCF was also influenced by black megachurches, such as the Los Angeles Church of God, led by Bishop Benjamin Reid. The lessons from black churches that have been embraced by ALCF center on the importance of a dynamic pulpit ministry, visionary leadership, and outreaching to the local community.

The Influence of Saddleback Church

In 2002, Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, had been in print for seven years and was having an outsized influence on many churches in how they saw their mission and organized their ministry. ALCF was no exception to this, and with over two thousand members to disciple, the senior pastor and other leaders of the church visited Saddleback to learn the principles and talk about ways some of them could be adapted to the needs of ALCF. What resulted was an almost wholesale adoption of the “Saddleback method.” Saddleback saw its purpose as centered on five priorities: magnify (worship), membership (joining the church following a profession of faith), maturity (spiritual growth through small groups), ministry (serving as you understand your gifts), and mission (sharing one’s faith locally and abroad).31 Saddleback created a diagram called “The Life Development Process” based on a baseball diamond analogy where members “rounded the bases” of increasing commitments reflective of corresponding spiritual growth (see figure 4.1).

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Soon after returning from Saddleback, ALCF adapted the baseball diamond metaphor for its own use, calling it “Winning in Life,” and implemented a membership class, a process to help people find a ministry, and small groups. From a discipleship point of view, Saddleback’s model helped ALCF’s discipleship development in two
primary ways: first, it provided a framework for spiritual growth; and second, it made the case for the necessity of small groups.\textsuperscript{32}

As a framework for spiritual growth, the baseball diamond analogy for spiritual maturity has the advantage of giving a believer concrete stepping stones to live out one’s spiritual growth. The problem with the Saddleback model is that it limits the idea of discipleship to being in a small group, learning God’s word, having fellowship, and praying. At Saddleback, discipleship was not an overarching concept under which the five priorities of church were lived out. Rather, it was one of the priorities. ALCF adopted this same understanding of discipleship, which is why our church has traditionally been a church with small groups rather than a church of small groups.\textsuperscript{33}

Even though Saddleback’s model has limitations around its expression of discipleship, it does have the benefit of demonstrating that the centerpiece of growing in Christ is in small groups. So central has this commitment been to Saddleback’s strategy that by 2007, Warren’s staff was proudly stating that there are more Saddleback people who meet in weekly small groups than attend a weekend worship service.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} ALCF’s senior pastor and leadership team went to Saddleback in 2002 where they heard about the necessity of small groups. Later visits by some pastors at ALCF occurred in 2004, 2007 and 2012.

\textsuperscript{33} The distinction between being a church with small groups and being a church of small groups lies in the priority that small groups have in the life of a church. Churches with small groups are ones in which the small group ministry complements other church life activities and ministries such as Sunday worship, mid-week teaching, community outreach or various affinity ministries. Churches of small groups, like Willow Creek, are ones that organize their purposes and mission around small groups. In this setting, the Christian’s spiritual journey, growth, and identity owe more to being part of a small group community than being a member of a larger church. In churches with small groups, participation in a small group is considered optional; in churches of small groups, participation is considered essential. See Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, \textit{Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place Where Nobody Stands Alone} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 161-163.

\textsuperscript{34} This was stated up front at a Saddleback conference on small groups which I attended in 2003. See also Steve Gladen, “The Saddleback Small Group Difference,” Small Groups.com, 2008, accessed
ALCF embraced the value of small groups by bringing me on staff in February 2003 to oversee the establishment of the Growth Groups ministry. From the start, Growth Groups were intended to “offer fellowship, accountability, and application of the Word.” The weekly curriculum of the groups was based on applying principles from the previous week’s sermon. Even while there was an emphasis on Growth Groups at ALCF from 2003 onward, it should be noted that ALCFs adult education (called Institute of Biblical Studies) and its affinity ministries, such as the men’s ministry, women’s ministry, and marriage and family ministry, were also providing elements of teaching and fellowship, just not as frequently as weekly small groups. Growth Groups plus these affinity ministries defined ALCF’s understanding of discipleship.

In its early days as a megachurch, Saddleback gave ALCF a way to understand its growth as disciples and to provide the vital structure of small groups to facilitate it. Unlike Saddleback, however, at ALCF Growth Groups were not seen as microcosms of the church’s purpose; instead, they facilitated a limited form of discipleship—a discipleship characterized by study of God’s word, prayer, and fellowship. Growth Groups did have a large impact on the spiritual maturity of many members. By 2009, there were 127 groups that had 1450 people participating out of a church of over 6000.

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35 Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, “Our Purpose,” presentation given by the church leadership in 2002 reflecting the emerging priority to create small group community at ALCF.

36 The Institute of Biblical Studies oversaw the development and delivery of all classes for adults. These included core classes in evangelism, spiritual growth, theology (e.g., “Understanding the Holy Spirit and His gifts”) and biblical studies (e.g., a course on the book of Exodus or the Gospel of Mark). Courses were developed and taught by pastors, staff, and approved lay members.
This was a promising start, but with only 24 percent of the church’s attendees in a group, ALCF remained a church “with small groups” rather than “of small groups.”

Lessons from Black Churches

Saddleback’s influence was instrumental in helping ALCF manage its growth by providing processes and structures for discipleship. Given the influence of Saddleback on churches in general over the past twenty years, it would be easy to overlook the core contribution and influence of black churches, especially black megachurches, on ALCF. The lessons from black churches that have been embraced by ALCF center on the ongoing necessity of a dynamic pulpit ministry, visionary leadership, and prioritizing the local community for its outreach efforts.

The first influential factor is a dynamic pulpit ministry. Most megachurches experienced growth because of a gifted preacher or teacher in the pulpit. In the African American tradition, this is particularly true since a dynamic preaching capability has been essential for churches of any size to form and to grow. One of Pastor Paul’s primary mentors, Bishop Benjamin Reid, bore testimony to this fact as when he reflected on the growth of his own church in inner city Los Angeles from three hundred to fifteen hundred people over a five-year period in the 1970s: “This church has a strong pulpit ministry. We’re strong on Bible teaching and many young adults come because of the Bible teaching. . . . We emphasize the traditional fervor and fire of the Black church tradition.”

From the outset of Pastor Paul’s ministry at ALCF, his preaching gift was manifest. From the testimonies of those who joined ALCF in the early days, Paul’s preaching was a combination of sound biblical exegesis mixed with practical applications and sprinkled with many humorous illustrations. Within a year of his arrival at ALCF, he started a successful radio ministry, *Enduring Truth*, on the largest Christian radio station in the Bay Area. The special combination of these ingredients enabled his messages to reach people across racial, ethnic, and socio-economic categories and brought an increasing number of visitors, attendees, and eventual members to ALCF.

The second influential factor of black megachurches upon ALCF is visionary leadership. Many black churches have capable, powerful preachers. What distinguishes the size and influence of a local church is the vision of the leadership. Thus, it is revealing that all five of the outside pastors who were asked to write or preach in honor of Pastor Paul’s twenty years at ALCF in 2009 had megachurches of their own, and four of the five pastors were African American. Each of these men had an active relationship with Pastor Paul and provided some level of encouragement, counsel, and mentoring at particular points in ALCF’s growth, such as facilities expansion, building

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38 In later years, *Enduring Truth* would be broadcast nationwide across the Salem Communication stations on the FM band.


40 The pastors who were featured were: Bishop Timothy J. Clarke of First Church of God, Columbus, OH; Dr. Tony Evans of Oakcliff Bible Church, Dallas, TX; Bishop Gerald A. Thompson of Jubilee Christian Church, Boston, MA; John Jenkins of Glenarden Baptist, Washington DC; and Chip Ingram of Venture Christian Church, Los Gatos, CA.
campaigns, and the like.\textsuperscript{41} From the outset, Pastor Paul believed that the reason for his call to the Bay Area was “to reach tens of thousands in the Bay Area for Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{42} This vision was reflected in some of ALCF’s values such as “numerical growth” and reinforced by specific teaching on this in the Exploring Membership class.\textsuperscript{43}

The third influential factor of black megachurches upon ALCF is a local community focus. One of the strengths of the African American church tradition is its priority of ministering to the practical needs of the surrounding community. Bishop Reid emphasizes that being a church that cares is an essential part of being a growing church, and he references the various food programs, counseling, and jail ministries that First Church of God Los Angeles has been involved in as proof of this priority.\textsuperscript{44}

From its earliest day, ALCF has been involved in addressing some of the needs in its community of East Palo Alto. Some ministries, such as its jail ministry, were started and staffed by Pastor Paul and other members. Other ministries, such as ones that reached out to at-risk youth through sports leagues, after school programs, and youth clubs, were supported by ALCF both financially and with volunteers.\textsuperscript{45} As ALCF grew,

\textsuperscript{41} In addition to these pastors, Bishop Benjamin Reid of the Los Angeles Church of God perhaps had the most influence on Pastor Paul if one goes by the number of references Paul made in sermons and staff meetings to the influence Reid had on him as a young pastor. This is my own personal recollection of several staff meetings during my tenure at ALCF.

\textsuperscript{42} This oft-repeated statement from the pulpit and in staff meetings was the closest thing that ALCF had to an official “vision statement.”

\textsuperscript{43} Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, Exploring Membership at ALCF (2003-2010).

\textsuperscript{44} Shumate, On the Grow, 201-202.

\textsuperscript{45} For example, in the Summer 2007 issue of Abundant Living, members of ALCF were encouraged to support many local community organizations such as Bayshore Christian Ministries (East Palo Alto), Community Pregnancy Center, For Youth by Youth, Green Pastures (a community support program for severely disabled kids), New Creation Home Ministries (which teaches young single moms job
so did its influence in the surrounding community. Even when ALCF moved its church site from East Palo Alto to Mountain View, its support of its original community remained strong.

The core strengths of the black megachurch experience on ALCF insured that it would remain true to its roots while adding ministries like Growth Groups to be intentional about developing disciples. These strengths would later become the basis for a noticeable resistance to too much change in the direction of the house church movement that gained currency following the church split in early 2014.

**Influences from the House Church Movement**

While ALCF remained a megachurch after Pastor Paul’s departure and through the two-year tenure of Pastor Hurmon, the influence of Saddleback and other black megachurches remained manifest in our ministries and congregational life. The church split in the beginning of 2014, however, resulted in the immediate loss of two thirds of the membership and had similar implications for the budget. Almost overnight, ALCF went from a megachurch with programs, structures, and staff to support them, to a place of loss, hurt, staff reductions, budget cuts, and uncertainty; and yet there remained a firm belief and faith that God still had a new and fruitful future for us.

In order to understand God’s leading, we needed to ask hard questions about what we should learn from the split. Chief among these questions were: “How did this happen? What were we teaching (or failing to teach) our congregation about handling dissension, the unity of the body of Christ, supporting church leadership, and resolving...
disputes in a godly way? Did we overlook the pitfalls inherent in a “senior pastor” model of church leadership, such as the potential devastation to the church body when that pastor leaves? As the elders wrestled with these questions, two answers emerged. First, ALCF had an incomplete understanding of discipleship and what it means to raise up disciples and to teach them what is in Scripture, and second, our reliance on a senior pastor leadership model was obscuring the biblical model of a plurality of leaders as found in Acts. It is in this context that the board of elders connected with Francis Chan, who had been working to establish house churches in San Francisco over the previous three years.

The Influence of Francis Chan

Chan joined the ALCF elder board in September of 2014. From the outset, his time as an elder was modeled after Paul’s leadership in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10), in that it was temporary, impactful, and designed to strengthen the church and encourage the local elders and leaders. Specifically, during this time Chan would bring refreshing leadership to ALCF’s new direction of house church-oriented discipleship. In this new era, our Growth Groups could be seen as “mini-bodies [of Christ],” or mini congregations, which would be part of a larger congregation called ALCF.

46 I have attempted to summarize the questions presented in various leadership and congregational meetings within months of the split.

47 This point was made repeatedly at various congregational meetings held in 2014 in the aftermath of the split.


49 Ibid.
Chan’s own journey towards the house church model is described in Chapter 2 of this project. He brought these convictions about spiritual potency to ALCF and showed the pastors and elders for the first time how a church might make disciples without a senior pastor-based model of leadership and organization. The goal was no longer to bring people into ALCF, but rather to equip the saints to go out from ALCF and live out the gospel in word and deed. Small groups were envisioned as “mini-bodies” where people could experience the love, encouragement, ministry of God’s word, and equipping to reach others for the kingdom of God. This would mean shifting the emphasis from the Sunday service as the central gathering of church members to the weekly gathering of small groups in homes around the Bay Area. As this shift gained momentum, there would be less need to meet all together on a Sunday. Perhaps we could start this shift by taking one Sunday off from meeting in the sanctuary and instead do some outreach in our neighborhood. As this shift progressed, eventually we might only need to gather one time per month in ALCF’s sanctuary while the other three Sundays would be spent in small groups in homes or in outreach. The anticipated monthly gathering of all house churches was what Chan was already practicing with his house church planting effort called “We Are Church.”

In order for this shift to take place, the leaders of the small groups would need to be trained and encouraged in principles of spiritual leadership. Down the road, members of the congregation could be trained in biblical knowledge and discipleship as well. The

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curricula provided in his book, *Multiply*, was written by Chan and his team for that purpose.51

Moving from a Church of Believers to a Church of Disciples 2.0

As it turned out, encouraging ALCF to make the shift from a large body of believers that met every Sunday to a body whose primary fellowship would now come from small groups proved more challenging than originally thought. Though ALCF was still a large congregation of six hundred worshipping in an over-sized facility, there was still a sense of real connection amongst that larger body that was not easily sacrificed. The thought of not having a “word from God” preached each Sunday or the opportunity for weekly corporate worship and seeing people you cared about less frequently was too much for many members. There was also a degree of uncertainty and hesitancy in embracing Chan’s leadership because of the temporary nature of his time on the board of elders. In light of these realities, the question now became how ALCF could adapt the values of *We Are Church* into its current small group structure so that a foundation for house churches emerging later could be laid.

After numerous discussions over a period of months among the elders and pastors, it seemed that the wisest step was an incremental one, and the leaders decided to refashion the twenty-five Growth Groups as potential house churches. This meant adapting the values of *We Are Church* for use by the Growth Group ministry. Fellowship ministries such as the men’s ministry and the young adults’ ministry would continue to be places where “the crowd” could gather and could be encouraged to eventually become

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Such a move would preserve the call of Growth Groups as a ministry of disciple-making while enlarging its importance and role within the life of ALCF. As ALCF moved forward with this house church/small group-based discipleship strategy (a strategy that became known as “Growth Groups 2.0” and which is further detailed in Chapter 6), the elders foresaw the potential to plant new churches in difficult places around the Bay Area like San Francisco and East Palo Alto. This new effort, which combined the Growth Groups 2.0 strategy with the maintaining of the weekly Sunday gathering for worship, teaching, and fellowship, and the corresponding affinity ministries which met at the worship center, is what became known as the “hybrid model.”

**Conclusion**

The GG 2.0 strategy appeared to have great promise in that it reflected who God had called ALCF to be. It also represented the church’s current place in living out this calling as a church that was moving forward even while it was healing from the split. Yet GG 2.0 would not demonstrate God at work or be a blessing to many if it was not rooted in Scripture. Thus, the next chapter provides the biblical insights and foundation for GG 2.0.

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52 These are two of the levels of commitment in Warren’s Purpose Driven model. The crowd refers to those who attend church and are less committed; the core refers to those who have become members of the church. Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 131-136.

53 Poonen, “Preparing for a New Vision.”
CHAPTER 5
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

When two fishermen by the Sea of Galilee, Peter and Andrew, heard Jesus’ invitation, “Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:19), they would have understood that he was inviting them to “become my students, be apprenticed to me, join my school, live with me,” in other words, to be his disciples.¹ What they could not have known at the time was how much Jesus was going to redefine what discipleship meant from the then current understanding of following the rabbi. They were not just going to “follow the dust of the rabbi” as Hillel and Shammai’s followers had done a generation before, learning specific schools of thought around Jewish Scripture and then, in turn, teaching others. The discipleship Jesus was speaking about was no less than the completion of God’s desire to rescue, redeem, and restore humankind, his very good creation. In so doing, Jesus and his twelve disciples would be fulfilling God’s original vision of the people of God, i.e., that they would be his people, holy like he is, dwelling in his presence as a community for eternity while stewarding his

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary, Vol. II: The Christbook, Matthew 13-28 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 143. Bruner also comments, “Discipleship was study-in-residence, home schooling; it was a live-in arrangement with a teacher.”
good creation. This chapter examines these themes by looking at our identity and mission as the people of God as originating in the Old Testament and completed in the New Testament. The theological foundation focuses on the transforming nature of discipleship, on others, on oneself, and on the necessity of community for the praxis of being disciples.

Old Testament Foundations: The People of God

There are some segments of the evangelical Church that focus on preaching Christ and the New Covenant and on inviting people to receive his offer of salvation, but they have neglected or misunderstood the essential value of the Old Testament for today’s disciples. The sense of identity as the people of God and mission for making him known is based upon our belonging to Christ. This belonging has its roots in God’s creation and formation of a people, Israel, from one family to be a blessing to all nations.

Identity: Formed by God

Discipleship is essentially a process of becoming—becoming a person more like the person the master or rabbi is and less like the way one used to be. It is caring about what the master cares about and reorienting one’s purpose, actions, and sense of fulfillment around this priority. But this journey of becoming has a context which shapes our identity. Our context begins with God’s act of creation, with him making the heavens and the earth and calling it good. God then made Adam and Eve (humankind) “in his own
image” (Gn 1:27) and called it “very good” (Gn 1:31). As image bearers of God—the foundation of our identity—we are to reflect his character and nature.²

We were created for relationship. We reflect the need for community. By his triune nature—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God is a God-in-community: “Community is God’s dearest creation because it is grounded in his nature and reflects his true identity as a plurality of person in oneness of being.”³ In making us “in his own image” God made us to be in community. Indeed, theologian Stanley Grenz sees this as the central point of God’s creation: “God’s intent to establish community with creation is a central theme of the entire biblical message. From the narratives of the primordial garden, which open the curtain on the biblical story, to the vision of white-robed multitudes inhabiting the new earth, with which it concludes, the scriptural drama speaks concerning community.”⁴

Adam and Eve were commanded to be fruitful and multiply so that community might grow (Gn 1:22, 28).⁵ First and foremost, then, humankind was created to be in relationship with God, to know the presence, the place, the provision, and the purpose of God. This is the significance of the Garden of Eden.

We were created to be holy. This community formed by God lived in his presence for a brief time. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve “heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gn 3:8). The Lord

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² Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 242-243. Grenz states, “If our divinely given design is that we be God’s image bearers, we must understand sin as our failure to reflect the image of God.”

³ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as a Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 44.


⁵ Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 27.
speaks with them. As the fall would soon reveal, humankind could only be in God’s presence if it was and remained holy as God is holy. To act contrary to God’s commands, as Adam and Eve came to do (Gn 3), would be an act of disobedience that showed one was no longer holy. This loss of holiness creates separation from God and this has fatal consequences (Gn 2:17).

We were created to have purpose. Genesis reveals God to be the Creator God; he is the one who makes all things, the heavens and the earth. He made it as an expression of who he is and out of his love (Ps 136), and he created humankind to take care of it. God gave Adam a purpose, which was to cultivate the Garden of Eden, to be a steward over God’s creation (Gn 2:15).

Mission: Called by God

The mission of the disciple is formed by the terrible consequences of the fall. When Adam and Eve sinned, they traded fruitful provision, protection, presence, and peace for cursed land, vulnerability, banishment, and fear. Yet no sooner had the holy God put Adam and Eve out of the garden, than out of his steadfast love (hesed), he went about making a way for them to return to his original intention. In her book, Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament, Sandra Richter describes this well: “Eden was the perfect plan, and God has never had any other. His goal was that the people of God might dwell in the place of God, enjoying the presence of God. This is all
our heavenly Father has ever wanted for us. And everything that lies between Eden’s
gate and the New Jerusalem, the bulk of our Bibles, is in essence a huge rescue plan.”6

Now God’s plan for humankind, to be once again a life-giving community
dwelling in the presence of God in his good and fruitful creation, would take place in the
midst of a fallen world marked by sin. This sin is represented by the priority of self, the
rejection of the true God, the seeking out of false gods and idols, and the grievous
consequences of pain, futility, and death. God would need to “make a way” (as we say at
ALCF) to overcome these humanly insurmountable obstacles. His way would be
redemptive in nature because it necessitates satisfying his justice. This involves paying
the penalty of the disobedience of Adam and Eve and their descendants and
reestablishing a form of what was lost in the garden, in order to give them and us a
renewed and present experience of life in him while pointing to a future hope of its
completion.

Over the course of the Old Testament, God’s plan unfolded through a series of
covenants he made and a number of rescues he provided.7 The essence of a covenant was
an irrevocable commitment between two parties to fulfill their agreed upon
responsibilities.8 God’s covenant with Abram is that he “will make you into a great
nation. . . . All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you” (Gn 12:2-3). God


7 Richter, Epic of Eden, 130-131. This chapter focuses on two of the primary covenants, those with
Abraham and with Moses, because they deal most directly with subject of identity and mission in God’s
plan. (God’s covenants with Noah and later with David are also discussed by Richter in her book, Chapters
6 and 8.)

8 Ibid., 77-78.
was establishing a “people of God,” a community, through whom the fallen world would know God and have the opportunity to be restored by him to his original intention in the garden. Later, God promises to give Canaan to Abram’s offspring, described elsewhere in the Old Testament as the Promised Land (Gn 12:7). The Promised Land would remind the community of God of the importance of having a place with God and that this remains God’s intention even after their expulsion from Eden.

God’s covenant with Moses follows his greatest saving act in the Old Testament, the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. By this liberation, God shows Israel that he is the God who saves, who redeems. As Christopher J. H. Wright explains, “Saving is one of the most dominant activities and characteristics of YHWH in the Old Testament. Indeed it is hardly going too far to say that salvation defines this God’s identity. ‘Our God is a God who saves’ (Ps 68:20).” Saving is part of God’s identity and mission, and it is thus part of the mission that God gives to the Israelites through his covenant with Moses:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:4-5)

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9 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 262-263.; see also Richter, *Epic of Eden*, 130. Both of these works discuss at length the themes originating from the Garden of Eden—place, presence, and purpose—and have been particularly helpful in describing our identity and mission as disciples in this work.


They are to be a holy community. The Israelites are God’s “treasured possession,” his special people (identity), and they are formed to be a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (mission). In other words, they were to be a people who revealed God, his holiness, his way of redemption, and his rule to the world. They would be representatives of God (priests) to the world to invite, teach, and administer the sacrifices of atonement that renewed one’s holy status before God, and perform signs of inclusion and community, such as circumcision, that marked out members of the Israelite community as set apart by God. It is for these purposes that God gave Moses the law on Mount Sinai. The law specified what life was to be like in this kingdom of God, for example, his supremacy above all gods; moral and ethical behaviors that demonstrate who belongs to God; as well as signs, rituals, and festivals—all things necessary to create, define, and provide purpose for community. On Mount Sinai, God was not only describing what the community of God was to look like and do, but he was also establishing his presence once more with his people. God would be present once again with his people in the tabernacle that he instructed Moses to build (Ex 25:8).13

They are to be a community in loving relationship. The foundation of being a community in relationship is found in the Shema (Dt 6:4-6): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.” This call to let love for God be the defining aspect of the community’s

13 Richter, Epic of Eden, 179-181.
relationship with him provides both purpose and mission to the Israelites.\textsuperscript{14} It is a priority reinforced by Jesus later for his followers when he responds to the question about which of the commandments in the Law is the greatest (Mt 22:35-38). In that same exchange with the expert in the law, Jesus also reminds his followers that being a loving community extends to how one treats and live with others (Mt 22:39).\textsuperscript{15} Jesus quotes God’s instructions to Moses in Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor has yourself. I am the Lord.”

The Old Testament reveals our identity as image bearers of God. We are to be like him in our heart and life in community, in our holiness, which kept us in his presence, and living in the place he provided while stewarding his good creation. The fall did not change God’s original plan for us to be imager bearers, but it radically altered the context in which this is done. Rescue and redemption became the priorities to overcome the consequences of Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The covenants God established and the rescues he performed for his people reveal this abundantly. Yet none of these worked because God’s people did not keep their part of the covenant: obedience to him. Rather than being a blessing to all nations, Israel became like other nations, and in the process they forgot both their identity and mission. But God had one more covenant, a new covenant to make with his people, a covenant that would deal with the fundamental failure of the previous covenants: the inability to change hearts which were hostages to sin (Jer 31:31-34).\textsuperscript{16} And so God would perform one more rescue: not from

\textsuperscript{14} Christopher J. H. Wright, \textit{The Mission of God}, 59-60.

\textsuperscript{15} Grenz, \textit{Theology for the Community of God}, 629.

\textsuperscript{16} Richter, \textit{Epic of Eden}, 185.
earthly enemies or destruction, but from sin and death itself. This last covenant would be the basis on which the people of God could truly regain what was lost in Eden.\textsuperscript{17}

**New Testament Foundations: Disciples**

One of the intriguing features of the New Testament’s presentation of discipleship is how the term “disciple” (\textit{mathétés}) appears exclusively in the gospels and Acts and nowhere in the epistles.\textsuperscript{18} This makes sense, however, when one considers that in calling people to follow him, learn from him, and live with him, Jesus was doing what other rabbis and teachers of his era had done and were doing. Those who followed were disciples. The remarkable fact was not that Jesus had disciples, but rather what he was teaching and doing. Jesus was forming (reforming) the identity and the mission of the people of God around himself, which is why the disciples afterwards are most often called “brethren” (e. g., Rom 1:13, KJV), and “children of God” (Gal 3:26), among other names.\textsuperscript{19}

**Identity: Formed by Jesus**

Our identity is founded on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Messiah, the one sent to save his people (Jn 20:31). His very name means, “Yahweh is

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{18} The word “disciple” (\textit{mathétés}) appears in the gospels and Acts a total of 294 times. No references are found anywhere else in the New Testament. Biblegateway, “disciple,” accessed February 8, 2017, https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Disciple. The other books of the New Testament further develop the concept of discipleship, according to Grenz, by speaking of it in the context of relationship with Jesus where he is Lord, our savior, so that we are not our own any longer; and together, in community called the church, we live out what it means to be made in his image. Grenz, \textit{Theology for the Community of God}, 232-233.

salvation.” Contrary to expectations of the time, he did not come to save Israel from its earthly oppressor, the Roman Empire, rather he came to offer salvation to all people on earth from the real enemy—sin—and deliverance from sin’s greatest consequence, death. He does this by offering himself in our place as the once-for-all-time sacrifice that satisfies the penalty for sin, and his resurrection demonstrates his power over sin because death is no longer the final place for those who live under his lordship (e.g., Heb 10; 1 Cor 15).

Jesus calls this “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20), and this New Covenant is the fulfillment of the previous covenants and the final covenant God has to bring humankind back into his holy presence, to a place where once more he will be with his people who have been made into a holy community. Christopher J. H. Wright points out that Jesus is not just the messenger of this new covenant, but “the very content of this communication.” God and humankind will finally live as he had planned since before Creation and once more enjoy life in a love relationship without any vestige of the fall, that is, without fear, shame, mourning, crying, or death. This is to be the eventual destiny of those who believe Jesus is Lord. In the meantime, we experience the beginnings of this eventuality as the new people of God, the Church. The Church is called a holy nation as Israel was (1 Pt 2:9). As Israel was called to show the surrounding nations who God is and what it means to be his people, so the Church is to show the world in which

20 Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God, 118.
21 Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 450-453.
22 Christopher J. H. Wright writes, “Thus, the fact that the New Testament so carefully details all the ways that Jesus shares the identity and functions of YHWH now comes into even sharper significance in this missional perspective. For it will be precisely in knowing Jesus as Creator, Ruler, Judge and Savior that the nations will know YHWH.” Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God, 123.
we live who God is and what his very good purposes are “for those who love him and have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). God’s presence is now with his Church through the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, who Christ gave to his disciples. His Spirit empowers the followers of Christ to “be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

In summary, our identity is in Christ, “who is your life” (Col 3:4). Our family background, our personal history, the consequences of our sinful, self-centered life from the past are now superseded by Christ “who is all and is in all” (Col 3:11). We have been put into a new family which now informs and shapes who we are in Christ. Our identity in Christ is tied to our participation in the community of Christ. The purpose of our lives have also been changed. As disciples, “you are not your own, you have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20). We follow where Christ is leading; we carry out his mission to be light to the nations (Mt 5:14-16).

Mission: Make Disciples of All Nations

The work of the master’s disciples is to continue the master’s work. The whole idea of discipleship in Jesus’ time was that the teaching, mission, and way of life that the master taught and lived out would continue as it was passed on to others and to succeeding generations. It is with this background that Matthew 28:19-20, often referred to as “The Great Commission,” is so seminal to the mission of those who follow Christ.
Jesus’ last instructions to his disciples in Matthew’s gospel begin with an imperative, literally, “Disciple!”²³ In his commentary on Matthew, Frederick Dale Bruner comments on the significance of Jesus’ focus on making disciples:

Interestingly, the usual missionary terms are not employed here: “preach,” “convert,” “win,” and the like. . . . [Instead] to disciple means “to make students of,” “bring to school,” “educate” . . . or in modern-English terms, “to mentor,” “to apprentice.” The word pictures students sitting around a teacher more than it does penitents kneeling at an altar—an education process more than an evangelistic crisis, a school more than a revival. The word’s prosaic character relaxes and says in effect, “Work with people over a period of time in the simple educational process of teaching Jesus.”²⁴

Since the emphasis of the mission is on making disciples, it is clear that when the Great Commission is viewed primarily as “getting people saved” or to “receive Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior,” as it often is in many evangelical churches, then Jesus’ clear commission is diminished and full discipleship is greatly hindered. To be sure, the evangelical emphasis on conversion is a necessary starting point, but too often it has become a focal point of churches. What is needed for a more biblical and effective understanding of discipleship is the inclusion and proper weighting of the elements mentioned by Christ in the Great Commission, that is, teaching and baptism.

The community of believers that is making disciples is doing so by teaching all that Christ taught his disciples. Thus, the word of God is lived out in this understanding of discipleship.²⁵ A disciple of Jesus is one who is living out his commands, who, for


²⁴ Ibid., 815-816.

²⁵ Eugene Peterson expresses this truth well: “We are part of a holy community that for three thousand years and more has been formed inside and out by these words of God, words that have been heard, tasted, chewed, seen, walked. Reading Holy Scripture is totally physical. . . . One of the early rabbis . . . insisted that the primary body part for taking in the world of God is not the ears but the feet. You learn
example, lives out the virtues of the Sermon on the Mount and does not ignore them because “they’re not realistic in this world,” or devalue them out of some erroneous understanding of “being under grace and not under the law.”

The community of believers is to baptize those who give their lives to Christ, those who identify with him as the redeeming God who died for them to make them holy and to give them a hope and a future. Baptism is more than a symbol; it is instead a public declaration of belonging to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and being received by him. Just as signing a contract is not symbolic but is the actual act of commitment, so too baptism is an act of commitment that identifies the person as belonging to the new people of God.

The place of the new people of God is this world (for the time being). The Church is to make disciples “of all nations” (v. 19). Matthew is using the very same words in Genesis 12:3b (Septuagint) when it says, “all the peoples on earth.” Just as Abraham’s seed was to grow in order to be a blessing to the nations around them, so now Christ’s spiritual offspring are to grow and be a blessing of covenant belonging and rescue to the whole world around them.

As the new people of God moved out in response to Jesus’ commands, they took with them the promise of his abiding presence, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (v. 20b). The presence of Christ is in them and with them as the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord leads them, counsels them, teaches them what to say.

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26 Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 679.

27 Bruner, Matthew, Vol II, 816.
in the moment, protects them, admonishes them, and brings glory to God. As they live by
the Spirit, continuing to do what Jesus did when he was on earth and doing this
throughout the world, the disciples are advancing the Kingdom of God, which is God’s
rule and authority in the world. In this present age, the Kingdom of God is a series of
outposts in the midst of “hostile territory.” The biblical hope and expectation is that as
these outposts continue to spring up, God’s people, the Kingdom of God, will be a light
to all the nations as they were intended to be.

In summary, by making discipleship the central task, the Great Commission
rescues the concept and practice of discipleship from its frequent status as a second-class
priority behind evangelism. Discipleship, as described by Jesus before he ascends, shows
how the new people of God, new in that they are formed by Christ and the New
Covenant, are to glorify God—by living according to his word, by inviting others to join
this new community, by spreading the gospel throughout the world so all will have an
opportunity, and by doing so as Jesus’ presence through the Holy Spirit guides, leads, and
equips.

Theological Foundations

Both Old and New Testaments speak to our identity and mission. Christ
redefined our identity and mission around himself and his ministry. This section explores
the specifics of what this means for disciples by looking at the hallmarks of a disciple,
how a disciple is transformed to become more like Christ, and lastly, the often forgotten
truth that being in Christian community is essential for discipleship.

28 N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the
The Call on the Disciple

Building on the foundations of God’s plan as revealed in the Old Testament, it is clear that Jesus provides the identity and mission for his disciples. It is helpful to consider what this means in practice, and what this looks like when lived out. Scripture reveals that the distinguishing marks of disciples are evident by what they do. These marks are summarized by the concepts of agape love, being about mission, training others as disciples, and prioritizing community by meeting together.  

The first distinguishing mark is love. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). For Jesus, there was no greater mark of the disciple than love—love for God, love for one another, and love for those in the world. This love was not primarily sentimental but active. It is active towards God by involving all aspects of a person’s being: body, soul, mind, and strength (see Mt 22:37). It is active toward those around us by elevating their needs on a par with our own (Mt 22:38). So important is it that Jesus says, “All the law and the prophets hang on these two commands [to love God and one’s neighbor]” (Mt 22:40).

Such love is self-sacrificing, which reflects the nature of God’s love for us (Jn 3:16). The true disciple of Jesus is one whose love for God and his very good creation is revealed by the giving of oneself in numerous ways, such as in time, in finances, in humility, in perseverance, and in forgiving instead of demanding repayment. However,

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29 The weight of Scripture, particularly the New Testament, speaks to these priorities: agape love (e.g., Jesus’ first and second commands, John’s Gospel and epistles, Paul’s ethic of love for the church in 1 Cor 13); being about mission (e.g., the Great Commission, the early church’s missionary efforts in Acts); training others as disciples (e.g., Paul’s pastoral epistles); and, prioritizing community by meeting together (e.g., Acts 2; 5; Eph 4; Heb 10). These four priorities are also influenced by Francis Chan’s teaching while he was an elder at ALCF and his house church movement called, “We Are Church,” whose four values are family, mission, training, and gathering. We Are Church, “Our Core Values,” accessed February 6, 2016, http://www.wearechurch.com/values/.
such acts of sacrifice may also be done without love (1 Cor 13:1-3), so it is essential to keep in mind that the expression of godly love is relational; it is manifest by how we treat others in our daily world. This relational love is seen by being patient, kind, truthful, forgiving, and always hopeful that the other person will become what Christ desires them to become (1 Cor 13:4-7; Col 3:12-14). It is to be the hallmark of a local church community and a sign that a particular community “is worthy of the kingdom of God” (2 Thes 1:3).

The second distinguishing mark of a disciple is mission. Jesus begins and ends his public ministry with the call to “follow me” (Lk 5; Jn 21). In so doing, he conveys two things about discipleship: 1) at its heart, discipleship is about following Jesus; and 2) the call to discipleship [mission of] carries on until he returns. The way the disciple participates in Christ’s priority of making disciples of all nations (as described above) is to do the things that Christ did in his earthly ministry.30 Christopher J. H. Wright explains that part of what it means to live out the Great Commission is that “the people [of God] . . . are now to become a self-replicating community of disciples among the nations.”31 N. T. Wright (no relation) sees the mission of these communities of disciples as showing the world that the kingdom of God is near, the rule of God has broken through and is establishing communities of God’s people as a foretaste of what life with

30 Eugene Peterson writes, “Everything Jesus said and did among them [the disciples] is to be continued in what they say and do. . . . ‘I have loved you; you love one another’ (13:34; 15:12). . . . ‘You’ve seen me work; you’ll do my work’ (14:12). . . . ‘I’ve been with you; the Spirit will be with you’ (14:16-17). . . . ‘I was hated; you will be hated’ (15:18-25). Peterson, Christ Plans in Ten Thousand Places, 236.

God in the new heaven and new earth is to be like.\textsuperscript{32} The strategy then is to be the people of God formed by Christ and therefore loving others in word and in deed. It means living out “kingdom values,” that is, those qualities and actions that reflect God and thus mark one as a member of his kingdom, as a disciple.

The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) provides specifics about what this looks like in practice and gives context to what it means for disciples to make disciples of all nations as discussed above.\textsuperscript{33} This discourse speaks to the motivation of a disciple’s heart (e. g., “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Mt 5:6), centers it on what is important to God (e. g., “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” Mt 6:20), and prescribes a kingdom ethic towards others (e. g., “Love your enemies,” Mt 5:44). Disciples today follow Jesus as part of a community who together are discerning his leading through the Holy Spirit (e. g., Acts 13). They are asking God to show them where they can be “salt” and “light” to a world that is so loved by God and so far from him (Mt 5:14-16). They are seeking practical and immediate ways to show God’s love in word and in truth.

The third distinguishing mark of a disciple is training. Many churches today describe themselves as “followers of Jesus” and offer programs couched in the vocabulary of discipleship by offering a Bible study on the subject. What is often missing in their understanding and efforts is the principle that “disciples make disciples,” meaning that a church that is committed to discipleship must be intentional about training

\textsuperscript{32} N. T. Wright, \textit{Surprised by Hope}, 201-208.

\textsuperscript{33} Bruner writes, “It is the collateral design of the sermon to give a portrait of and to form \textit{disciples}... To read the Sermon on the Mount is to discover what it means to be Jesus’ disciples; to read it with faith is to receive power to \textit{be} Jesus’ disciples.” Bruner, \textit{Matthew, Vol. I}, 151.
its people to understand and live out their identity as disciples so that they can then train others in what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. When the Great Commission says, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,” it points us to the three years of Jesus’ teaching his disciples in word, deed, and by doing life together so that they in turn would carry on the works that he did and teach a new generation of disciples to do the same. Jesus grew his disciples in numerous ways: through private explanation of his parables (Mt 13:36-43), by sending them to the surrounding towns (Lk 10:1-20), telling them to give the people something to eat (Mt 14:13-21), paying the poll tax (Mt 17:24-27), and using disputes among them as teachable moments (e. g., Mk 10:35-45). His disciples would later be known, according to Acts and the epistles, by their living out of his teaching—how they forgave those who harmed them, loved their enemies, prayed as Jesus taught them instead of worrying, gave to the poor, healed the sick, and “preached the good news.”

The “discipleship training” that Jesus practiced was also carried on by Paul with those he discipled, like Timothy and Titus. Paul is not content that these men just learn from him and minister to others; he requires them to teach others who can then carry on the mission of Jesus. 34 Disciples make disciples. It is important to note that this pattern of discipleship is how church leaders are chosen in the early Church. The qualification of church leaders (elders or presbyteros) is based in part on their ability to “hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Ti 1:9, see also 1 Tm 3:2).

34 For example, Paul writes to Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tm 2:2). See also 2 Timothy 3:14-17.
The fourth distinguishing mark of a disciple is meeting together. It is clear from the earliest days of the Church that regular gatherings of the disciples (and those who wanted to learn more) were vital. Acts 2:42-47 explains what happened to the three thousand people who accepted the gospel message and were baptized—they met together for teaching, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. They did this in temple courts and in people’s homes, and they did this regularly. Each of these aspects of meeting together confirmed their belonging to Christ. Over time, however, judging from the exhortation in Hebrews 10:25 to not give up meeting together, it appears that the enthusiasm of some of the disciples for fellowship had cooled which put them in danger of growing cold towards living for Christ, not persevering through the difficulties of such a calling, and even the possibility of returning to one’s former life of deliberate sin with the consequence of the expectation of fearful judgment (Heb 10:26-27).

There are many sources of spiritual danger to the disciple, and Hebrews does not indicate which may have been in operation here. However, the prevailing culture of the day provides a formidable headwind of opposition and challenge for disciples in every age. In western culture today, the headwinds of self and consumerism built on the deep foundation of individualism are constant challenges to meeting together as disciples. In his book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah describes this foundation of individualism: “Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. . . . We believe in the dignity, the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make
our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious.”

The sad reality is that many Christians apply this attitude towards their local body of believers. They make the decision to fellowship with local believers based on their individual preferences, for example, based on who is leading worship, or who is preaching, or whether the children’s or youth program is acceptable. Such attitudes are described by Dick Staub in *The Culturally Savvy Christian* as “Christianity-lite,” and are characteristic of a Christianity based more on a one-time prayer of salvation than a lifelong identity and commitment to being a disciple of Jesus. Those who are practicing Christianity-lite are not salt and light to the world but rather are letting their “minds [be] squeezed into the mold of the thought patterns, beliefs, values, and behaviors of our fallen culture. . . . [They] are blind to them, vulnerable to them, and even addicted to them.” The pressures in their many forms from our surrounding culture should compel us to meet together so that we might be strengthened and encouraged by God through one another.

The Effect on the Disciple: Spiritual Transformation

As the disciple lives out his or her call to love God and others as Jesus did, to be about the Lord’s work, to make new disciples, and to be in ongoing fellowship—this life

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37 Ibid.
is producing change in the disciple. It is making this person more like Christ, which is God’s desire for each of us from the fall of humankind.\footnote{Grenz, \textit{Theology for the Community of God}, 146.} It is vital for churches to know and then to teach its members that God’s plan for us is not just that we “get saved,” but that we become more and more like his Son (Rom 8:29). Grenz explains, “It is [Jesus] who reveals to us what God has created humankind to be.”\footnote{Ibid., 231.} As Christ is the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), so we are becoming like him; we are becoming less like our old selves and more like our new selves (e. g., Col 3:9-10).

Becoming like Christ is a process, one often described today as “spiritual transformation,” and in previous generations, “sanctification.” This process is captured well by 2 Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” As we are living for Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are seeing his glory—his presence, his weight, his light—manifest in countless ways. These encounters are changing us so that we reflect Christ’s glory more and more. God’s process of spiritual transformation, of making us Christlike, is ongoing and lifelong.\footnote{Grenz writes, “Transformation into the image of God is a process which we experience beginning with conversion and lasting until the great eschatological renewal which will bring us into full conformity with the image of God.” Ibid.}

The Apostle Paul’s words about being transformed into Christ’s image more and more brings encouragement in the present and hope for its final completion when Christ comes again. Yet it would be incorrect to think that the Spirit is doing this work in us without our participation. To the contrary, our intentional participation is required, and

\footnote{Grenz, \textit{Theology for the Community of God}, 146.} \footnote{Ibid., 231.} \footnote{Grenz writes, “Transformation into the image of God is a process which we experience beginning with conversion and lasting until the great eschatological renewal which will bring us into full conformity with the image of God.” Ibid.}
failure to embrace this will mean our lives will not be very much different than those non-Christians around us. Willard sees our intentionality in spiritual transformation as requiring *vision, intent,* and *means* (which he calls “VIM”) to live as disciples.

According to Willard, “The vision that underlies spiritual (trans)formation into Christlikeness is then the vision of life now and forever in the range of God’s *effective will*—that is, *partaking* of the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4; 1 Jn 3:1-2) through a birth ‘from above’ and *participating* by our actions in what God is doing now in our lifetime on earth.” As followers of Jesus, we must be intentional, that is, we must decide to “live in the kingdom as [Jesus] did,” to be a “kingdom person.” When we decide to live as Jesus did, we will find the means to do so, Willard writes, chiefly through God’s word and participation in his community. If these resources are used well, they will help us identify and address “the thoughts, feelings, habits of will, social relations, and bodily inclinations that prevent us from being [more like Christ].”

Willard laments the failure of so many Christians to experience the spiritual transformation that God intends, a reality he blames partially on the failure of the

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41 Dallas Willard writes, “Those who are Christians by profession—and seriously so, we must add—today do not usually have…the [vision, intent and means] that would enable them to routinely progress to the point where what Jesus himself did and taught would be the natural outflow of who they really are ‘on the inside.’” Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 86.

42 Ibid., 87.

43 Ibid. Willard adds this sobering comment: “Perhaps the hardest thing for sincere Christians to come to grips with is the level of real unbelief in their own life: the unformulated skepticism about Jesus that permeates all dimensions of their being and undermines what efforts they do make towards Christlikeness.” Ibid., 88.

44 Ibid., 89.

45 Ibid.
ministers and shepherds of the body to make this a real and consistent priority in the congregation. His observation leads to the last key point in this discussion regarding spiritual transformation: a significant goal of ministers who labor in the body of Christ is to move the members toward maturity in Christ. The Apostle Paul said as much when he addressed the church in Galatia in Galatians 4:19: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you.” Paul described his ministry to the Colossians with a similar focus: “We proclaim him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (Col 1:28).

Paul is illustrating the intentionality of leadership, of disciples making disciples, that Willard often finds lacking. The apostle is teaching and admonishing with the goal of presenting everyone “complete,” or spiritually mature, that is, more like Christ. Congregations of professing disciples who do not get these priorities right are only kidding themselves about what being a disciple is and how it should be lived out.

The Necessity of Community for Discipleship

The disciple who follows Christ daily becomes more like him, but the disciple can only truly follow Christ as part of a community. A community of disciples as revealed in Scripture is much more than just a place of encouragement as described by Hebrews.

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46 Ibid., 244-245.

47 Peter O’Brien writes, “Although he [Paul] is aware of the real progress in faith and love (v 4) the readers have already made, as a true pastor Paul will not be satisfied with anything less than the full Christian maturity of every believer. There are to be no exceptions, since his aim is that each one (panta anthropon) should reach perfection. However, this will be fully realized only on the last day, for only then will they, like the Thessalonian Christians, be completely sanctified (1 Thess 5:23; cf. 3:13).” Peter O’Brien, Word Commentary on Colossians-Philemon (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 90.

48 Grenz, Theology for the Community of God, 652.
It is the place we need to become mature in Christ, experience agape love, and declare our identity as disciples through baptism and communion.

There are many passages in the New Testament that speak to the church community being essential to the process of becoming like Christ. Ephesians 4:1-16 likens Christians to parts of the human body where each part of the body is connected and supportive of the other members (Eph 4:12,15-16), and when only by each member functioning as it has been designed to function will the whole body experience the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). God’s Spirit has given each member of the body particular spiritual gifts that are to be used in the community “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Believers cannot experience the fullness of Christ apart from experiencing him together. Nor can they become mature in Christ—become Christlike—unless each disciple contributes his or her spiritual gifts to the body. Only in the body can disciples get the biblical teaching, pastoral care, and prophetic word for the times that are necessary for living out their calling as disciples (Eph 4:12).

The guiding ethic of the community in Christ is love. Peterson describes the priority of love this way: “We are here to be formed over our lifetimes into a community of the beloved, God’s beloved who are being formed into a people who love God and one another in a way and on the terms in which God loves us. It’s slow work. We are slow learners.”

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49 Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, 312.
Paul explains in very practical ways what love looks like in relationships. It is demonstrated in “humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another” (Eph 4:2) and by “speaking the truth in love” to one another (Eph 4:15).

The new people of God, the Christian community, are marked by two ordinances from Jesus: baptism and the taking of the bread and the cup together. Baptism is the public acknowledgement and acceptance of Jesus’ saving work on the cross and the declaration that one’s life now belongs to Christ and one will now live as a disciple (Eph 4:4-5). Communion is a defining element in Christian community (Acts 2:42). According to Peterson, “The Eucharist is the definitive action practiced in the Christian community that keeps Jesus Christ before us as the Savior of the world and our Savior, and ourselves as sinners in need of being saved. . . . Without the Eucharist it is very easy to drift into a spirituality that is dominated by ideas about Jesus instead of receiving life from Jesus.”

Taking communion together displays equality since we are all in need of Jesus’ death on our behalf. It shows unity by saying we belong to him and to each other. Communion grounds us and centers us upon the person, work, and real presence of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship is lived out in community. It has particular hallmarks formed around the work and presence of Christ signified by baptism and communion, and it is continually formed and empowered by his Spirit characterized by love. It is important to consider, then, how a church can move towards making sure that each disciple is experiencing Christlike community in this way. Bilezikian and many others see small

50 Ibid., 203.

groups as the answer: “The primary application of the biblical mandate for communal life can only take place in a context of closeness and togetherness. Necessarily, this spells ‘small groups.’ . . . Every church that aspires to function as community must make a small group structure available to its constituency.”

He believes that the relationships in a church should look like a family, that is, familiar, engaged with each other, and “sharing the joy and benefits of togetherness.” Within a small group community, disciples can experience the way Christ-formed community is designed to operate according to Ephesians 4 and other similar passages. Spiritual gifts can be used to bless one another. Communion, as the foundation of common identity in Christ and his work, can be celebrated. And the blessings of community in the form of provision—that is, being loved, receiving wisdom, finding healing, prayer, having financial needs met, and the like—can be experienced. The power of small group community is often underestimated. Indeed, Larry Crabb, in his book, *Connecting*, makes the case that so much of the healing and restoration that Christians seek through professional therapists can be accomplished in a loving, small group of believers where authentic relationships are lived, forgiveness is experienced, and people live out their new identity in Christ rather than the old but familiar identity before receiving Christ. Crabb concludes, “Maybe ‘going to church,’ more than anything else, means relating to several people in

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52 Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 54.

53 Ibid.
your life differently. *Maybe the center of Christian community is connecting with a few.*"\(^5^4\)

God has designed us as relational beings, meant to be in relationship with him and with others. The giving and receiving of love is to characterize these relationships. Discipleship apart from this is not possible, and churches must be intentional about creating small group structures to give this spiritual dynamic and praxis its fullest expression. The next chapter details what this looks like in ALCF’s context.

PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY FOR SMALL GROUP DISCIPLESHIP AT ALCF
Jesus said, “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (Jn 15:8). Jesus was clear on what the vision for his disciples was—to bear fruit. The metaphor of fruit bearing is comprehensive; it includes not only the inner transformation of one’s heart and mind so that it reflects more of Jesus and less of the world, but also the influence and transformation of others through the living out of the gospel in word and deed. Disciples who are worthy of Jesus’ name are those who order their lives in relationship with the Master and thus experience greater holiness, love, grace, mercy, and shalom and who demonstrate these same qualities along with sacrifice, compassion, and generosity to those around them. The Apostle Paul calls such people “ambassadors” (2 Cor 5) because their purpose is to encourage others to receive the same reconciliation they received in Christ and thus to join the one kingdom that truly matters because it is God’s and it is eternal.

This chapter begins by presenting key concepts of effective discipleship. It is critical to determine what disciples need to know, what they need to do for themselves, what they need to do for their group members, and the character transformation
(Christlikeness) that results. The second section within the chapter identifies the hybrid model that comprises the strategy of this project. In this model, small groups will be the primary vessel for discipleship and growth, and the larger ALCF congregational life and ministries are complementary to the small group focus.

**Key Concepts in Effective Discipleship**

For a church to be effective as a body of disciples, it is vital to be able to clearly communicate to its members what the essentials of discipleship are. These essentials are called “key concepts” in this project, and they speak to what congregation members need to know about discipleship, the role of spiritual practices in living out one’s discipleship, the role of shepherding and encouragement, and the ultimate transformation of becoming more like Christ in the process.

**What They Need to Know: The Essence of Discipleship**

If fruit bearing is what Jesus required of his disciples, then the goal of small groups must be the same. The real goal of small group discipleship is to produce fruit in the lives of those participating and to see that fruit manifest as well in the community around them. Anything short of this is missing the mark, which is not only a waste of time, but worse because it promotes a falsehood that one can be a genuine disciple without having it change one’s heart, mind, and actions towards God and others.

Thus, as church leaders look at their small group ministry, they need to ask not only, “What do we want people to do in small groups—learn God’s word, pray, share lives, etc.?“ but more importantly, “How do these small group elements truly help participants grow as disciples?” Answering this question well requires the leadership to
create a small group discipleship effort that harnesses the church’s spiritual DNA while moving in the direction of Christ’s leading. For this discipleship effort to be effective, it must be specific and limited to the most essential concepts. These concepts come from asking essential questions according to Andy Stanley and Bill Willits in their book, *Creating Community*: 1) What do we want people to become? 2) What do we want them to do? 3) Where do we want them to go?¹

In keeping with the biblical and theological foundations explored in Chapter 5, those questions are answered as follows: 1) We want them to become mature followers of Jesus Christ; to be Christlike; 2) We want them to go not only to the large Sunday worship gathering but also equally and additionally to a small group community; and 3) In that community we want them to experience and participate in (“to do”) four specific priorities: receiving spiritual care from the leader, discussing Scripture, being salt and light to the local community, and being a loving fellowship of disciples. As believers live out these four priorities in community, they will know and experience the essence of discipleship. While aspects of these four priorities have been a part of Growth Groups since their inception, in this new season, they are better defined and distinctive enough to be presented in four words as Growth Groups 2.0: leader, Bible, light, and fellowship.

The first priority is that each member of a group experiences a measure of spiritual care provided by identified leader or apprentice of the group. A leader is more than someone who administers the group or makes sure that the two hours spent together each week are structured and productive. (Saddleback calls their small group leaders

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¹ Stanley and Willits write, “Answering these questions is vital for gaining clarity of mission and strategy. These are issues all leaders need to be clear on.” Stanley and Willits, *Creating Community*, 78.
“hosts” while ALCF has used the title “facilitator” to describe this role.) By contrast, the leader in GG 2.0 is someone who is not only hosting and facilitating, but more importantly, is actively stewarding each group member’s spiritual growth as a disciple, as both Jesus and later Paul did with their disciples.

Stewarding the spiritual life of group members means making sure that the group is consistently experiencing the four elements of GG 2.0: reading God’s Word together, creating space to be a loving family, finding specific ways to demonstrate Christ’s love in word and deed to the surrounding community, and receiving spiritual care. Developing “faithful people” is also a priority for the leader (2 Tm 2:2). GG 2.0 uses the concept of apprentice leaders to designate those in a group who will later lead their own groups. As apprentices, they are given opportunities to periodically lead the group and meet one-on-one with the leader to talk about ways of providing spiritual care, leading the Bible study portion, or the effort to be salt and light to the community.

The second priority is to read the Bible and seek to follow it. In surveying over two hundred churches over a decade ago, Willow Creek confirmed what Protestant churches throughout the centuries have known: hearing God’s Word and following it is the single most decisive factor to spiritual growth.² In his book, Christianity’s Dangerous Idea, Alister McGrath provides some historical context for the central role of Scripture in the life of the Christian community when he writes, “There is the most

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² Hawkins and Parkinson write, “The Bible is the most powerful catalyst for spiritual growth.” Hawkins and Parkinson, Follow Me, 105.
intimate interconnection between the Bible and Christ in the Protestant tradition. The Bible is the means by which Christ is displayed, proclaimed and manifested.”3

How churches use the Bible within their small group ministries today varies widely. Many churches use a DVD-based teaching series, topical book study, or sermon-based lesson. ALCF has traditionally used the sermon-based curriculum, which focuses on applying the sermon to our lives. Weekly lessons with questions were prepared to help participants look at particular passages and discuss application to one’s life or current circumstance. This approach made sense when ALCF was a “preaching center” because it extended the benefit of the weekend sermon into the lives of church members. The problem with this approach is that it also perpetuated a dependency on “what the preacher said” about a passage. The weekly lesson doubled down on this shortcoming by directing participants’ attention and reflection along certain paths of scriptural interpretation. It was like giving a person a ready-made spiritual meal.

In GG 2.0, the goal is for disciples to encounter the risen Christ through his living Word. John 1:1-2 declares that “the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” To read and meditate on God’s Word in community is to encounter Jesus more fully than we can by ourselves.4 We want to create room and rely upon his Holy Spirit to guide and direct the discussion so that all participants are able “grow in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10), and to “present [themselves] to God as one


4 Tod Bolsinger writes, “Our individualistic use of the Scriptures keeps us from the shared reality of Scripture working in us together. Because this is so, most of us don’t realize that the transforming power of the Spirit works within each believer personally but not independently.” Tod Bolsinger, It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian: How the Community of God Transforms Lives (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 132.
approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tm 2:15).

As participants in GG 2.0 practice reading and discussing Scripture together, the hope is that they will see how the Spirit uses the insights and experiences of all to help them grow into the knowledge of God, and that they will grow in the practice and confidence of “accurately handling the word of truth.” This point is particularly crucial for ALCF since I have seen many Growth Group participants over the years express hesitation and feelings of intimidation when they only have the open Bible to study. There is often the desire to look for an authoritative teacher or go directly to the commentary on the passage rather than cultivate one’s own engagement with Scripture. As GG 2.0 participants learn to read and study the Bible for themselves, they will learn how to feed themselves and others from God’s word rather than be dependent on spiritual food from a particular teacher. Participants will learn as they read a short passage together and then answer open-ended questions asked by the group leader that are observational, interpretational, or application oriented in nature. Observational questions include, “Who is being addressed in this passage? Who is speaking? What is the setting? What is the subject being spoken about?” Interpretive questions have to do with the meaning of the text. For example, if studying the Sermon on the Mount, an interpretive question would be, “What does it mean to be poor in spirit?” Application oriented questions are ones that encourage participants to talk about ways any insights or principles from the passage can be applied to their lives. 

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GG 2.0 will start with groups lead by elders and pastors, all of whom are experienced in leading Bible studies with the kinds of questions described here. As apprentices and participants experience the
The third priority is to be a light to the world. A vital element of what it means to be a disciple is how one engages with the world. Being faithful and true to Christ’s call to be his disciples means that we will be salt and light to the world (Mt 5:16). People cannot live well or for long without salt or light, and disciples are meant to be providers of vital spiritual sustenance signified by these words. This salt and light is revealed by “good deeds” that reveal God at work in the world. These are deeds done out of a desire to demonstrate our love for God by tangible acts of love for others (Mt 10:5-8; 22:37-39). Thus, a small group ministry that aspires to develop effective disciples will focus on practical ways group participants can be salt and light.

At ALCF, being salt and light to the surrounding community has been organized centrally through the church’s outreach ministries and has taken various forms such as a monthly homeless outreach, support for homes for new single moms, a care home for severely disabled children, and various after school tutoring programs for disadvantaged students. ALCF has also participated in a variety of one-day work events like “Beautiful Day,” where churches take on a specific project such as painting school rooms in order to be salt and light in the community.

This strategy has a variety of limitations on the opportunity to be salt and light. First, the central organization of these efforts by ALCF has meant that just a few outreach priorities can get done given the limitations on staff time and attention. Second, these outreach efforts have been geographically limited to the East Palo Alto/Mountain View area, which means that other communities with significant ALCF member populations,

benefit of this open Bible format study, the expectation is that they will be able to use this in their personal studies of Scripture and in any subsequent small groups they may lead. All GG 2.0 leaders will be encouraged to review the passage before their GG 2.0 meeting and to be prepared to provide insights from commentaries on difficult terms, phrases or meanings as necessary.
such as San Jose and the East Bay, are not being reached, and those ALCF members are not having the impact for the gospel that they are capable of. The third limitation is that in the case of all-church efforts like Beautiful Day, there is no real way to build relationships or address the needs of the local community that are ongoing in nature.

In GG 2.0, it is hoped that groups will look around and find a need that the group (or two groups together) can help meet in their geographic area and thus cover more parts of the Bay Area with “salt and light.” Groups should look for needs that are ongoing and where relationships with those in need can be built over time. For example, one Growth Group has helped put on a monthly worship time at a nearby convalescent home. This effort is ongoing (monthly) and relational in that they have built friendships with both staff and residents of the home. As each GG 2.0 group does this, then God’s “salt and light” will be spread farther and faster than it can through the limited ALCF-sponsored outreach ministries. More importantly, GG participants can learn firsthand that discipleship means living out the good news in word and deed.

The fourth priority is fellowship. Fellowship is not just a synonym for a social gathering, but rather in the context of GG 2.0, the hope is to live out the reality of fellowship reflected in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Thus, GG 2.0 groups should be places where the kind of love spoken about in Scripture is experienced—a love from the heart that is marked by care, encouragement, affection, patience, and forgiveness. Experiencing such love is the basis of transformation. “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). In other words, the love we experienced from Christ transforms us so that we can extend that same love to others.
Fellowship that is Christian is also marked by what believers do together to connect with Christ and reinforce their identity in him. Growth Groups have been a place where disciples at ALCF can learn God’s word and pray together; now in GG 2.0 they will also be communities where people can celebrate their identity in Christ through the taking of the bread and the cup together. In GG 2.0, groups are encouraged to do this occasionally but consistently. Doing so would enable group participants to practice the presence of Christ in a new meaningful way and remind them that what forms them together and keeps them growing in love for one another is their common inheritance and identity in Christ. Peterson writes, “The Eucharist is the definitive action practiced in the Christian community that keeps Jesus Christ before us as the Savior of the world and our Savior, and ourselves as sinners in need of being saved.”

When the leader passes out the bread and the cup, he or she should encourage group members to examine their hearts and confess anything not yet dealt with to God and to reconcile any rift with anyone, particularly in the group. In this way, love is promoted and the numerous causes of offense that can appear among group members over time is mitigated.

As GG 2.0 groups practice being a loving fellowship by studying Scripture, praying together, and taking communion, they are able to live out the calling of being one body (2 Cor 11). They live and celebrate what they have in common, and in so doing they transcend the differences inherent in our culture—differences based on age, race, class, gender, spiritual background, and the like. This allows for the authentic multicultural character of ALCF to grow.

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6 Peterson, Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, 203.
What They Need to Do for Themselves: Spiritual Practices

To reclaim the fundamental communal nature of discipleship, as this project desires to do, is not to negate the importance of personal spiritual disciplines or practices. In fact, they are necessary for the disciple to truly become Christlike. Thus, even as GG 2.0 focuses on small groups, it also calls out the need for the leader and the participants to each cultivate a set of personal spiritual practices that will facilitate a deeper individual relationship with Christ. John Ortberg defines spiritual disciplines as “any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.

How many spiritual disciplines are there? As many as we can think of. Certain practices are basic such as solitude, servanthood, confession, and meditation on Scripture. . . . We can turn almost any activity into a ‘training exercise’ for spiritual life.” Dallas Willard adds to our understanding, “A major service of spiritual disciplines . . . is to cause the duplicity and malice that is buried in our will and character to surface and be dealt with.”

If we desire to grow in Christ and to see that growth be a blessing to those we are in community with, we must intentionally deal with matters of the heart that are not yet formed in Christ. It is hard to hide in a small group community, and sooner or later one’s heart will be revealed. GG 2.0 encourages group members to be real about where they are and also to pursue holiness through spiritual practices in order to become more like Christ.

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7 In this project, “spiritual practices” and “spiritual disciplines” are used synonymously. In presenting and promoting the concept to the ALCF community, “spiritual practices” will be used because it is less intimidating and has fewer connotations than “spiritual disciplines.”

8 John Ortberg. The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 48.

9 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 155.
Though spiritual practices can be almost anything, as John Ortberg points out, in GG 2.0 the emphasis is on some of what Richard Foster calls the “interior disciplines,” which are focused on one’s relationship with Christ and include prayer, fasting, meditation, and study.\(^\text{10}\) Specifically, GG 2.0 is calling for leaders and participants to develop the spiritual practices that focus on prayer and the word of God. Rather than trying to define these practices too closely, which would likely be too cumbersome for the GG community, GG 2.0 expands the practice of prayer to include worship and fasting, and it expands the practices around God’s Word to include reading, meditation, and study. Thus we hope to make it easier for people to get started in practicing one or more of these disciplines and to be able to share a common journey with one another in their Growth Groups.

To pray is to come into the presence of God. It is a supremely costly and exalted privilege (e.g., Heb 9:24-28) and so commends a posture of humility and intentionality. It is therefore entirely appropriate to begin the practice of prayer with some form of worship or adoration. Bill Hybels’s book, *Too Busy Not to Pray*, advocates using the ACTS model for prayer (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication).\(^\text{11}\) This is a straightforward, easy-to-understand outline for prayer that leaders and participants can do. There is no reason to offer additional modalities of prayer or instruction at this point. The important point is to set aside consistent time to pray, and the movements in the ACTS model can be helpful. The expectation is that practitioners would see tremendous


tangible blessing in their relationships with God, with others, and in the fruitfulness of their ministries.

Unlike prayer, fasting is a relatively unfamiliar practice to the GG community and has only been encouraged during the “40 days of prayer and consecration” that precede Easter.\(^\text{12}\) GG 2.0 hopes to make the practice of fasting more normative by speaking to its purpose and encouraging small steps in that direction. The purpose of fasting is not so that God would think us more righteous (for it is only Christ’s work on the cross that brings us into righteous standing), but that we would see for a brief time that Christ is the source of all we need. Foster comments, “More than any other single discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.” Fasting brings times of freedom from that which keeps us from greater Christlikeness.

Moving in the direction of fasting begins with small, practical steps. One can start by fasting from food for a time; even just one meal would be a good start. There are ways that this can progress to a twenty-four-hour fast as one gains experience and practical wisdom in how to go about this.\(^\text{13}\) Health precautions and hydration are encouraged as well.

The discipline of engaging with Scripture by reading it, meditating on it, and studying it is indispensable for the disciple of Jesus. It is “a must” discipline for the GG 2.0 leader and participant for the simple reason that, as Mulholland states, “the scripture stands close to the center of this whole process of being conformed to the image of

\(^{12}\) Foster notes with a certain irony and incredulity how little fasting is practiced in the evangelical church today given its prominence in Scripture. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 41.

\(^{13}\) Foster provides practical guidance for progressing through the discipline of fasting. His comments and experience cover fasts from one day to seven days. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 49-53. To encourage fasting in the GG 2.0 context, one day would be sufficient at this point.
Christ. . . . [It] is one of the primary channels through which God encounters us in our grasping, controlling, manipulative mode of existence . . . and whereby God awakens us to the dynamics and possibilities of a new way of being.”

When Willow Creek studied which spiritual practices helped Christians mature, they concluded, “The Bible’s power to advance spiritual growth is unrivaled by anything else we’ve discovered. Reflection on Scripture is by far the most influential spiritual practice.”

GG 2.0 identifies particular ways in which participants and leaders should engage with Scripture. The first way to engage with God’s word is to read it. It is important to have a systematic plan of simply reading the Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. GG 2.0 encourages reading plans in which participants go through the Bible in a year. This means setting aside about twenty minutes a day just to read. There is not really time in this schedule for in-depth study. Those who accomplish this will find themselves growing in knowledge and connection with God, and finding the Holy Spirit bringing to mind recent passages with which they can encourage others.

The second way to engage with God’s word is to meditate on it. In my experience as the GG ministry leader, this discipline is commonly overlooked by many in their rush to answer the questions that come with a weekly curriculum, but meditation is essential for formation as a disciple. Foster points out that the most influential leaders in the church through the centuries saw the “meditatio Scripturarum . . . as the normal foundation of the interior life.”

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14 Mulholland, Shaped by the Word, 28.

15 Hawkins and Parkinson, Follow Me, 105-106.

16 Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 26.
and personalizing of the passage [so that] the written Word becomes a living word addressed to you.”

GG 2.0 encourages meditation on Scripture by encouraging participants to see themselves in the passage. First, the reader should note what the passage is saying (and not saying) and then visualize, as Ignatius of Loyola advocated, the scene that it presents.

For example, as Henri Nouwen does in his book on the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), the reader should see himself or herself in each of the roles presented: as the prodigal son, then as the father, and finally as the older brother. Seeing oneself in each place will reveal things that God wants to deal with or encourage.

The third way of engaging with Scripture is through study. This is the more exegetical approach described by Peterson as coming to the biblical text with “focused attention, asking questions, sorting through possible meanings. Exegesis is rigorous, disciplined, intellectual work. It rarely feels ‘spiritual.’” GG 2.0 encourages leaders to look at the passage this way first, without the benefit of a commentary, because using a commentary in the initial stages will dull the development of exegetical thinking. Certain books are encouraged, like Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart’s How to Read the Bible for

17 Ibid.

18 Foster writes, “Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises constantly encouraged his readers to visualize the Gospel stories.” Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 22.


20 Eugene Peterson, Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 50.
Engaging with Scripture in these ways has an exponential effect on the Christlike growth of the individual and thus the community. At a minimum, GG 2.0 commends consistent reading of Scripture according to an organized plan. Meditating and studying passages of Scripture is left to the individual as the Holy Spirit draws one’s attention and heart to a particular passage.

What They Need to Do for Their Group Members: Shepherd and Encourage

While both GG leaders and participants need to understand the essence of discipleship and develop spiritual practices, it is particularly the leader who is responsible for providing a measure of spiritual care for the participants in the group. The practice of spiritual care envisioned here is encompassed by the ideas of shepherding and encouragement as rooted in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 when Paul writes, “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”

To shepherd participants in the GG 2.0 context is to help move them in the direction of God, to “[urge them] to live lives worthy of God” as representatives of his kingdom and beneficiaries of his promise of the glory of being found in Christ and like Christ. This is a level of spiritual leadership that is characterized by helping participants

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move “on to God’s agenda” and away from their own or the world’s priorities.\textsuperscript{22} Like a shepherd in Bible times who led the flock to green pastures and protected them from harm, so leaders are to shepherd the participants by connecting them with spiritual nourishment and watching out for those straying into dangerous areas of thought, feeling, or action. In GG 2.0, this is done in two ways: 1) during the weekly group gathering; and 2) in one-on-one meetings that the leader has with members of the group.

The first component of shepherding is leading the weekly group gathering. The leader is responsible for this meeting, which involves not only the logistics of confirming time and place of meeting, but more importantly moving through the GG 2.0 elements during the gathering. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, in their excellent guide for small group leaders, call this, “facilitating process.”\textsuperscript{23} The Holy Spirit already has the spiritual agenda for the meeting; the leader’s role is to ensure that the group has time together to study God’s word, share lives (usually in the form of prayer requests), and to pray together. There is also the expectation that the group will have periodic discussions about how best to reach out to the surrounding community and about what things to do together (e. g., meals together, communion, community outreach, day hikes) to be salt and light to others and to build the group into a loving family. The leader should ensure that the apprentice or apprentices in the group get opportunities to lead a meeting, an outreach endeavor, and communion.

\textsuperscript{22} Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby write, “The ultimate goal of spiritual leadership is . . . to take . . . people from where they are to where God wants them to be. God’s primary concern for all people is not results, but relationship.” Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, \textit{Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God’s Agenda} (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 127.

\textsuperscript{23} Henry Cloud and John Townsend, \textit{Making Small Groups Work: What Every Small Group Leader Needs to Know} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 147.
Both my experience in leading the GG ministry as well as numerous books on the subject confirm that leading a small group is more art than science for the simple reason that it is shepherding people with all their varied perspectives, concerns, and patterns of relating. Consequently, being an effective leader means learning about the people in the group and about how to develop an environment for spiritual growth. Cloud and Townsend’s book provides an effective catalogue of skills that the leader should develop, such as listening, confronting, providing emotional safety for group members, asking clarifying questions, and the like. Most importantly, these authors recommend that the leader be authoritative without being authoritarian; this means that the leader should be a person with knowledge about God’s word and leading people (like Jesus), but not someone who is lording it over the group members (like the Pharisees).

The second component of shepherding involves one-on-one meetings. While participating in a small group is essential for becoming spiritually mature, there are also issues, challenges, and concerns in each person’s life that are more appropriate for a one-on-one discussion with a spiritual leader. Many churches, including ALCF prior to its initiation of GG 2.0, typically wait for the church member to initiate a discussion on these topics. Far too often, the request is coming after the person has suffered a setback or gotten stuck rather than before. In GG 2.0, the aim is to provide proactive spiritual care, and therefore the leader is responsible for meeting with each group participant approximately once a month to build a spiritual friendship, know how to pray more

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24 For example, Scazzero observes that when people are seated around a table (or in a Growth Group), there are more than just those people in the room. Also in the room are an array of family influences and perceptions that shape and influence the relational and discussion dynamics. Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, 104-105.

deeply for the person, and provide an opportunity to talk about any spiritual or life priorities or concerns that the person has. In coed groups, a male leader will meet with the men and a female leader will meet with the women.26

Providing proactive spiritual care is somewhat “outside the box” for the ALCF community. Some members of the congregation have come from churches or heard about churches with authoritarian shepherding, so care needs to be taken so that this shepherding and encouragement reflects the heart of parental love in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11-12 that motivates it. When leaders meet with a member of the group, they should be mindful that the goal is not to solve a problem or be “Dr. Phil,” but to connect that member with what Christ is doing in the member’s life.27 As Paul instructed Timothy, so leaders should look to “warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thes 5:14). As leaders do this over time with members, they are living out the priority of disciples making disciples. They are demonstrating that a church does not need to have “paid staff” to provide regular opportunities to encourage, guide, and help people grow, and they are helping to live out the “priesthood of all believers” based on our calling in 1 Peter 2:9.

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26 Most coed groups are currently led by men. If the group does not have a woman apprentice leader who could meet with the women of the group, then in some cases the leader’s wife would be a good provider of shepherding and encouragement.

27 Paul Tripp writes, “Personal ministry is not about always knowing what to say. It is not about fixing everything in sight that is broken. Personal ministry is about connecting people with Christ so that they are able to think as he would have them think, desire what he says is best, and do what he calls them to do even if their circumstances never get ‘fixed.’” Paul Tripp, Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 184. Tripp’s book offers many helpful insights about how to shepherd and encourage.
What They Should Become: Christlike

The church that is focused on making disciples needs to be clear about what the essence of discipleship is, and that it can only be fully experienced in community, most effectively in small group community. It needs to commend the key spiritual disciplines to every disciple, as these will help them to become mature. This maturity will prompt them to build up one another in the small group by being shepherds, encouragers, and good spiritual friends. Leaders in particular need to model this.

The church that is wise in living out its calling to discipleship will also keep the hope of becoming more like Christ at the front and center of the congregation and their small groups. Discipleship is a journey of transformation—as we follow Christ, we are transformed from the self-centered habits, idolatries, and sin patterns to the God-centered, love-based heart and acts of kindness, mercy, care, and generosity towards God’s good creation.28 The Apostle Paul describes this journey as “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). This truth has immense power to encourage and sustain today’s disciples as they follow Christ’s leading through the challenges, setbacks, disagreements, disparagements, and persecutions from those hostile to Jesus and his kingdom. Indeed, Paul wrote this verse to encourage the Corinthian saints to be bold in being ministers of the gospel because they have the hope of being transformed into Christ’s likeness (2 Cor 3:12). This hope animated and motivated Paul throughout his ministry (Phil 3:7-11).

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28 The Apostle Paul uses various metaphors in his epistles to describe this transformation, i.e. “old self . . . new self” in Ephesians 4:22, 24, Colossians 3:9-10; “old [creation] . . . new creation” in 2 Corinthians 5:17.
Sadly, many churches either through ignorance or neglect fail to prioritize this hope of transformation for their members. Sometimes this is because pulpits are focused on “practical steps” Christians are to do rather than helping them become, and other times it can be because of what Willard calls “distractions,” where churches get distracted by temporal things that deal with “church structure and life . . . style of music, order of worship, or times of church gatherings.”

In GG 2.0, the hope and eventuality of becoming like Christ should be taught to the leaders and preached about to the congregation. Willard advocates that “spiritual formation in Christlikeness [be] the exclusive primary goal of the local congregation [emphasis in original].” He provides a picture of what this means corporately by referring to Ephesians 4:17-6:24, in which “the ones described are the ones in whom spiritual formation in Christlikeness has done and is doing its steady, ongoing work. They are the emerging and the mature children of light, and they ‘shine like lights’ in a darkened world.”

Christlikeness is also meant to be reflected by individuals. Mulholland offers this description of the process of personal transformation: “God seeks to create in us a whole new structure of habits, attitudes, and perceptions of dynamics of personal and corporate relationships; of patterns of reaction and response to the world. This new structure is one of increasing Christlikeness. God is seeking to break the crust.” How do we know that God is breaking the crust? When our lives reflect and live out love of God and love for

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29 Willard, Renovation of the Heart, 235.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 234.
32 Mulholland, Shaped by the Word, 113.
others in increasing measure.\textsuperscript{33} This is demonstrated in countless ways when, for example, we are responding with mercy rather than judgment, when we put the interests of others above our own, when we take more joy in giving rather than receiving, and when we see hardships and setbacks as part of God’s love and plan rather than as a sign that God cannot be fully trusted. We may be able to manifest these responses outwardly as an act of the will from time to time, but they only become part of our life and character when they originate from a changed heart.\textsuperscript{34} And we know our heart is changing when it is drawing closer to Jesus in relationship and thus to others in love. The signs of a changed heart are the fruit of the Spirit, the growing patience and joy that we and others notice in us, the peace amidst challenging times and circumstances, the kindness shown to others, particularly when undeserved, and the self-control practiced amongst the enticements of the world out of reverence for God, desire to live a holy life, and the certain knowledge that no matter what comes at us in this life, it cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39).

Presenting and continually affirming the hope and call of Christlikeness to the ALCF congregation as GG 2.0 is introduced and commenced will take thought and planning. It will require that the leaders discuss what this means, the importance of modeling it, and regular references to it from the various preachers in the pulpit. It needs to be a key feature of the GG 2.0 training. Given ALCF’s holiness roots, it will be

\textsuperscript{33} Both Hawkins, Parkinson and Ortberg make the point that visible Christlikeness is manifest in living out Matthew 22:37-39. Hawkins and Parkinson, \textit{Follow Me}, 106; Ortberg, \textit{The Life You’ve Always Wanted}, 32.

\textsuperscript{34} Willard, Ortberg, and Tripp agree that, as Tripp states, “The heart is the target.” Willard, \textit{Renovation of the Heart}, 29-30; Ortberg, \textit{The Life You’ve Always Wanted}, 47-49; Tripp, \textit{Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands}, 59-60.
important to speak to spiritual transformation in terms of growing in holiness without making it into a kind of legalism or “holier than thou” dynamic. This can happen as the GG 2.0 leaders encourage the practice of personal spiritual disciplines, making daily decisions to live for Christ and to prioritize regular participation in small group community and the larger ALCF congregation.

**Hybrid Model**

As ALCF seeks to develop disciples, it is important to note the hybrid nature of the project’s implementation, that is, how the nature of the church-wide ministries work together with the small groups. The reality is that even churches that would consider their discipleship and community to be primarily small-group based (such as North Coast, Saddleback, and Willow Creek, who would describe themselves as churches “of small groups” rather than churches “with small groups”) have substantial church-wide ministries that include robust weekend worship experiences, active large group affinity gatherings, and impactful community outreach efforts. So, even as ALCF is communicating the small-group essence of discipleship through GG 2.0 and exhorting people to participate, it still needs to invest in its church-wide ministry areas.

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35 The church-wide ministries are generally focused in one of three areas: worship services (including all ministries that operate within the weekend worship services, such as ushers, greeters, hospitality, visual media, and the like); outreach ministries (ministries focused on being salt and light to the local and global world by providing financial and people resources, including a monthly homeless ministry, after-school programs for a local school, jail visitation, convalescent home ministry, and supporting a group home for single moms); and affinity ministries (large group gatherings based on age and stage categories that meet for fellowship and teaching).
The Larger ALCF Body Is Complementary to the Small Group Focus

As ALCF encourages people to greater discipleship through small groups, it also needs to be clear about the role that the larger ALCF body and gatherings continue to play. GG 2.0 groups may be the prototype of house churches at some later date, but ALCF’s mission to the Bay Area and its spiritual care of the congregation continues to need the large gathering, especially on Sundays, for a variety of reasons. These include being a place for worship, connection, community, and congregation.

The most immediate reason why the larger group is critical is that with our black church roots and megachurch past, worship has always been a significant part of our church life. It is virtually inconceivable for many at ALCF to hold a Sunday gathering and not have an extended time of worship as a full multicultural and intergenerational church body. Weekly times of worship together allow us to glorify God through familiar praise songs and precious hymns and be reminded of what he has built and is building that is called ALCF.

The second reason is connection. ALCF serves a vital role for those exploring a relationship with Jesus or recovering from hurtful or even abusive experiences from other churches. The large size of the sanctuary at 1700 seats affords the curious, the seekers, and the hurting ample space to be on their own to the extent that they wish. Over time, such people often connect with someone from ALCF who reaches out to them, talks to them at the coffee bar, or offers prayer as appropriate. It is not uncommon to hear stories from active members of ALCF who describe this as the reason for their first attending. Osborne points to the reason for ALCF’s experience: “For the average non-Christian in America, it’s far more threatening to walk into a small group than . . . a worship service
[where] they know they can sit in the back (on the aisle) and quickly leave if things get out of hand.”

The third reason why the larger group is important is that it is a place for the community. As described above, ALCF is engaged in various outreach efforts to the surrounding community. Ministries like feeding a large number of people who are homeless and supporting after-school programs are better resourced through the large church gathering, as they require a large number of volunteers as well as significant space. ALCF’s building also plays a role in serving the community by providing meeting space and a venue for various conferences and community events.

Finally, the large group gathering is an important place for the congregation. Not all regular attenders of ALCF will find GG 2.0 groups to be the next step they take in the discipleship journey. For many, the age and stage affinity ministries, such as the women’s fellowship, singles’ fellowship, or seniors’ fellowship, will be the preferred next step, with their topical teaching, larger fellowship gatherings, and more casual commitment dynamics. Making gradual changes is the better way towards becoming a church of small groups.

Gradual change can begin initially by incorporating some of the GG 2.0 elements into the life of the affinity communities. This might mean, for example, having the larger community gathering watch some DVD-based teaching and then separate into small groups around the room or at tables to talk about application and pray together. Table leaders could be sought after, interviewed, and appointed. Apprentice table leaders could

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36 Larry Osborne, Sticky Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 143-144.

37 Donahue and Robinson devote a whole chapter to the importance and practicalities of phasing in small groups into a church. Donahue and Robinson, Building a Church of Small Groups, 195-205.
likewise be recruited. An affinity ministry could also be a light in the local community by looking for ways to reach out and organizing a specific effort and volunteers accordingly.

Finally, the larger body is an important place for ALCF’s children and youth ministries. Having the facilities and the classroom volunteers to help teach and disciple children and young people in age-appropriate ways is a significant step in the development of young disciples. These ministries should also show parents how they can follow up on teaching and modeling biblical truths to their children on an ongoing basis.

### Conclusion

The move to GG 2.0 small groups as the centerpiece of ALCF’s discipleship efforts makes the most sense in living out our mandate to go and make disciples. It is modeled to start with the church elders and pastors, but it relies on lay leaders to lead additional groups and multiply throughout the congregation over time. Discipleship is done most effectively in small group community and also enhanced by the practice of personal spiritual disciplines. The disciple who is faithful in these endeavors will bear fruit and grow in Christlikeness. There is definitely a role that the larger church gathering plays in discipleship, and both its role and that of the small groups need to be clearly communicated so that ALCF members understand the call to discipleship through small groups and the path that is available to get there. Chapter 7 describes how these priorities were piloted and then rolled out throughout the church and what was learned along the way.
CHAPTER 7
IMPLEMENTING SMALL GROUP DISCIPLESHIP

The direction of becoming a discipleship center and how to accomplish this through small groups was discussed at various elder and pastor meetings in the fall of 2014. By January 2015, a discipleship plan known as “GG 2.0” was introduced to the congregation. The plan called for a pilot phase (Phase One) where groups led by church leaders (a pastor or elder) would be pioneering the GG 2.0 format. The pilot groups served as a prototype and “road test” for how small groups could be spiritually effective for developing disciples. The pilot group experience also was meant to establish a “common practice” of leadership and support, which could be passed on to the new lay leaders.

Phase Two, which would start shortly after the evaluation of Phase One, focused on the wider launch of new small groups. These were led by lay members of the congregation who had gone through small group leader training or had apprenticed in a pilot group. It also was the time in which current Growth Groups could “migrate” to the GG 2.0 format. Throughout these two phases, the large church continued to operate its churchwide ministries focused on worship, outreach, and affinity fellowships. These
ministries were meant to complement the discipleship efforts of GG 2.0, which is why this became known as the hybrid model. Assessment of the large church contribution to the small group-based discipleship is part of the evaluation of Phase Two.

**Phase One: Pilot Small Groups Led by Elders and Pastors**

Phase One was intentionally designed to be led by the church leadership of elders and pastors for three reasons. The first reason was to ensure that the church leaders became experienced in and contributed to the development of discipleship through small groups. The second reason was to have them participate in developing the leadership practice so that they could encourage and shepherd other leaders later. Finally, elder/pastor-led groups were important because key ministries without key leaders participating is a quick path to seeing ministries stagnate and eventually collapse.

The Pilot Group phase was designed to run fourteen weeks from mid-February to the end of May, with a break for Easter. The plan encompassed various components, including curriculum, leaders’ training, communication, prayer, and evaluation (see Appendix B). Getting the GG 2.0 groups started while leader training was going on was intentional. There was a bias and need for getting started while the motivation was there and because the basic elements of GG 2.0 and the objectives of Phase One had been sufficiently discussed and refined. Lessons would be learned along the way and adjustments could be made as necessary before Phase Two.

**Objectives of the Pilot Group**

The objectives of the pilot group in Phase One were threefold. First, the group should experience the elements of discipleship as can only be done by being together in
small group community. Second, apprentice leaders should be identified and developed in this pilot phase. Third, a common leadership practice should emerge as each pastor or elder leading a group learns lessons about leading and shares them with other leaders in the pilot group.

The first objective was for the members of the pilot group to experience the four elements of discipleship—leader, Bible, light, and fellowship—in small group community. The leader of the group was responsible for weekly meetings as a small group in which the four elements of the discipleship experience were presented and lived out. The leader was to present the four elements to the group in the initial meetings in such a way that they were understood and progress could be measured.

The leader element meant that each pilot group was led by an elder or pastor who not only led the weekly group, but also provided a measure of spiritual care based on 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11-12 for each member of the group through intercessory prayer and through monthly, one-on-one meetings. It was measurable in the sense that leaders should be meeting at least monthly with each person in the GG. If the group was coed, then the leader should find a mature woman who could meet with the other women in the group.

The Bible element meant that the group study and discussion time were based on reading a passage of Scripture together. In the pilot group, there was no DVD study, topical book, or sermon-based lesson—just the open word of God. To make this point clear, it was called the “Open Bible Format.” The expectation was that the group would look at a section or book of Scripture by reading and discussing five to seven verses at a time, and in doing so should be able to move through a passage or book of the Bible in the fourteen weeks of the pilot group. With this design, steady progress was quite
measurable, and focusing on the same passage of Scripture allowed pilot group leaders to learn from one another’s experiences in leading this study.

The element of light, based on Matthew 5:14-16, means that each pilot group would look for an opportunity to present the loving Lord Jesus Christ in deed to those in their local community. The types of outreach work that groups could do varied widely. Different options were given, such as helping an older person living alone by doing household chores, driving them to appointments, or helping with the garden. Another option that was given was helping staff a local food distribution agency that helps the hungry and food insecure. The goal was to find something ongoing and relational. These characteristics stand in contrast to works that are primarily job-oriented, like helping to paint or renovate classrooms at the local school on a Saturday. In the pilot phase, the goal was for each group to identify a work in which they could be an ongoing light to some part of the local community and to complete their first act in that process.

The element of fellowship based on Acts 2:42 was designed to move the Growth Group beyond the enjoyment of being together socially and into the common identity as a people of God and known by their love for one another (Jn 13:35). This means that in addition to social gatherings, there would also be times to practice the sacrament of communion. The leader was responsible for this and for ushering people into a time of reflection and repentance prior to the taking of the bread and the cup. Each group was expected to do this monthly. Participants’ love for one another should be on display and

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1 It should be noted that works that are singular in nature, like school renovation, have their place in being God’s light to the community and in helping develop disciples. In GG2.0, there is an opportunity to do works that cannot be done in a single day and that require the building up of relationships over time to be effective. Oftentimes in presenting Christ, believers have to demonstrate what life in Christ is before they have earned the right to talk about what it is.
growing. This is more felt than quantified but can be seen when people are feeling safe in one another’s company, sharing more, and asking prayer for deeper issues and personal concerns.

The second objective of the pilot group was to develop apprentice leaders. A key feature of GG 2.0 is the priority of disciples making disciples. This value is formalized in the practice of raising up apprentice leaders in each of the pilot groups. An initial number of apprentice leaders was chosen after discussions among the elders and pastors. The goal was to have two apprentices per pilot group with the idea that these apprentices would be the leaders of new groups following the conclusion of the pilot group phase. The leadership team was open to the idea that during the pilot group, additional apprentice leaders might be identified and developed within each group.

Apprentice leaders can be men or women who believe that God is moving them to lead a group (or are at least open to the prospect) and are already committed to growing in maturity in Christ (Col 1:28; Jas 1:4). On the practical side, they need their schedules free enough to participate in the group initially and have time to lead a group for at least a year afterwards. In addition, they need to attend the leaders’ training sessions and have consistent meetings with the GG leader for training, coaching, and support (2 Tm 1:13-14). This feedback from the leader will come in response to the occasional opportunities the apprentice will have to lead the group, the Bible study, or the time of communion.

The third objective of the pilot group was for members to develop common leadership practice. The GG 2.0 Pilot Group Phase Plan (see Appendix B) called for biweekly meetings with the elders and pastors to talk about their experience as pilot group leaders and identify what was working well, what was not, and what adjustments
should be made. The elders and pastors leading pilot groups acted as a leadership cohort. This discussion was in addition to the regular agenda for the biweekly pastors and elders meetings, so time was limited.

Group Leaders’ Training Plan

The training for the group leaders centered on a two-part plan. The first part took place over the course of seven weeks and encompassed both spiritual and practical aspects of leading a group. Francis Chan led these sessions. The second part began after a break for Easter, and took place over the course of four weeks. These sessions were taught by an elder or pastor.

Francis Chan’s portion of the training was designed to develop the heart, character, and skills of an effective leader (see Appendix C). Thus, it focused on passages of Scripture that speak to these issues. It was heavier on principles and lighter on practicalities and detail. Each session was one hour, with forty-five minutes of teaching/preaching followed by fifteen minutes of question and answer time. Each week, a one-page handout based on the topic was shared. The class lecture was videotaped and posted on an internal website for further review. The expectation was that after each training session, leaders would have one or two actions they could take to develop themselves or their groups. In the interest of building a leadership culture around this new discipleship model, we opened up the training to all current leaders and potential leaders—a class that eventually included about eighty people.

The second part of the training, after the Easter break, focused on the practicalities of small group leadership. These sessions included such topics as
appreciating differences among group members, principles for effective Bible study, and the art of spiritual care for the group (see Appendix D). The final training focused on self-care for leaders so that they could be effective throughout the weeks and months they would be leading the group.

Expectations, Curriculum, and Leadership

In order for the pilot phase to get off to a good start and run well, it was important to be clear about the expectations for those participating. Consequently, we provided some specifics called “GG 2.0 Responsibilities” (see Appendix E) for the leader, the apprentices, and the participants, with the understanding that these would be shared at the first meeting of the group and reinforced as needed over the course of the pilot phase. As each person in the group understood what the expectations and roles were, acceptance and active participation would be more easily gained. This was particularly important in terms of spiritual care, since that was a new element to any participant from previous Growth Groups.

Another important aspect was curriculum. During the pilot phase, each of the groups was encouraged to study the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to 7 because it is almost exclusively composed of Jesus’ words (“red letters”), and its subject is foundational to discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount also enables leaders to better process how the participants are adapting to the Open Bible Format curriculum. Adjustments would be made in real time as necessary to help participants (or leaders) become more comfortable with reflecting on and discussing Scripture without the comfort and benefit of a commentary or DVD.
Finally, leadership during the pilot phase was critical. It was important for the elders and pastors to lead their groups with clarity, consistency, and humility. Priority was given to getting the apprentice leaders in the group ready to lead their own groups in about six months. This meant giving apprentices the opportunity to lead the Bible study on specific weeks and modeling good one-on-one spiritual care through encouragement and shepherding. In the discussion times, leaders modeled a facilitation of conversation, trusting that the Holy Spirit was accomplishing his purposes without the need for the leader to lecture or go into a mini-sermon mode. In like fashion, when the leaders met one-on-one with participants, their goal was to provide care, insight, and prayer that the Holy Spirit could use to move the receiver closer to Christ in heart, word, and deed. The leader was not leading through authority but through gentleness and humility. The hope was that if leadership of the pilot groups would unfold according to these priorities, and if the apprentices would catch hold of this and model it when they became leaders, then in just three generations of leadership, the whole of ALCF would be growing well as disciples through small groups.2

Assessment of the Pilot Group

The pilot group phase began February 2015 and was extended into June of 2015 owing to the late start of some of the groups. In the end, there were five pilot groups out of a possible ten. Two of the groups were led by pastors and the other three by elders.

2 Generational growth: Start with 10 leaders of elders and pastors with 2 apprentices each (apprentices serve six to twelve months.) First generation: Elders and pastors lead: 10 leaders covering 100 ALCF people in GGs including 20 apprentices. Second generation: 20 apprentices now lead their own groups along with 10 elders and pastors. So 30 leaders covering 300 ALCF people including 40 new apprentices. Third generation: 40 “second generation” apprentices now lead their groups along with 40 elders, pastors and “first generation” apprentices thus covering 800 ALCF people. Outcome: The majority of ALCF is growing as disciples through small groups within three years.
Those elders and pastors who did not lead groups during this phase had various reasons for not doing so, including health issues, job travel, and other non-GG ministry commitments that kept their plates full. Four of the five groups (80 percent) were new, and the fifth group had been meeting for at least two years prior. Each group averaged two apprentices and a total of ten people. Of the total population of fifty members in the GG 2.0 pilot phase, roughly half of those had not been in an ALCF group for at least three years previously, if ever. Also during this time, Francis Chan, who had been a major advocate for this effort, left his active role on the board just after Easter.

Post-Pilot Assessment

The post-pilot assessment was done in the summer of 2015 through a survey that was sent to the pilot group leaders (see Pilot Group Survey, Appendix F). I also held personal interviews with the leaders, some apprentices, and some participants, which proved vital given the poor response rate of surveys returned. The survey was focused mainly on how the four elements of GG 2.0 were experienced by the group. The findings

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3 Leaders were encouraged to forward these surveys to their GG 2.0 participants, but historically participants’ responses to such requests from previous GG surveys have met with minimal support. The response rate by participants to requests from their pilot group leaders was no exception to this trend. This is due in part to the fact that ALCF has not cultivated an evaluation or feedback culture in its ministry leaders or with its volunteers, and group members are reluctant to offer any critical comments. In addition, the survey was designed more to capture qualitative rather than quantitative information since the small number of pilot groups would make quantitative data potentially less significant for future planning, and because qualitative data was seen as of greater help in making adjustments for the Phase Two rollout. It should be noted that in light of the Phase One assessment experience and because of the greater number of groups participating in Phase Two some changes were made prior to assessing Phase Two: 1) an online survey service with a customized questionnaire (Appendix G) was used in order to facilitate the invitation and response tracking process; and, 2) only GG 2.0 leaders, not participants, were asked to respond. This made data capture uniform and the analysis and presentation of results easier.
are summarized below in terms of the four elements of discipleship: Bible, light, fellowship, and spiritual care (leader).  

In relation to the first element of discipleship, the Bible, all four of the new groups, (representing 80 percent of the total) used the Matthew 5-7 Sermon on the Mount passages as the basis of their study time together. Universally, the respondents felt that group members were blessed and grew by reading the text for themselves. Reading the passage as a group provided more insights and ways to apply the principles than people would ordinarily discover on their own. Even with this benefit, there was a desire to have some questions to focus the group’s attention on a given passage. To simply read a passage without a specific question in mind was an adjustment for leaders as well as participants.

In terms of the second element of discipleship, light, the goal was for groups to establish an outreach to a person or group in their local community. The survey identified three stages in making progress towards this goal: a) “We discussed specific projects”; b) “We organized and carried out an initial effort”; and c) “We have an ongoing outreach relationship that we’ve established and continued to support.” Four out of five (80 percent) of the pilot groups completed the first step of discussing projects, while the fifth group had already been serving once a month at a local convalescent home. The reasons most groups gave for not getting past the discussion phase was that it

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4 For the purposes of the survey, we changed the name of the leader element to its functional goal—spiritual care—as it made more sense following Phase One for both the pilot group leaders and their participants to think in these terms. When GG 2.0 was introduced to the congregation before the pilot group phase, the term “leader” was intentionally used for this topic of spiritual care because it was important to be clear that it was the leader’s responsibility to provide a measure of care, and that the nature of leading a group had changed from only being a facilitator.
takes time to find and cultivate a local outreach work. Since most group members work, it meant that the outreach would typically have to be done on a weeknight or weekend.

The third element of discipleship, fellowship, was assessed as well with particular attention paid to the practice of communion. Only one of the five groups reported having communion. All groups said their fellowship had grown deeply during this time, primarily due to sharing and support. Groups were encouraged to have participants share personal testimonies in the early weeks of the group, and because there were significant life issues for some members, such as serious illness and job insecurity, there was opportunity for people to grow closer by supporting these individuals.

In relation to the fourth element of discipleship, spiritual care (leader), this topic in the survey focused on the spiritual care that the leader was to provide participants in the group, starting with the apprentices. All of the pilot group leaders, who were male, connected one-on-one with the male members of the group. Three of the five leaders (representing 60 percent) made an effort to have in-person meetings with each man in the group (which was the intention), while the other two leaders (40 percent) met with a few of the men or connected via text during the week (which was not the intention). In terms of providing one-on-one care for the women in the group, in two of the five groups (40 percent), the group leader’s wife met with each of the women in person. The remaining three groups (60 percent) did not have a woman “co-leader” who was available to do this. Consequently, the default was for the leader to encourage the women in the group to meet together outside the group time, either all together or one on one, as desired. Four of the five leaders (80 percent) said they prayed during the week for the people in their groups. All of the leaders provided at least one opportunity for their apprentices to lead.
Though some of the execution of the goals was uneven among the groups, the group leaders were consistently lauded by the participants I spoke with. Participants, particularly in the new groups, commented on the level of close fellowship, engaging Bible study, or shepherding care and prayer that the leader provided.

Discerning a Common Leadership Practice for Leading Groups

The pilot phase assessment was also significant in that it helped to define a common leadership practice. Three aspects of leadership went well and were refined in the pilot phase: the necessity of organization and execution, the importance of training, and the priority of shepherding. The assessment also made it clear that certain common leadership practices were less successful or needed greater attention, including the ideal method for studying Scripture, how to be light in one’s community, and the reluctance to practice communion occasionally in their small groups.

First, the necessity of organization and execution was highlighted by the pilot phase. All leaders were effective in getting their groups organized and in following the prescribed Bible teaching. They also cultivated the leadership and spiritual development of their apprentices by giving them opportunities to lead the group, and they supported them through one-on-one meetings.

Second, the importance of training was also clarified. Leaders invested in their own personal and spiritual development by participating in the group leaders’ training sessions. Attendance at the weekly training sessions done by Francis Chan was very consistent, averaging 100 attendees, thus demonstrating that the leaders involved had
made it a priority. This training was attended by the pilot group leaders and their apprentices as well as many of the other elders, pastors, and affinity leaders who were not leading a pilot group. In the second part of the group leaders’ training, pilot group leaders took turns leading the training and thus modeled leadership to those in attendance. The attendance at this second part of the training dropped by about 65 percent, owing to the fact that Francis Chan was not teaching and the subject matter was more practical and familiar than foundational.

Third, the priority of shepherding was also a highlight of the pilot phase. Each leader prioritized the spiritual care and shepherding of the members in the group. This had an outsized impact on the members of the group in terms of seeing God work in their lives and their feeling cared for. The format of one-on-one meetings and praying for the people in the group provided a template for spiritual care to take place. Leaders adapted this template according to the needs of the individuals and the leader’s own time constraints.

There are various leadership practices that did not get discussed or refined during the pilot phase. Chief among these was the aspect of helping people grow in their understanding and study of Scripture. The pilot phase did not clarify what members of ALCF ought to know and practice in terms of reading and meditating on Scripture. Another fruitful topic would have been to explore ways in which leaders can encourage and model being light in our local communities. It is clear from the survey results that this proved a bigger challenge than anticipated. One roadblock to some of these clarifying questions is that the anticipated bi-weekly meetings with elders and pastors

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5 As the organizer of the training, the author took a count at the beginning of each class.
often did not take place, and when they did, there was no room in the agenda for building common leadership practices.

**Lessons Learned and Adjustments Made**

Many lessons were learned during the pilot phase. The biggest lesson was a confirmation that small group-based discipleship is the most effective way to become more like Christ. There were numerous testimonies to the depth of relationship experienced in the group through times of fellowship and communion—often from long-time ALCF members who had not participated in a small group before. This “wonderful discovery” was a product of the groups focusing on the four elements of the GG 2.0 format. Participants I spoke with expressed appreciation for their leaders because of the spiritual care that was provided through prayer, one-on-one time, and faithful leading of the group. These comments confirmed what Francis Chan said in his training, “You can have the worst plan and the godly leader will succeed.”

Another lesson was that flexibility is critical in implementation. Leaders were free to adapt the GG 2.0 elements to their particular group situation. Thus, there were variances in terms of frequency of meeting, whether or not to incorporate children in some part of the GG time, and how to lead the Bible study portion. Most groups met weekly, though one meet biweekly because of schedule. Some groups met at the same home while others rotated. Most groups did not include children in their time together, but one did and reported much blessing as a result.6 The way leaders handled the Bible

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6 One pilot leader wrote, “There is an openness and a sense of safety that has knitted the group; people share heart-felt issues . . . and it stimulates more sharing. During the summer months, the children came to some meetings and to hear how the group has impacted them has been great! Prayer has also brought us together.” This quote was a response to the GG 2.0 Pilot Group Survey (Appendix F), question
study time varied as well. Some prepared questions and used commentaries for difficult passages, while others just had the Bible open and let the Spirit lead.

The importance of building up leaders was also a crucial lesson learned. The structure of having apprentice leaders in the small groups and participating in training was significant for the effective leadership that many participants experienced. As Phase One was assessed for how it could inform Phase Two, it was noted that the spiritual development and health of the leader should be encouraged and continued in Phase Two. This was done by additional times of leader training and by encouraging particular spiritual practices focused on meditating on God’s word, worship, prayer, and fasting. Additionally, each of the pilot group leaders was to provide periodic one-on-one support for two to four GG lay leaders. Though the cohort of pastors and elders leading Phase One groups met only occasionally to talk about GG 2.0, it was hoped that in Phase Two this could become a more regular pattern of mutual support and encouragement.

As mentioned above, another lesson learned was that the Bible study segment needed attention, particularly in the areas of resources and training. While leaders and participants during the pilot phase remarked on the power of Scripture to convict and change lives when read and discussed as a group, they also expressed a certain discomfort because of the unstructured design of the study time. As a result of this feedback, two adjustments were made: first, the Bible study time was formalized as the Open Bible Format in an effort to help clarify the purpose, and second, additional training and resources on ways to lead Bible studies were made available to leaders and

on page 4: “Have you seen any specific ways by which God has knit you together, e. g. meeting a challenge together for a particular member…?”
apprentices. This included providing links to resources that could clarify terms and principles for a particular passage.

It was also discovered that being light to the local community is harder than anticipated. During the pilot phase, no group moved beyond the discussion and planning stage of finding a local community need in which the group could provide some help, but this outcome was not for lack of trying. As groups looked for outreach opportunities, it became clear that there was often a mismatch between the times people or organizations needed assistance and the times group members were available. For example, the group I led was interested in helping with food distribution at a local community services agency, but the only times available were on weekdays, not on weekends or evenings when most of our group was available. It should be noted that one group that had begun looking into participating in a meal and street evangelism ministry, eventually did so after the pilot phase. Their experience showed that being light can take longer than just a month or two to set up.

As a result of the pilot group experiences, the adjustment that was made was to encourage Growth Groups to prioritize being light, but to do so by joining an ALCF outreach that is already up and running such as the jail ministry, outreach to the homeless, and an after-school program. Since some of these ministries do their work monthly, there would be less opportunity to build ongoing relationships with people in the community, however it is better for group members to get involved in some outreach, even if it is less than optimal from a GG 2.0 point of view.

The pilot phase confirmed the power of the GG 2.0 approach to discipleship. Because half of the church leaders participated, it was more of a priority in the life of the
church. The lessons learned and the corresponding adjustments were invaluable for the subsequent effectiveness of Phase Two, the general rollout of GG 2.0 into the remainder of the Growth Groups and the inclusion of affinity ministries.

**Phase Two: Small Groups Led by Lay Leaders**

Phase Two was the nine-month period (September 2015 through May 2016) in which the pilot groups continued, some new groups began that were led by the apprentices from the pilot groups, and the original GG 1.0 Growth Groups that were functioning would be encouraged to “upgrade” to using the GG 2.0 format. The GG 1.0 groups were not required to upgrade since some of the groups had an established rhythm or particular leadership style that preferred sermon-based lessons and the current level of fellowship. Such groups were generally satisfied with letting their large church participation on Sunday provide their opportunities for outreach and communion.

In total, twenty-three Growth Groups completed Phase Two. The groups ranged in size from four to twenty people, and most of them used the GG 2.0 format. Of the groups that finished Phase Two, most were comprised of men and women across a wide age spectrum; however, three were women-only groups, three were men-only groups, and one group was composed of young adults.

During this phase, the affinity ministries, which sponsored weekly gatherings and Bible studies, were encouraged to incorporate GG 2.0 elements into these ministry times as well. The expectation was that the Bible study times would have a portion for small group discussion and prayer. The affinity community was also encouraged to look for a way to be light to the local community. The affinity ministries that participated in Phase
Two were the Singles’ Fellowship and the Women’s Fellowship. An assessment of Phase Two was completed in May 2016. During Phase Two there were quarterly leaders’ gatherings where training on the GG 2.0 elements for all Growth Group leaders, apprentices, affinity leaders, and lay team members occurred.

Assessment of the Lay Led Groups in GG 2.0 Phase Two

Towards the end of Phase Two, leaders were sent a survey, called the “GG Planning Survey,” courtesy of Survey Monkey, which made both input and analysis of results far easier than the pilot group survey (see Appendix G). The survey asked seventeen questions that were focused on the following areas: 1) basic GG details (Questions 1-4); 2) the group’s focus on GG 2.0 elements and their impact on the group (Questions 5-7); 3) curriculum selection (Questions 8-9); 4) personal spiritual practices (Questions 10-12); 5) fruit-bearing: how did GG participants grow? (Questions 13-15); and 6) future training and support needs (Questions 16-17).

In general, the leaders led their Growth Groups very well. Two-thirds of the groups met weekly, while the remainder met at least biweekly or three weeks out of four per month. Nineteen of the groups had at least one apprentice. There were thirty apprentices total, which meant groups averaged one and a half apprentices per group. This is critical, as it ensures an ample pool of next-generation Growth Group leaders.

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7 The Men’s fellowship and Young Adults’ Fellowship did not have larger gatherings as the Singles’ Fellowship and Women’s Fellowship did. Instead, they met as small groups within the Growth Group framework. There were three men’s Growth Groups and one young adults’ Growth Group, and they are included in the total of twenty-three participating Growth Groups. The Seniors’ Fellowship maintained their twice quarterly dinner-based fellowship nights and were thus beyond the scope of this project.

8 Despite repeated communication, encouragement, exhortation, and periodic personal badgering for the most recalcitrant leaders, the survey responses trickled in over several months, from late April to July. Eventually 100 percent participation was achieved.
Most of the groups implemented one or more of the GG 2.0 components (see figure 7.1). The data reveals that the Bible study (82 percent) and fellowship (75 percent) were the elements more frequently implemented, according to the respondents. Spiritual care was experienced by a little over 50 percent of the respondents, while outreach was engaged in by only about 25 percent.

Figure 7.1 Level of Implementation of the GG 2.0 Elements

All groups held some kind of Bible study or discussion of biblical principles, and the 82 percent figure partially reveals that some groups chose a DVD or topical study that was not specifically focused on a book of the Bible. As with the pilot phase, Growth Groups in Phase Two were encouraged to look at the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew
5-7; however only 39 percent chose to study this or another book of the Bible.\(^9\) Another 52 percent chose to stay with the sermon-based lesson (see figure 7.2).

**Q8 What has your curriculum been based on? (check all that apply)**

![Diagram showing the percentage of groups choosing different curricula options.](Diagram)

**Figure 7.2 Curriculum Used in GG 2.0 Phase Two**

Being a loving fellowship also scored highly as most of the groups had some kind of time to build fellowship over social events and less so over communion. The 25 percent who did not mark this were primarily participants in legacy small groups that focused on particular topics or studies.\(^{10}\) Of particular encouragement was that half the groups looked to implement some aspect of spiritual care. This was significant in

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\(^9\) Having completed Matthew 5-7 during Phase One, pilot groups were encouraged to select another portion of Scripture. The group I led selected the Gospel of John.

\(^{10}\) For example, one group had formed primarily to look at special topics, such as the role of angels in Scripture. This group was heavy on topical passages, teaching, and discussion. Another group was a legacy men’s group that did have periodic potluck dinners but chose not to consider that as an element in their GG 2.0 migration.
moving ALCF from a pastor-centered care model to a small group community-centered approach.

The only aspect that was less than encouraging was that only a quarter of the Growth Groups said they did some kind of community outreach. The ones that did said these were more singular events, such as delivering presents during Christmas to a group home. As mentioned earlier, it is hoped that with more time and with the encouragement to join one of the church’s already existing outreach ministries, this percentage will increase.

**Continued Participation in Small Group Discipleship**

The survey revealed that of the 201 people participating in the twenty-three groups, only thirty-seven (or 18 percent) of these joined a Growth Group in 2016. This is an improvement over the customary 5 to 10 percent increase in participants that Growth Groups experienced after the annual fall and winter sign-ups push. However, this improvement was at best incremental. Having 201 people participate in GG 2.0 Phase Two out of a population of about 600 members or regular attenders was generally in keeping with the historical trend of 25 to 40 percent of ALCF people participating in Growth Groups.

There may be various reasons for the lack of increase in participation, but chief among them was that during Phase Two, ALCF hired lead pastor Bryan Loritts, who would not only be the primary pulpit teacher but also lead the congregation in the next season of ministry. The fact that Bryan came with a national reputation as a teacher and speaker signaled to many that ALCF was returning to its pulpit-centered roots. Bryan did
champion the goal of making disciples as part of ALCF’s priority going forward and made consistent mention of the importance of Growth Groups in this regard, but the excitement and uncertainty that comes with the arrival of any new lead pastor outweighed the communication about the priority of discipleship and small groups.

Lasting Fruit

One of the great blessings of seeing the results of GG 2.0 was to see the fruit of spiritual growth in all participating. The survey (Questions 13 and 14) asked specifically about numerous areas in which leaders saw their participants and apprentices grow deeper in Christ. A vast majority (91 percent) reported hearing regular praises and testimonies about how God had cared for them, made provision, provided healing, or come through for them in countless other ways (see figure 7.3). One leader wrote, “We have seen growth in several members and maturity in how they handle work situations, marital relationships and a closer walk with the Lord.”

11

Two-thirds of the groups’ members manifested greater degrees of Christlikeness as evidenced by noticeable transition points from the old nature (anger, judgment, easily provoked) to the new nature (being quick to hear, seeking God first, desiring God’s wisdom and peace in various situations). This Christlikeness was also on display through loving, kind, and considerate actions towards others in the group. One leader reported, “A couple going through separation is now dating again. Depression and anger are
showing up less and we support each other in and out of church.”¹² With the growing experience of Christlikeness among members in the group, it should be no surprise that faithful attendance to the group increased for sixteen out of the twenty-three groups.

GG 2.0 was designed in part to encourage members to be light to their community in word and in deed. About half of the leaders said their participants were making more time to share their faith with others, while about a third of the leaders said their groups were making time to be salt and light to the community. There is room to grow the practice of these GG 2.0 aspects going forward, but some of the comments are already very encouraging: “One couple answered God’s call on their lives and moved to Dallas for training as missionaries; several member[s] are regular helpers with the homeless ministry. Aid has been given to those in need. Contributions made to world missions.”¹³ These findings are in keeping with the fact that many do not feel qualified to share their faith and thus need greater encouragement and training. Being salt and light requires a level of effort and opportunity that continues to prove challenging for groups to provide.

The GG 2.0 goal least implemented was the one called “discipling others,” which was based on the principle that disciples make disciples. This means that a disciple is meeting regularly with another person in the group for the purpose of Bible study, spiritual conversation, or prayer. At a minimum, we exhorted the GG leaders to do this with the participants in their group in the same way that the pilot group leaders did so.


The fact that fewer than 10 percent did this means that we have much work to do encouraging this value and teaching practical ways to carry it out.

The survey also looked at how the leaders grew during Phase Two. Leaders had been encouraged to practice various spiritual disciplines or practices for their personal spiritual growth and for their leadership development (see figure 7.4).

**Figure 7.4 Spiritual Practices among Leaders**

The results were encouraging in that the two most important practices for the leaders centered on taking Scripture into one’s life and heart through reading and meditating on it, and prayer, both for oneself and intercessory prayer for members of the group. These practices had been encouraged and taught during the quarterly leaders’
gatherings in the fall of 2015 and the winter and spring of 2016. Spiritual practices such as fasting had not been specifically mentioned during the training, so it is no surprise that less than a third of the leaders practiced fasting. The survey also revealed (see figure 7.5 below) that leaders wanted to grow in areas they are least experienced in (like fasting) or where they wanted to experience greater impact (like intercessory prayer).

**Q11 Which three spiritual practices would you like to grow in the most?**

![Bar chart showing top three spiritual practices in which to grow]

Figure 7.5 Top Three Spiritual Practices in which to Grow

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14 The leaders’ gathering on September 7, 2015 focused on using God’s word in the group through the Open Bible Format. The gathering on January 31, 2016 focused on how to provide spiritual care for members of the group with particular attention given to the role of prayer in this process. The training session on April 10, 2016 returned to the theme of how God’s word shapes hearts and lives.
Assessment of the Hybrid Model

As ALCF moved in the direction of greater discipleship through small groups, it sought to use its other discipleship-oriented ministries, such as the affinity ministries, the Sunday worship gathering, and the outreach ministries in concert with this effort. This hybrid model recognized that for many reasons, not all members and attenders of ALCF would be willing or able to plug into a GG 2.0 group. Assessing this hybrid model means focusing on the role and effect of affinity, worship, and outreach ministries.¹⁵

How the Large Church Ministries Complement the Discipleship Focus

As mentioned above, during Phase Two of GG 2.0, affinity ministries were encouraged to introduce some of the GG 2.0 elements into their ministries. The Women’s Fellowship and the Singles’ Fellowship were intentional about doing this. The Women’s Fellowship met mostly on Saturday mornings with attendance ranging from fifteen to thirty. Singles met on Tuesday nights with attendance ranging from twenty-five to thirty. Both groups structured their meetings in ways similar to Growth Groups: a time of teaching followed by small group table discussion, ending with prayer. Periodic social events offsite and a sense of fellowship at each meeting were a part of the affinity experience. Each of these fellowships was lay led and had a team of lay leaders that could also facilitate the small group table discussions. Curriculum varied in terms of whether it was on a topic or a book of the Bible. Most of the teaching was DVD based, though some was live. The assessment of these affinities was done by me personally.

¹⁵ Assessment was done by the author primarily through periodic observation of and participation in some of the affinity ministries, as well as discussions with members of the lay leadership team and with some of the participants in the affinity and outreach ministries.
through observation and monthly interviews with the lay leaders. I also was part of the live teaching at the Singles’ Fellowship during this phase.

Essentially, both affinity groups saw the same benefits that Growth Groups did to the extent that they implemented GG 2.0 elements. They did not see the full extent of the Christlike transformation that the Growth Groups did because there was less commitment expected from participants, many of whom participated based on the teaching topic rather than because of a commitment to the group. Also, the changing nature of the small group table discussion participants made it harder for the lay team members to build deeper fellowship and provide spiritual care to individuals. The affinity ministries did participate in being light to the community, not by initiating a new work, but by volunteering to help in the ALCF Christmas Drive.

The Sunday worship gathering was an essential part of the hybrid model because it connected GG 2.0 participants with a full expression of worship to God. It also connected, reminded, and taught them that they belong to a larger body of believers and to a church that God is shaping and using for his purposes in Silicon Valley. As many GG 2.0 groups did not do communion, it was also vital for group participants to partake of communion on a regular basis (and to witness occasional baptisms) in the Sunday worship gathering. Throughout Phase Two, communion and baptisms continued to be held consistently in ALCF’s sanctuary.

In their efforts to be salt and light, GG 2.0 groups and affinity fellowships relied upon the large, centrally organized outreach ministries of ALCF, such as the homeless ministry. This demonstrated the ongoing need for the outreach ministry to function. During both phases of GG 2.0, the outreach ministry provided an essential way for
groups to experience the value of being salt and light. The next step is for the outreach team to help GG 2.0 and affinity groups to find and develop their own local work.

Assessment of Congregational Support for the Hybrid Model

At the conclusion of Phase Two and based on my numerous conversations with leaders, participants, elders, and ALCF staff members, my assessment was that the hybrid model was well supported and appreciated for many reasons. First, the hybrid model leveraged the benefits of the large church in terms of worship, affinity communities, and outreach efforts, while at the same time promoting and developing deeper discipleship through small groups. In this way, the hybrid model was the least disruptive option to current ministries that could be implemented. Second, the hybrid model was supported by the Growth Group and affinity leaders because it provided “ready-made” opportunities for being salt and light to the community without requiring them to organize and drive this effort themselves. Third, while many commented on the power of Scripture that was being experienced by groups during Phase Two, they also recognized and desired to meet weekly as a church for the purpose of praise and worship. The power and need for this did not diminish during Phase Two, nor was it sufficiently met even in those groups that did some form of worship at the beginning of their time together. Finally, the hybrid model allowed ALCF to stay consistent with its spiritual DNA as a black church and a megachurch where worship, preaching, and community are emphasized, and where broken people can come and just be ministered to through a weekend service or affinity gathering before they become more deeply discipled through small group community.
Conclusion

There were numerous blessings experienced by many during Phase One and Phase Two of this quest for deeper discipleship. The leadership discovered important lessons about itself as a community, and the participants learned or had confirmed the power of Christlike transformation through small group community. At the same time these experiences were taking place, ALCF was embarking on a new season through the hiring of its new lead pastor. This significant step had and will have implications for how ALCF moves forward in its call to discipleship.
CONCLUSION

When ALCF was a megachurch it was like a big husk of corn—tall, visible, and vibrant. But just as the husk is not the nourishing part of the cornstalk, so too the size of a church is not the spiritually nourishing part of the church. It is the kernel inside that provides the nourishment and ultimately signifies whether the cornstalk is fruitful or not. ALCF’s unplanned journey from megachurch to local church did not diminish the fruitfulness of the congregation. In fact, it prompted us to look again at who we are in Christ to see that we are called disciples. It also encouraged us to be intentional about living that out in small group communities and as a larger community through worship and outreach. In this way we continue to move towards fulfilling God’s call on our lives. We have learned many lessons along the way, which will serve the church well as it heads into a new season of leadership and fruitfulness.

The first lesson is that small groups are essential to growing as disciples and becoming more like Christ. Leaders saw firsthand how coming together regularly as a small group community centered on God’s word, praying together, providing a measure of spiritual care, and growing in love for each other and for those in the surrounding community was a manifestation of Christ in people. Leaders heard from many in their groups about how they were turning aside from their “old person” and putting on the “new person” in Christ. This experience of increasing Christlikeness and spiritual fruitfulness made the entire small group experience worthwhile. My prayer is that this experience in the lives of the leaders and participants is one that they can build on and take with them in whatever church or ministry context God may move them to in the
future—disciples making disciples. The second lesson from this journey is that for ALCF, the discipleship journey required continuation of the large church Sunday worship gatherings. The spiritual DNA of the church, with its focus on worship and expectation of a powerful and timely weekly word from the pulpit, meant that the large gathering provided support and affirmation of a common identity and mission to the Silicon Valley. It was also a forum for encouraging outreach and participation in Growth Groups or affinity ministries and thus served as a needed “staging area” for newcomers to enter into the deeper life of discipleship. Thus, the hybrid model—small groups combined with affinity communities and the large church community—was essential for ALCF’s ability to experience all the priorities of GG 2.0.

As ALCF continues in its call to make disciples and have its disciples make other disciples, it will need to prioritize two critical components: leadership development and keeping Growth Groups as the centerpiece of discipleship. The GG 2.0 endeavor revealed that developing effective leadership is key to making disciples. It starts with the top—at the elder and pastor level. These people must be practitioners, students, and modelers of effective leadership. They need to resist the temptation to measure “church success” by increased attendance, budgets achieved, and few complaints, and instead be steadfast about seeing disciples grow and making other disciples.

The increased level of participation from ALCF leaders in GG 2.0 was encouraging. Making small group leadership a virtual requirement is needed if small groups are to go deeper into ALCF’s DNA and if a leadership culture for small group leaders is to be developed. When each church leader is providing spiritual care through prayer and one-on-one time for a handful of individual leaders who in turn do that for
others, then each small group is strengthened to be the discipleship center for a community of people. As more ALCF leaders and people live out their calling as disciples, more frequent exhortations and testimonies from leaders, participants, and recipients of outreach efforts should be heard, which should encourage others.

Continuing to provide training and workshops on being effective small group leaders and personal spiritual practices could create a pipeline of future leaders or apprentices.

ALCF is now in a new season of leadership with potential for church growth and impact due to the arrival of the lead pastor in March 2016. Pastor Bryan’s role, preaching gifts, and leadership understandably have raised new questions about the role of small groups within ALCF’s discipleship priority. One key question emerges: Does ALCF see Growth Groups 2.0 more as potential house churches or the basis for planting other church communities in the Bay Area, or will it return to the familiar pulpit-centered ministry and continue to promote Growth Groups as a discipleship option within the larger context of ALCF’s mission? Answering this question will determine how the GG 2.0 elements are either developed or changed, and ultimately how effective ALCF is in its mission to fulfill Jesus’ commission to “go and make disciples.”
APPENDIX A

BILL HULL’S CHURCH-CENTERED DISCIPLE-MAKING PLAN

Table 1: GG 2.0 Pilot Group Phase Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weeks</th>
<th>Appointments Confirmed</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Salmon Series “Life in the Kingdom”</th>
<th>Leader Training</th>
<th>Prayer Team</th>
<th>Current GPs</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Next Groups Launched</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 18</td>
<td>Apprentices Selected</td>
<td>18-Jan 25-Jan</td>
<td>Jan 1-Feb 8-Feb 15-Feb 22-Feb</td>
<td>Sunday class</td>
<td>S. Hill team updated</td>
<td>Update on 2.0</td>
<td>Ongoing @ E &amp; P Mtg</td>
<td>Apprentices → Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 1</td>
<td>Apprentices Criteria</td>
<td>Feb 1-Feb 8-Feb</td>
<td>Feb 1-Mar 8-Mar 15-Mar 22-Mar 29-Mar</td>
<td>Elders / Parents Mtg</td>
<td>Prayer Times scheduled</td>
<td>Invitation to leader training</td>
<td>3 Month eval by leaders</td>
<td>New Apprentices selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 22</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mar 2-Mar 9-Mar</td>
<td>Apr 5-Apr 12-Apr 19-Apr 26-Apr</td>
<td>Sunday Curriculum developed</td>
<td>E &amp; P times of prayer</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 Month eval by participants</td>
<td>GPs 1.0 go to 2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 29</td>
<td></td>
<td>Apr 29-May 6-May</td>
<td>May 3-May 10-May 17-May 24-May 31-May</td>
<td>Weekly Bible study curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adjustments discussed</td>
<td>Sign-ups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May 31-Jun 7-Jun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adjustments made</td>
<td>Leader Training on Sundays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- E: Elders
- A: Apprentices
- S: Salmon Series
- T: Training
- P: Pray
- GPs: Group Pairs

Note: The diagram shows the planned activities and their timeline for the GG 2.0 Pilot Group Phase Plan.
Appendix B is the GG 2.0 Pilot Phase plan that was finalized with elders and pastors. The plan is presented in a Gantt chart format with the tasks on the Y axis and their corresponding timeframes for performing them over a five month period (January to May) on the X axis. Tasks are color coded and appear in the week(s) they are to be done. Below is a more detailed explanation of the key parts of the plan: Weekly meetings, Leader Training, and Evaluation.

Groups Meet Weekly. These tasks present a rhythm of leadership tasks from meeting weekly as a group, to having one-on-one meetings about twice a month, and using two meetings a month to discuss “missionsal outreach” in order to be light to the community. “Family events” refer to social gatherings, e.g. potlucks, and times of communion. Thus, they are scheduled monthly on the plan.

Leader Training. These tasks show the weekly Sunday training starting in mid February and going through April. The “Elders / Pastors Mtg” refers to using a portion of the biweekly elders and pastors meeting to talk about leadership practices and experiences in this pilot phase. The “Sunday Curriculum developed” was a task for the teachers of the leaders training (e.g. Francis for the first seven weeks) to develop the curriculum and handouts for the Sunday class. The “Weekly Bible study curriculum” task was put in the plan when it was thought that the pilot phase would have more organized Bible studies with set questions rather than the Open Bible Format that ultimately was used.

Evaluation. Like discussion of leadership in the biweekly elders and pastors meeting, evaluation would also be a part of this agenda. Questions like, “How is your group going? What is working well, and what challenges are you facing?” would be the basis for these regular discussions. The answers to these questions by the leaders would be the basis of adjustments discussed and made in mid-May prior to the rollout of Phase Two.

In addition to the above main tasks, others are noted on the plan including confirming apprentices which means identifying two people per pilot group who could lead their own groups after the pilot phase, communicating to the congregation, organizing a prayer team for GG 2.0, and staying connected with the current Growth Groups. Note: with few exceptions (such as the addition of leader training in May, and the decision not to prepare curriculum before the weekly Bible study) this plan was carried out essentially as presented here during Phase One.
LEADERSHIP TRAINING

OVERVIEW: “Everything rises and falls with leadership. You are going to reproduce who you are. We can have the best plan and the wrong leader will destroy it. We can have the worst plan and the godly leader will succeed.”

Francis Chan

In this seven-week course, we want to learn key principles of godly leadership so that we can live out His calling to be effective leaders at ALCF as we love and serve those in this body of Christ.


Mar 1. The Loving Leader, John 17:20-23, 1 Cor. 13:1-7, 1 Thess 1:5-12

Mar 8. The Equipping Leader, 1 Cor. 12:7-11,27-31; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 2:2

Mar 15. The Missional Leader, Josh. 1:1-9, Rm. 9:1-3, Phil. 1:12-14
Leadership Training, Part 2

Focus: To build on the foundational leadership training we’ve been blessed to have over these past two months, we now focus on the practical, weekly aspects of small group and ministry leadership. Thus, in April and May we will look at particular skills and practices that will further encourage and equip small group and ministry leaders to be effective.

Also, we hope and pray that these additional two months together as a leadership community will further develop our common leadership practice, help us grow together, and be a place of mutual encouragement and support.

Plan: Continue the Sunday format (12:15-1:45), but just 2x / month

April 12. One Body, Many Parts: Appreciating differences, responding to challenges, applying grace

April 26. Rightly using the Word of God: Principles for effective Bible study and discussion

May 3. The Art of Spiritual Care: Encouragement, listening, confrontation

May 17.* Care of the Leader: Personal practices to sustain effectiveness

Presenters: Each of these sessions will be presented by an elder or pastor, with time for Q&A

* May 17 will go from 12:15 to 1:15 in order to leave additional time for discussion specific to Growth Group leaders immediately afterwards

May 31. ALCF Picnic!! Rengstorff Park, Mtn. View. 12:00—4:00pm. Invite your groups, ministry teams, family & friends.
APPENDIX E
GG 2.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

Leader:

- Gathering the small group community together weekly
- Leading the Bible study
- Meeting with others in the group regularly for spiritual care and growth
- Establishing an ongoing community outreach that demonstrated the love of God in word and deed
- Having fellowship events of a social or spiritual nature, e.g. potluck meals to communion
- Training up apprentices
- Leading the group through 2015
- Requirements: Spiritual maturity (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9); time available to lead (2015)

Apprentice Leaders:

- Grow in the practice of leading a GG 2.0 group
- Participating weekly in the GG 2.0 pilot group until September, 2015
- Launch and lead a new group in September, 2015
- Lead this new group through 2016
- Receive the guidance, wisdom, spiritual and practical mentoring from the group leader
- Requirements: Developing Spiritual maturity (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9); time available to apprentice (2015) and lead (2016).

Participants:

- Participate weekly in the small group gatherings
- Share thoughts and insights from the Bible study time
- Participate actively in the times of community outreach
- Participate in the fellowship events
- Meet with the leader regularly for the purpose of spiritual care and growth
- Pray for one another; keep confidentiality
GG 2.0 Pilot Group Survey

We want to hear from you. Thank you for taking the time to thoughtfully fill this survey out; it will help us make adjustments as we roll out GG 2.0 across our small group community this fall. After the "Group Summary" at the beginning, there are questions pertaining to the four priority areas for GG 2.0: Bible Study; Light to the Community; A Loving Fellowship; Spiritual Care. (The Scripture references supporting each of these priorities has been provided as a reference for you.)

- Required

Your Group Summary

Please answer the following questions regarding your group.

Have any people joined or left your group since it has started? (Please indicate their names)

How often did your group meet? *
- Weekly
- Every Other Week
- Other: 

Who are your apprentices? *

What was the curriculum? *
Bible Study:
Study and discuss God's Word together. John 1:1 says that Jesus is the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In other words, to do Bible Study together is to experience the Lord Jesus.

Was the leadership done by one person or shared? *

What is your impression on the effectiveness of the study? *

Curriculum: Did you study the Scriptures themselves or use a published Bible study, e.g. Lifeway? *

If you just studied Scripture itself, was there a general format used, e.g. "Let's read the passage and discuss what it says"? *

What went well? *
What can be improved? *

Light to the Community
Establish an outreach to someone or group in our community. Matthew 5:46 says, "Let your light shine before men so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Thus, during our time together, we will look to reach out to meet a particular need in our community. This will require prayerful thought and time.

How far along is the group in making an ongoing, relational connection with some person or group for the purposes of outreach? A) We discussed specific projects; B) We've organized and carried out an initial effort; C) We have an ongoing outreach relationship that we've established and continue to support. *

What has been the blessing to the GG? ...to the community? *

What are some ways to develop this further in the mind/heart of the GG? *

A Loving Fellowship
The early church according to Acts 2:42, came together and "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." We want to be a place where God's love for one another is clearly on display. This happens as we gather socially from time to time and do spiritual things occasionally such as have times of worship, communion, or even foot-washing.
What did you do to build group connection and relational depth, e.g. social events; sharing of testimonies; having a time of communion? *

Have you seen any specific ways by which God has knit you together, e.g. meeting a challenge together for a particular member such as a health issue, financial concern, relationship challenges, etc.? *

What things do you want to implement in the next few months to grow deeper? *

**Spiritual Care**
We want to make sure that everyone in the group knows God's love and is cared for. Consequently, those leading the groups are to provide some spiritual care and mentoring for others in the group. This is to be done in the spirit of 1 Thessalonians 2:7,11-12, “we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children...we dealt with each of you as a father...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”

Were you able to meet one-on-one with members of your GG to see how they are and ask what you can pray for? *
What specific things did you do to develop and encourage the apprentice(s) in your group, e.g. had them lead a lesson? *

Who met with the women in the group 1:1? How did you encourage the woman meeting with other women? *

How often were you able to pray for the people in your group, e.g. daily, a few times a week? *

What other ways are you considering to build your spiritual care of the group, e.g. make more time to meet; pray more, get additional training for specific issues members are facing.*

General Questions
Ways you would like to receive encouragement in this role?
Any other observations / recommendations / improvements / praise reports?

Thank you!
APPENDIX G

GG PLANNING SURVEY

GG Planning Survey
Introduction & Overview

Thank you for taking a few minutes to complete this survey. It will help us greatly to plan and update the ways we can encourage and equip you to be God’s effective leader in your Growth Groups.

* 1. How frequently did your group meet in 2018?
   - Weekly
   - Every other week
   - Other (please specify)

* 2. Please list the first and last names of the people who attended your GG fairly regularly (include your name too):

* 3. Please indicate the names of anyone who joined in 2018:

* 4. Who is your apprentice or backup leader(s)?

* 5. Did your GG implement any of the Growth Group 2.0 elements? (check all that apply)
   - [ ] Bible Study
   - [ ] Spiritual Care of group members through one-on-one meetings with you or another leader
   - [ ] Being a Loving Fellowship through social events, communion, etc.
   - [ ] Community Outreach project (please describe)

* 6. If you did not incorporate any GG 2.0 elements, briefly describe the main elements of your group (e.g. lesson discussion, prayer time, sharing life, etc.)

   

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7. What did you notice were the biggest blessings for the group in terms of growing as disciples because of the GG 2.0 elements? (briefly explain)

GG Planning Survey
Curriculum

8. What has your curriculum been based on? (check all that apply)
- Weekly GG Lesson based on the sermon
- Reading a book of the Bible
- Topical subject using a book or DVD (please indicate the name(s) of book or DVD)

GG Planning Survey
Personal

9. What drew you to the particular curriculum you are currently using?

GG Planning Survey
Personal

10. What personal spiritual practices are a regular part of your week? (check all that apply)
- Worship/prayer
- Fasting occasionally
- Scripture reading/study/meditation
- Prayerful intercession for members in your group
- Other (please specify)

11. Which three spiritual practices would you like to grow in the most?
- Worship/prayer
- Fasting occasionally
- Scripture reading/study/meditation
- Prayerful intercession for participants in your group
- Other (please specify)
**12. How have you grown personally as a result of leading the group? (briefly explain)**

**GG Planning Survey**

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<th>Fruit-bearing</th>
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**13. In what ways have you seen group participants grow deeper in Christ? (check all that apply)**

- More praises/testimonies about God's provision, faithfulness, healing, etc.
- Greater Christ-likeness (e.g., less anger, more grace, less reacting, more prayer, less dependent on self, more dependent on God; greater peace, less anxiety about situations/circumstances; showing greater care and love for other group members)
- Greater faithfulness in attending and participating in the group
- More times of sharing their faith with others
- Greater time spent being salt and light to the community
- More group members serving in other ALCF ministries
- Discipling others (i.e., regular meetings to study God's Word, pray, connect)

**14. Please elaborate on any of the above points you checked with specific examples, praises, or testimonies.**

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<tr>
<th>Future Training &amp; Support</th>
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**15. What were some of the challenges you faced as you led the group (i.e., group dynamics, individual struggles, personality clashes, etc.)?**

**16. What kind of future training would you find helpful? (check all that apply)**

- Leadership development
- How to better come alongside members in their challenges and struggles
- How to lead a Bible study
- Sharing your faith in Christ
- Other (please specify)
17. How can we better come alongside you as a leader to encourage and support you?

- Provide helpful information (e.g., books, articles about leading a small group, and spiritual care)
- Meet periodically with about 4-6 other CG leaders in your area for mutual encouragement and equipping
- Meet one-on-one periodically with a pastor or elder for encouragement, equipping and discussing particular pastoral care issues
- Provide downloadable studies and study guides for particular books of the Bible
- Other (please specify)

19. Is there any other feedback you’d like to give the ALCF leadership regarding your CG leadership experience?


