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The X Factor: Biblical Discipleship— Life or Death for Your Church

“Hello, Carol, I’m Kent Hunter, the consultant for your church. Thanks for being willing to be part of this confidential interview during this consultation process.”

After several general questions about Carol’s membership history, I ask, “Carol, in what ways are you involved in the ministry of this church?”

“I’m a Sunday school teacher,” Carol responded. “I’ve taught Sunday school for the last 10 years. I started when our two children began attending Sunday school. My kids are now in the junior youth program.”

“Oh, that’s great,” I replied. “Carol, can you tell me a little bit about how the Sunday school ministry works here? For example, what is expected of you? What would you say is your job description?”

“What do you mean...?” Carol hesitated. “I... I teach the third grade class every Sunday.”

“That’s wonderful,” I replied. “What else is it that a Sunday school teacher is supposed to do at this church?”

Kent Hunter has pastored churches in Michigan, Indiana, and South Australia. He is the author of 31 books, including the best-



selling *Who Broke My Church? 7 Proven Strategies for Renewal and Revival*. Kent writes a daily Twitter feed and produces a monthly podcast series. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries and serves as a consultant to churches, denominations, and networks of congregations. He has taught thousands of pastors at conferences in 14 countries.

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MULTIPLYING MINISTRY

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“Well...I’m supposed to be prepared — and I always make sure that I am. Is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied. “What else?”

“Well... I pray for the kids, and I follow up when one of the children misses two or three Sundays.”

“Oh, that’s important,” I shared. “What else? Anything else?”

“They have teacher training days twice a year to review. We go over the theme and materials,” she replied.

“Anything else?” I asked.

After a pause, Carol replied, “No, I don’t think so.”

Discipleship Multiplication: The Missing Link

The X Factor: “X” is the symbol for multiplication, right? Remember that! For more than 40 years, I have been interviewing hundreds of people in confidential interviews in churches of all kinds. Since the beginning, I have continually asked Sunday school teachers to share what they perceive is expected of them.

What am I looking for? In broad terms, I’m trying to find a discipling culture. Sadly, in North America, I have *never* had one Sunday school teacher give the response I believe Jesus would expect:

“This is one of my top priorities as a Sunday school teacher. While I love teaching, I am continually praying for and looking for, until I find, another person to disciple, on the job, while I teach Sunday school. My objective is to multiply myself with someone who has the spiritual gift of teaching.”

I don’t blame these wonderful men and women who teach Sunday school. In fact, I don’t blame their pastors, either. Most pastors don’t know how to disciple. At best, pastors think discipling is all about teaching and preaching — even though Jesus modeled discipling with his disciples for a period of about three years.

I blame the Bible colleges and seminaries, including the one where I was trained. Don’t get me wrong, I had an excellent education: four years of college and three years of seminary, along with one year of internship to “learn” from a supervising pastor — which didn’t occur. It’s just that no one ever disciplined me. Literally, no one modeled discipling so I could catch it.

Who Disciples?

We’ve got a small leak in the dishwasher in our kitchen. My wife knows better than to ask me to fix it. Let’s just say plumbing is not my gift. She finally called a plumber.

Jake showed up in his truck and came to the door with his toolkit. I noticed right away that

he was about 50 years old. I asked him, “How long have you been in the plumbing business?” He said, “About 20 years.” Which made me happy to show him the way to the kitchen.

But the toolkit wasn’t all that he brought. This “young kid” — maybe 23 — came through the door, following Jake. I must admit, I prematurely thought, “I’m not sure I want the kid touching our dishwasher.”

This is “Jon,” Jake said. “He’s my apprentice. He’s been with me for a year.”

I watched as Jake found the leak and repaired the hose. Then it occurred to me. He’s discipling this young man to be a plumber. Of course!

Who disciples? Plumbers like Jake. Airplane pilots. Doctors, nurses, painters, carpenters, engineers — a lot of people! Who made discipling famous? Jesus! Who doesn’t do much discipling? The followers of Jesus!

Revivals

Have you ever been exposed to a revival? It would have to be on some other continent for most of us. I’ll share one example. I was asked to teach about 1,500 pastors from 12 different countries in northeast Africa. The destination for this conference was Nakuru, Kenya, north of Nairobi, about three hours, on a road full of potholes. The movement there has now spilled over into Ethiopia where the Christian faith is growing like wildfire. It is a large revival that has continued for several years.

My interpreter for the plenary sessions for this conference was James. He was so good, he translated a millisecond after every word I spoke. I also noticed another, younger man who was always with James. It was Peter. I learned that he was being disciplined to be an interpreter by James. I saw them meeting together after every session, debriefing. Then I noticed that Peter was always sharing with a younger guy, named Ezrom. Ezrom was being disciplined to be an interpreter by James. Yet Ezrom, I noticed, was discipling a young man who was about 12 years old. So, the interpreter ministry of the pastor who hosted the conference had a “farm team” of interpreters four deep! Discipling was a lifestyle.

What do you think? Did they disciple because a revival was occurring? Or was a revival occurring because many Christians were discipling — multiplying ministry through on-the-job, relational teaching and training?

KEY RESOURCES

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What Are We Missing?

Prior to every revival in history, there is what is called an *awakening* in some churches. What is an awakening? It is a wake-up call. The Holy Spirit wakes up Christians to look closer at Jesus and rediscover discipling, along with other biblical basics that, somehow, got lost in the church closet.

What other biblical basics are discovered? One of them is the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers, discovered in 1 Peter 2:9 and practiced by Jesus, Paul, and other leaders of the New Testament. It means every Christian is a minister. Every believer has a ministry. When you were baptized, you were “ordained” into ministry.

Parallel to this biblical teaching is another important element from Ephesians 4, where it clearly states that the “real” job of church leaders, like pastors, is multiplication. It says that God has given special gifts to the church — the movement of Christianity. They include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These gifted leaders have a special role: To equip God’s people for the work of ministry. That is the role of discipling Christians! That is their priority job. It is not to *do* ministry for people, but to *equip* people for ministry, while they do ministry. That’s multiplication! Those Christians follow that model to equip other new Christians. That’s discipling.

The other key element in revivals is spiritual gifts, described in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4, along with a few other verses scattered throughout the New Testament. Your spiritual gifts — given by the Holy Spirit — determine God’s special role for you in the Christian movement.

You don’t have a “job” at church. We should never ask for “volunteers” — an approach that uses people. God does not use people. We are ambassadors for Christ. When you know your gifts, you discover your “calling.”

10 DIMENSIONS OF THE X FACTOR

1. Every Christian is called to multiply disciples.
2. Most churches fail to equip disciplers.
3. Most pastors were not disciplined by another, so they have never “caught” the fine art of discipling.
4. Most pastors don’t know, from experience, the approach to discipling to start a discipling movement in their churches.
5. Discipling is the key factor for rapid growth of the Christian movement.
6. Discipling is the “X” factor — the multiplication factor — for the growth of the church, according to Jesus.
7. Whenever there is a sustainable revival, discipling is a key factor.
8. Discipling is not preaching and teaching alone.
9. Preaching and teaching, according to Scripture, are ways to grow people who are already disciplined for Christian ministry.
10. When Christians are not equipped to disciple others, human approaches like volunteers are substituted, and churches are crippled from contributing to the growth of God’s Kingdom, as the Lord intends. Churches experience mediocre growth of converts and eventually plateau or decline.

Part-Timers Change the World

When people are discipled into ministry, according to their spiritual gifts, their role is not to keep the institution going. They are in their divine “sweet spot.” They experience what it means to be the body of Christ. This is multiplication of ministry. People in their spare time can do 10 times more ministry than a staff of pastors can do working 60 hours a week. Revival results! Discipling by on-the-job equipping multiplies the Kingdom exponentially.

Today, as you read this, about 160,000 pastors or staff members of churches in North America will visit someone in a hospital. Ninety-eight percent of them will take no one with them to disciple.

Of the two percent that are being discipled, the likelihood that they will conduct hospital ministry AND multiply themselves by discipling another is around .01 percent.

If you do ministry by the Book, get ready for an awakening, followed by a revival. It’s the best thing that could happen to your church, the nation, and our world. It has to start somewhere. Why not with you? What is God saying to you? What are you going to do about it?

SIX STEPS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Step #1: Come follow me — invite.

Step #2: I do/you watch — teach.

Step #3: I do/you help — train.

Step #4: You do/I help — test.

Step #5: You do/I watch — transfer.

Step #6: Do it again, and again,
until you die — multiply.