

A Model for Discipleship

By B. Craig Stinson

The Grease Factory

A man visited a grease factory. It was enormous! The hosts gave the visitor a hard hat to wear and drove him all over the many acres of the facility. There was activity everywhere! Machinery of all sizes and shapes laboring away, giant tanks of grease as far as the eye could see, tanker trucks constantly pulling in and out, loading and unloading, people scurrying about.

The tour of the grounds took all morning. The hosts fed the visitor lunch in a large conference room and then spent the afternoon showing him through the suite of office buildings. They showed him the I. T. section full of computers and servers, a huge room where people were doing nothing but talking on phones, and floor after floor of executives and administrators.

At the end of the day the visitor was ushered into the splendid office of the CEO. "How was your tour?", the CEO asked.

"It was amazing. I've never seen such a huge grease factory!"

"We're pretty proud of it," said the CEO. "It's the largest grease factory in the world... one billion barrels of grease a year!"

"That's fantastic!", said the guest. "What is your market for all that grease?"

"What do you mean, 'market'?"

"I mean, where do you sell all this grease? All here in the United States? Emerging markets in China or Europe?"

The CEO looked dumbfounded. "Sell it?," he said. "We don't sell it."

"Then what do you do with all this grease?"

"Why, we use it to lubricate all the machinery here at the grease factory."

Making Disciples

How are we really doing with our task of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"? Or are we mainly making grease to grease the machinery of the church?

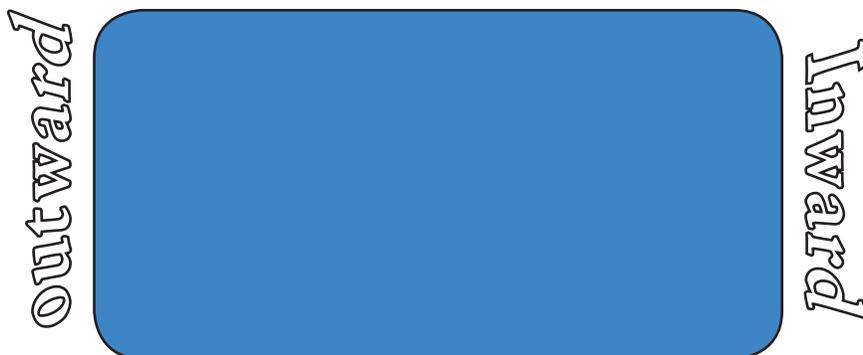
We assume the task of "making disciples" means both that people who are not followers of Jesus would become followers, and that those of us who are already trying to follow him would grow in our relationship with him.

We also assume that the local church is the primary place where this relationship takes place.

So, what does a fruitful congregation look like? Is there a model for discipleship that could be understandable and yet open? There are many, many ways to think about this, but we offer the following:

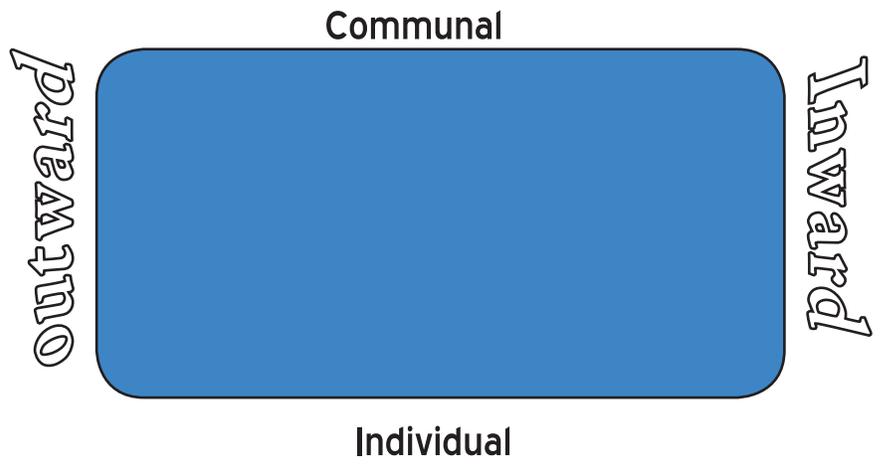
Faith has an inward component and an outward component... that is, part of the life of faith is about the "interior" life, and part is its external expression.

So let's put that in picture form:

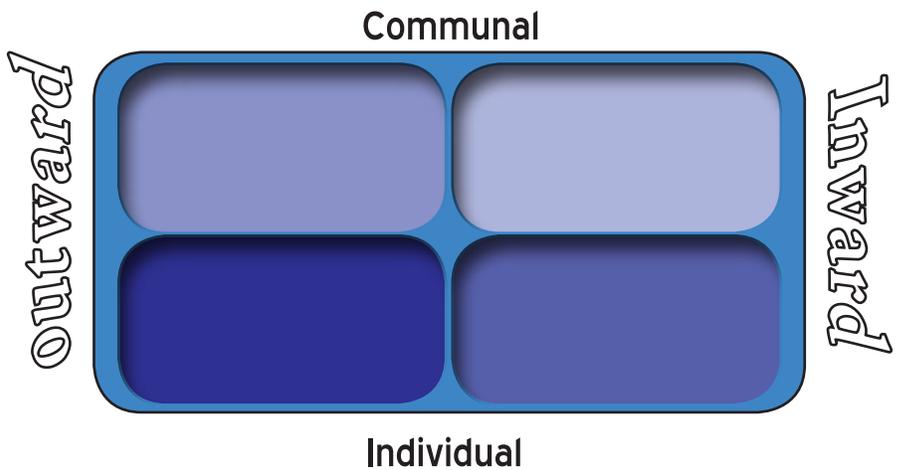


Also, the life of faith is both something we do alone and something we do in groups, or communally.

Let's add that to the picture:



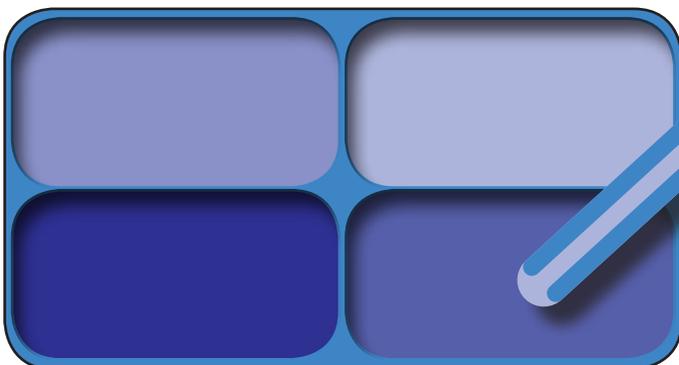
Any decent consultant can take four variables and make them into a grid. So let's do that:



That gives us four quadrants. Reading from right to left, bottom to top, we see a quadrant named "individual focused inward" which deals with the interior life of the person. The basic question in this area is, "How is your relationship with God?" (or whatever power that you acknowledge to be greater than you).

Individual Focused Inward

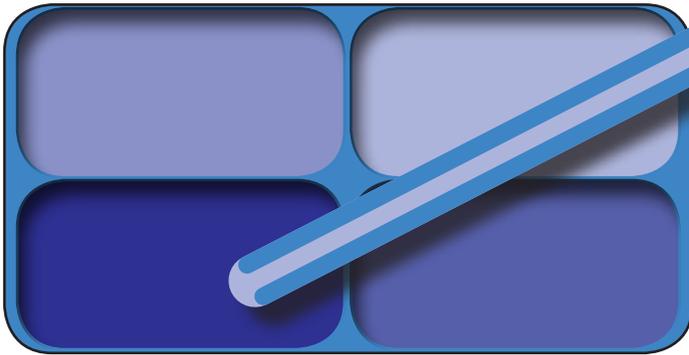
- How is your relationship with God?



The "individual focused outward" area deals with the external life of the individual. The question asked in this quadrant is, "What does a disciple (or faithful person) DO??"

Individual Focused Outward

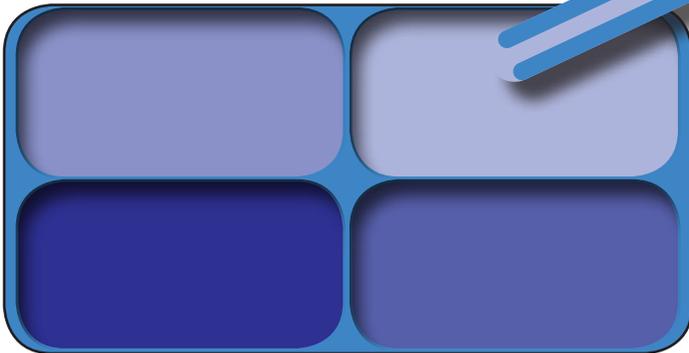
- What does a disciple (or faithful person) DO?



The area entitled "Communal focused inward" focuses on our corporate life together. When we gather intentionally as a church or club or ongoing group of friends, the operative question is, "Do broken people get better?" Do we build one another up? Or do we keep repeating the same mistakes, or worse, do we tear one another down? The church would ask it this way, "When we gather, do we meet the risen Christ?"

Communal Focused Inward

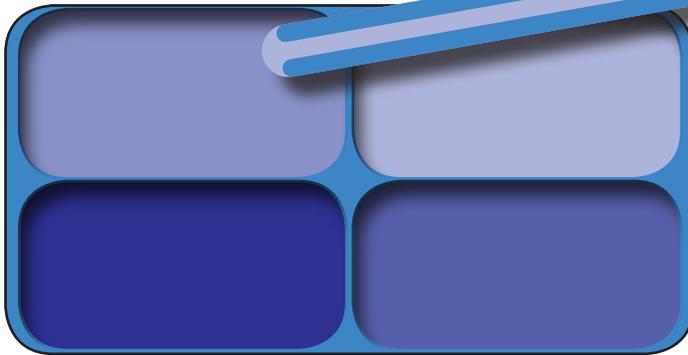
- Do broken people get better?



And finally, the “Communal focused outward” area asks us, “Did the presence of our group, club, or church make any real difference to the place where we are planted? Is our community, neighborhood, city really being transformed for the better by our presence?”

Communal Focused Outward

- Did the presence of our group, club, or church make any real difference to the place where we are planted?
- Is our community, neighborhood, or city really being transformed for the better by our presence?



In Oklahoma we have 529 United Methodist Churches, with worship attendances ranging from 4 to 4,000. Although there are many ways to look at it, we are suggesting that if any-sized church will tend to these four

quadrants, and if they will set goals and measure their results, they will find their true identity, and will find that they are “making disciples” rather than just making grease to lubricate the machinery at the grease factory.

Can you measure relationship with God?

As churches have “tried on” this model, some interesting questions have been raised. About ten churches wrote to say, “When looking at the area entitled ‘individual focused inward,’ you seem to be asking us to measure our relationship with God. Things like that can’t be measured.”

That is a fairly common response. But try this: Ask yourself, “Am I closer to God than I was a year ago? Or am I further away? Or am I about the same?” Almost anyone can answer these questions pretty quickly... both church people and people who don’t go to church. Most folks have some idea how their interior life is going.

The second question is this: “Why did you say what you said?” It takes a little longer to think of the answer to this question, but most people can tell you, after they think

about it for a little bit, what happened in their life, or what didn’t happen, or what regular practice, or what absence, caused them to answer the way they did. A person’s answer to this second question shows the criteria that person uses in measuring their relationship with God.

The third question, and this is the tough one for the church, is “Did the Church have anything to do with your answer?”

We want to suggest that if pastors and laity would have this conversation with a few people this year, choosing some people from inside the church and some from outside, and listen carefully to what they say, we would learn a lot about what next steps our church should take.

The response from non-church people

It turns out that people who are not a part of “church” seem to relate to this framework as well or better than some in the church. For some church people, it seems perplexing to tend to these specifics, when for so long it has been enough just to

“have church”. But we are finding that many people who do not attend church and who may never have attended church still have an affinity to these questions. For them it may look like this:

1. How is your interior life of faith? What readings or exercises do you use to nourish your soul?
2. What choices are you making in attempting to be more responsible as a citizen and as a responsible inhabitant of this planet?
3. What formal or informal groups do you affiliate with that build up and strengthen the personhood of yourself and others?
4. How do these groups transform your city/neighborhood/town for the better?

“The endless immensity of the sea”

Our experience is that intentionality is an important ingredient in fruitfulness. We need to name specific things that we plan to do, and we need a way to measure the outcome. Many people, both inside and outside the church, are tending to these things. But we never want to forget that the proximate plans for fruitfulness in our daily lives are there for a larger purpose... we want to learn to live as disciples of Jesus Christ so that the world can be

transformed for the better. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, author of “The Little Prince,” said, “If you want to build a ship, don’t herd people together to collect wood, and don’t assign tasks and start giving orders. Rather, teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

That’s what we want “church” to be... not one endless committee meeting or task force, but a gathering of people of all kinds, and all ages, longing for the endless immensity of the faith.