



CURATED THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

## INNOVATING MULTIPLICATION:

Fusing Assimilation with Disciple Multiplication

**Shane Stacey & Dave Rhodes**

As the rise of secularization in American society continues to increase—with nearly 30% of the population indicating zero religious affiliation—the way churches think about how they make disciples must also rise to a new level. An over-reliance on the ministry models of the past couple of decades will prove inadequate for the context that is before us.

To better understand the disciple-making convictions and practices churches need to adopt in this decade, we should first explore the fundamental assumptions underlying today’s prevailing ministry models. These assumptions continue to influence many existing practices.

### THE TALE OF TWO FUNNELS

We’ll do this by using two shapes to contrast two ways of growing a church. The first shape is a funnel that people pass through from the wide end to the narrow end; it is called the “assimilation funnel” or an “engagement funnel”. This funnel, which is associated with a program-driven church, is the most efficient way to get people engaged in a church and to make them feel that they belong.

The second shape is a turned-around funnel that people pass through from the narrow end to the wide end; it is called the “multiplication funnel” or an “empowerment funnel.” This funnel, which is associated with a church being driven by shared disciple-making vision and practices, is the most effective way to empower the people of the church to make disciples of Jesus.

Aspect	 Assimilation Funnel	 Multiplication Funnel
Primary Goal	Connect people to belonging and service	Send people to live as disciple-makers on mission
Produces	Converts who become volunteers who serve	Disciples who become leaders who are sent out on mission
Primary Measure of Success	Smooth pathways into greater participation	Development of disciples sent out to be and bring good news
Where ministry Happens	Church space: classes, groups, serving teams	Church space: classes, groups, serving teams
Core Staff Skills	Teaching, shepherding, organizing	Coaching, training, multiplying
Core Staff Mindset	Inspiration and connection orientation	Equipping and development orientation
Staff Role Perception	Heroes of great ministry	Hero-makers of everyday ministers
Celebrated Win	Participation and program growth	Gospel being planted in people’s relational spheres of influence
Results In	A connected, stable congregation	A multiplying movement of disciples

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Many existing churches need to integrate these two “funnels,” but achieving this integration means prioritizing the multiplication funnel over the assimilation funnel. For most church leaders, this necessitates significant shifts in personal thinking, focus, and practices before implementing broader changes within their congregations. This is a challenging task as the assimilation funnel often competes for the time and energy needed for the multiplication funnel.

It is essential to keep multiplication superior and defend the assets devoted to it, because the multiplication funnel yields compounding returns while the assimilation funnel only yields diminishing returns.

### WHAT AN ASSIMILATION FUNNEL DOES WELL

The assimilation funnel is a model that depicts a person’s typical step-by-step path to full engagement and belonging in an organized church. In fact, this is often identified as “a next step process”. Each step represents involvement in a program or activity that they haven’t engaged in before. So then, the more activities a person engages in—the further they proceed through the funnel—the more connected they are and the more energy, time, and money they personally contribute to the church.

The assimilation funnel is a creation of church leaders in the late 80’s to early 2000s. Prior to that period—and still in most churches today—church activities looked like a menu, not a map. The bulletin, newsletter, and calendar listed a variety of events that had no obvious connection to one another.

Participants were free to pick and choose any combination of programs they wanted to attend, and many picked none other than the one they started with (usually Sunday morning worship). The jumble of options was confusing, and it wasn’t obvious what one’s next step should be. Again, in too many churches, this is still true today.

Many attendees, especially newbies, heard announcements about this or that upcoming event and interpreted them as invitations for someone else.

The assimilation funnel was invented to improve this situation. It simplified the process of belonging by presenting each person with a clear next step—the next program they were invited to participate in. It also muted, limited, or even eliminated programs that didn’t fit the funnel, which streamlined the church calendar and aligned the whole organization to bring people to deeper involvement.

Today, the most common assimilation funnel typically consists of three steps: worship attendance, small group participation, and volunteer service. However, there’s a growing trend, exemplified by the Church of the Highlands in Alabama, where a four-step funnel is gaining popularity. This approach includes adding a membership class—before the volunteering step—that places a strong emphasis on discovering one’s personal calling.

The most elaborate assimilation funnel that’s widely known is Saddleback Community Church’s five-step funnel, described in Rick Warren’s 1995 bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Church*.

The Assimilation Funnel was a great ministry innovation in its day, because it made the church comprehensible for participants and manageable for leaders. For a church that was already good at drawing people in, the assimilation funnel was the most efficient way to get as many as possible glued as firmly as possible to the church.

It was also the most efficient way to recruit the volunteers needed to staff the funnel and expand it to engage even more people—in other words, it grew the workforce to accommodate a growing church.

## 5 ASSIMILATION FUNNEL DRAWBACKS

Although these benefits to churches were great (and still are), the assimilation funnel also has significant drawbacks, especially when it is the only funnel operating in a church—that is, when there is no multiplication funnel running at the same time.

Hear us loud and clear: The assimilation funnel is not inaccurate... but it is inadequate. An efficient Assimilation funnel is needed. Yet, for the sake of the missional task before us all, we need to have a clear understanding of what the Assimilation Funnel can do and what it can't do, no matter how much we improve it. Otherwise, you'll continue to make more efficient that which is not holistically effective in making and multiplying disciples in our increasingly secularized contexts.

### 1. The assimilation funnel assumes inflow.

Back when the assimilation funnel began to be deployed in dynamic, growing churches of the 90s and early 2000s, it was hard to see that it wasn't multiplying disciples because the churches were adding new attendees so fast. It also became really easy to confuse correlation with causation—people got the idea that since growing churches had efficient assimilation funnels, the assimilation funnels must have been causing the growth.

The question that those growing churches were trying to solve was: "If you found yourself up to your neck in baby Christians, what would you do?"

The assimilation funnel did help churches grow by providing volunteers to run high-quality programs that Christians gravitate to. Even so, this was still only one ingredient to growth. If your church was located in an area with a booming population, and if the new residents were predisposed to go to church, and if you had an electric teacher and a heart-pumping band, then good programs could help you bring people in and keep them.

Still, even with the assimilation funnel doing its part, the church relied on other sources to pour people into the wide end of the funnel.

What do you do, though, when those sources dry up? What do you do to reach a never-churched generation that doesn't think of the church as a place to find answers to their questions about life? What do you do when even Christians are disinclined to attend or tune in frequently?

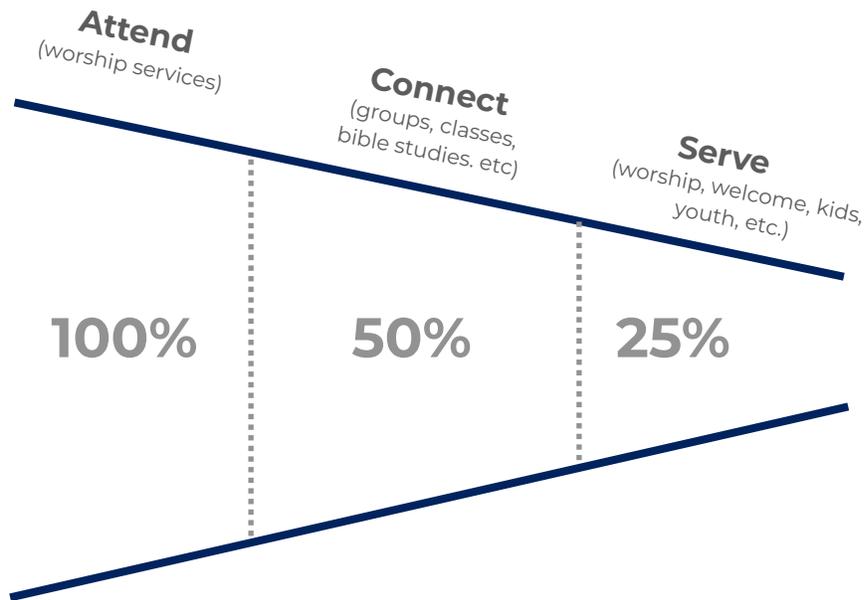
Your assimilation funnel may excel at driving people toward greater engagement at the narrow end, but its effectiveness diminishes if fewer people are entering through the wide end..

### 2. The assimilation funnel yields diminishing returns.

However many people you have participating in the first stage of your funnel, you're likely to have half as many engaged in stage two and a half again as many in stage three.

Another way to say it is that you'll always have a lot fewer people doing everything than those doing a couple of things or just one thing.

# INNOVATING MULTIPLICATION: Fusing Assimilation with Disciple Multiplication



In the parable of the soils, Jesus talked of scattering lots of seed (and seed casters) and only a portion of it falling on good soil—sort of like the assimilation funnel—but the good soil was so productive that it more than made up for the seed that didn't produce (Matthew 13:3–8, 18–23). The assimilation funnel doesn't generate that kind of fruitfulness without the multiplication funnel running alongside to deploy more “seed casters”.

### 3. The assimilation funnel produces mistaken results.

I'd like you to notice that the description of the assimilation funnel above is in strictly organizational terms. The assimilation funnel is a tool to solve a specific problem—how to get interested new participants to stick in a voluntary organization so that the organization is strengthened. Indeed it solves that problem quite well. Yet, the leaders, designers, and developers of the Assimilation Funnel, both in the past and present, do not merely frame it in organizational terms; they imbue it with a layer of spiritual ideals and expectations, often viewing it as the key to the kingdom.

It has then become not just a technical solution for an organizational challenge but God's process for making and maturing disciples.

This spiritual interpretation of the assimilation funnel is based on two dangerous assumptions. First, it assumes that moving people into a new ministry environment equals spiritual growth. Second, it presumes that moving people into service will multiply disciples.

One of our pastors we've worked with often tells the story of a parishioner in their congregation who checks all the Assimilation Funnel boxes – attending weekly, engaged in a small group, and serving as a greeter on Sundays. This same parishioner also introduces himself as a self-proclaimed atheist.

On a typical church's scorecard, this man is a poster child of ministry success and yet by his own confession is not a disciple of Jesus.

The problem is not the assimilation funnel itself; it's the reality that it over-promises and under-delivers. It promises to do everything listed in the chart below, but most often only delivers on the left-hand side. Again, it's not inaccurate, it's simply inadequate for the task at hand.

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### **4. The assimilation funnel fosters attachment to the provisions rather than the vision.**

People become emotionally attached to the programs, people, personality, and places that the assimilation provides. The output of the assimilation funnel is the labor force and donor base it provides.

There's nothing about the assimilation funnel itself that requires a person to climb to embrace and see themselves as an active agent of the shared disciple-making vision of the church.

Now, a church can do its level best to get people thinking and embracing a larger God-empowered vision. For instance, many churches include in their assimilation funnel an orientation for new members, and there they talk about the church's mission, values, and vision.

Still, if the language of mission and a vision of making disciples is only a label pasted onto the assimilation funnel, not a disciple-making identity, then a new member's commitment to the mission and vision often moves to celebrating and helping their pastors with the organizational vision.

### **5. The assimilation funnel promotes leader distraction.**

The engagement steps of worship, small groups, and volunteering are embedded in the American Church's version of the Great Commission which is more about making worship services, baptizing people into small groups and teaching them to volunteer.

No pastor or leader embraces this distorted commission intentionally, but it's what they are slaving away doing even with all their good intentions.

It's possible for someone to be employed on a church staff and have no time or margin to work on the multiplication funnel. In fact, it's not only possible, it's probable. Consider: who are the three to ten people you're personally discipling?

Every leader on a church staff needs to answer this question. In most churches we've worked with, both large and small, three-quarters of the staff can't name three.

## **ELIMINATION OFTEN PRECEDES INNOVATION**

Ironically, it's just here that the assimilation funnel can become part of the solution to its own problem. For us to begin forging a disciple-making vision and culture, all staff members must free up at least 20 percent of their time and devote it to making disciples personally as living models.

The only way to do this is to become increasingly efficient at servicing the Assimilation Funnel. Fortunately, efficiency is just what the assimilation funnel is good at. The assimilation funnel simplifies church programs not only for participants who enjoy them but also for leaders who run them.

Liberated from an endless list of events to plan, resource and oversee, leaders can carve out the time they need for personal disciple-making.

Our problem is that we've frequently used the time savings yielded by the assimilation funnel to make existing programs more irresistible instead of making the shared disciple-making conviction and vision more accessible.

I once asked one church staff team how much of their time they put into Sunday morning. Without batting an eye they replied that it was 95 percent. I asked them, "So are you a church or a production company?".

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### BEFORE WE TURN TO THE MULTIPLICATION FUNNEL

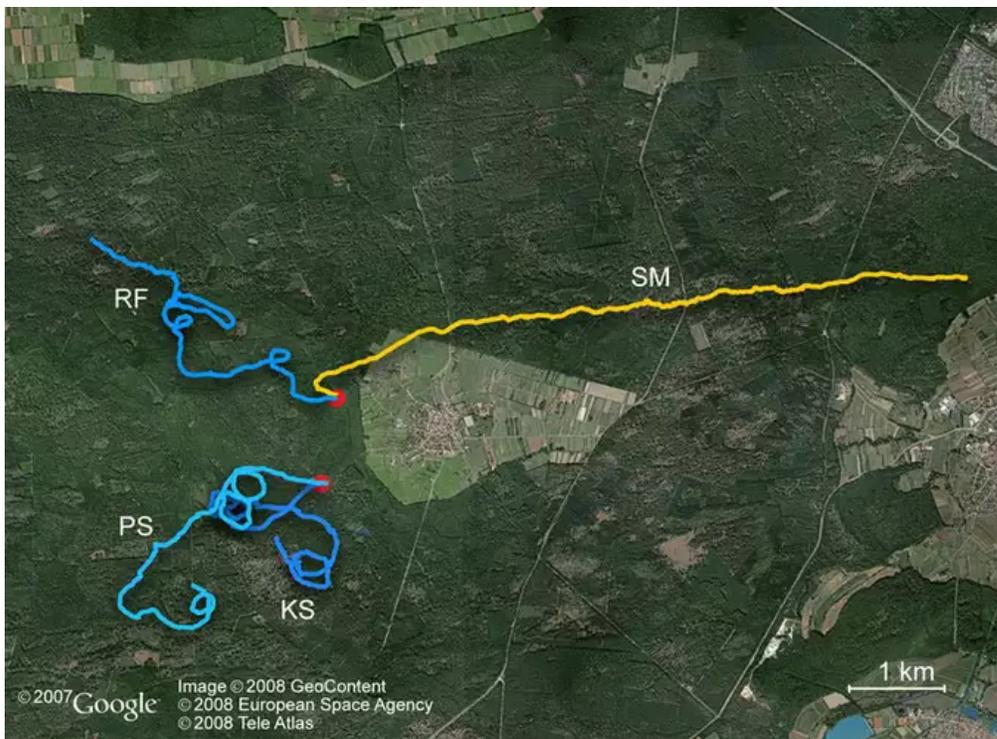
Have you ever been lost; determined to get to a particular destination but found yourself confused about where you are and which direction to head next?

If so, you're not alone.

Apparently walking in circles is a natural phenomenon. In fact, scientific researchers studied what happens to people who get lost while walking in a forest or wilderness. In the study, people were instructed to do their very best to walk in a straight line from point A to point B and then were left on their own in a dense forest in Germany. Each person was tracked by GPS.

It turns out that lost people literally go around in circles, but they don't realize it. Even so, that is not what is most fascinating.

The research revealed that lost people tend to feel confident that they are walking in a straight line all the while they are walking in circles. The study stated, "...participants were only able to keep a straight path when



the sun or moon was visible. However, as soon as the sun disappeared behind some clouds, people started to walk in circles without even noticing it.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems we are in continual need of a reliable point of reference to keep from walking in circles. With the prevailing model of church in mind, our friend, Bill Allison, loves to ask this question: “When it comes to disciple-making, could it be that we have lost our point of reference and are spending a good deal of time confidently walking in circles—and we’re not even aware of it?”<sup>3</sup>

## **INNOVATING MULTIPLICATION:** Fusing Assimilation with Disciple Multiplication

If we're honest, without a fixed point of reference, the simplicity of the Great Commission turns into the Great Confusion. Any multiplication innovations that move the church into the future must begin with a fixed point of reference..

The good news is we know where to locate that point of reference. In the four gospels we find that, through Jesus' life, we have been given a definitive pattern for multiplication. Amazingly, Jesus is not only the Messiah and our message but also our model for life and ministry.

### **THE GREAT CONFUSION**

We described it as an Assimilation Funnel with a common three-step strategy: Attend → Connect → Serve. We did a deep dive to unpack both its benefits and limitations.

If you were unaware of Jesus' commission to His Church and tried to discern it by examining the prevailing discipleship model found in most churches today, it would probably sound something like this: *Go into all the world and make worship attenders, baptize them in the name of small groups and teach them how to serve a few times a week.* <sup>4</sup>

Of course, that is not the Great Commission that we find in Matthew 28:18-20. Yet, because this passage is so familiar to us, it may be helpful to step back and ask: How did the first disciples of Jesus hear the commission before Jesus ascended?

Could what they had heard sound to them more like this:

*"You know the friendship I've shared with you for the last three-and-a-half years? Repeat that in the exact same way over and over again. Starting right now, go and do exactly what I did with you...with other friends...and help them do it with their friends without ever stopping. When you tell others in your life about me, some will believe and follow me. Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Be sure to pull them close—like I did with you—and show them how to love God, love people, and make disciples...who make more disciples...until every community in the world has disciple-making friends, who are making more disciple-making friends. As you live my disciple-making way of life you can have full assurance of my presence, power, and provision—for I am always with you."* <sup>5</sup>

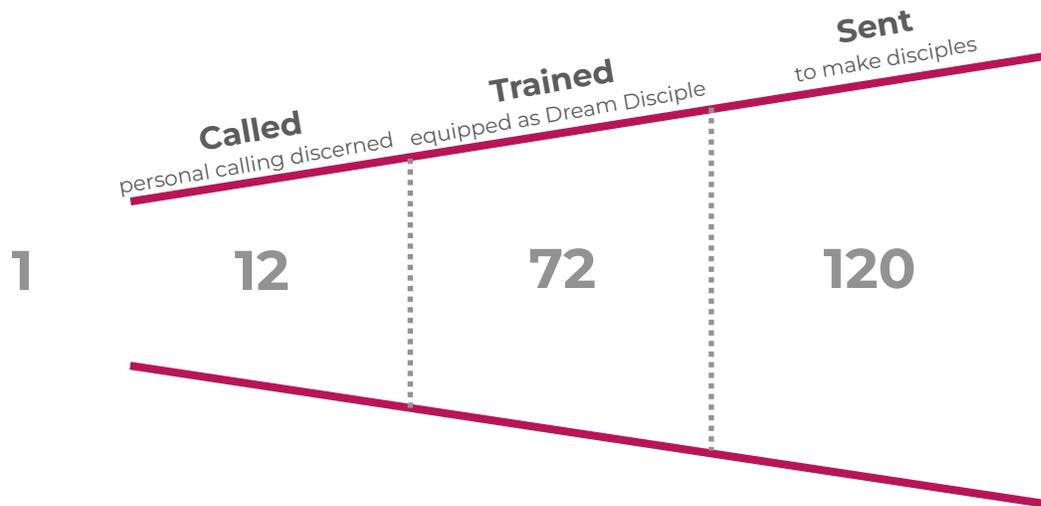
### **JESUS' MULTIPLICATION FUNNEL**

When we look at Jesus, not merely as our message but also as our model for life and ministry, we find that he has provided a repeatable pattern for a disciple-multiplying movement. We call what we see in Jesus's life and ministry the Multiplication Funnel.

This is called the Multiplication Funnel because it's about disciples of Jesus who make disciples who make disciples. It's not about addition by drawing more people into the church—it's about multiplication by followers of Christ reproducing Jesus' way of life in multiple other people who do the same in still others.

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The stages of this funnel do not represent a sequence of programs but a succession of spiritual generations of disciples of Jesus. We label them with numbers that recall successive generations sent out on mission with Jesus.

While the best place to find Jesus' multiplication strategy is by looking chronologically at the life of Christ as portrayed in the four gospels, Luke provides for us with a high-level "Cliff Notes" version.

In the diagram above, Jesus is represented by the number one. In Luke 8:1-3, we find that Jesus is doing the ministry but bringing along men and women he's pulled close to join Him on his mission. [It's worth noting that the sequence really begins in chapter 6, where Luke highlights Jesus' communion and dependence on the Father for who to invest in for the sake of multiplication.]

In Luke 9:1, we see that one becomes twelve as Jesus sends out the apostles to preach and engage in the spiritual battle with Christ's authority. It is helpful to know that the word preach in that context simply means to "announce the presence of someone significant". It's not talking about what is done in a pulpit but rather what any herald of good news can do.

Then, several months later, we see in Luke 10:1 that the 12 has become 72. They also are sent out on Jesus' mission into their relational spheres of influence. It's worth noting that, as Jesus sends them out, he reminds them not merely to make converts but to be praying for the Lord of the Harvest to raise up more "workers"—a.k.a. disciple-makers who will also be sent on mission together. He sends the 72 with a multiplication mindset.

Finally, in Acts 1:15, Luke identifies that there are 120 disciples gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem, poised for Pentecost (Acts 1:15). This 120 become the Spirit-filled force for good that launches the expansion of the church.

We can also symbolically associate these stages with the four generations of disciples implied in 2 Timothy 2:2: "And the things you have heard me [first generation] say in the presence of many witnesses [second generation] entrust to reliable people [third generation] who will also be qualified to teach others [fourth generation]."

The multiplication funnel is sort of like a family tree on its side showing disciple-making friends and their spiritual children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. To perpetuate multiplication beyond the walls of the church, disciples need more than to attend, connect, and serve. They also need to be called, trained and sent.

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#### **Called...into special assignment**

Every disciple of Jesus has been called. God called each of us “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Just as Paul tells the disciples in Rome and in Corinth that we are “called to be his holy people” and as he also tells Timothy that we are “called to a holy life” (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:9). God has summoned each of us to be someone and do something that we otherwise wouldn’t if we didn’t belong to him.

Much of what God has called us to be and do we share in common with everyone God has called. Such as, he’s called all of us to be his children, his servants, and his temple. Likewise, he’s called all of us to glorify him, to love our neighbor, and to make disciples.

However, he hasn’t called all of us to be and do these things in the same way. He has given us a diversity of gifts and positioned us in a diversity of places. He’s instilled in us a diversity of passions. He’s fashioned for us different bodies, and he’s embedded us in different situations with different webs of relationships.

In this light, when we say that people need to be called, we mean that if leaders are going to develop a multiplication funnel, they have to help individuals know and name their special calling from God. We are talking about their Ephesians 2:10 calling, their holy assignment from God. Most Christians know what they have been saved from (see Ephesians 2:1-9), but they don’t know what they have been saved for.

When a person knows their special calling, they grasp as they never have before the value they have to contribute to the world around them in all venues at all times. Special calling breaks down the false distinction between sacred activity and secular activity in a person’s life.

As Paul says, “To the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15); special calling helps disciples recognize that they are God’s sacred people wherever they are who sacralize every ordinary thing they do just by doing it (see Colossians 3:23). They start to see themselves as living their divine calling when they’re on the job as much as when they’re in a worship service.

#### **Trained...to do the Jesus “stuff”**

Once someone comes to see that Jesus has chosen them to be and make disciples of Him by living out their special calling among the unique people and places He’s sent them, they still have to learn how to live like him. Dallas Willard famously wrote of discipleship being “learning from Jesus to live my life if he were I.” It’s doing what Jesus would do if he lived your life today—if he worked your job, had your family and friends and lived in your neighborhood.

Most people who go to church are not equipped for this kind of living despite leaders’ good intentions. The attend-connect-serve assimilation model does a decent job of convincing people they should live like Jesus; it connects them with other people who want to live like Jesus; it even creates supportive spaces for people to celebrate how they’re living like Jesus and to confess how they aren’t. But it rarely trains people to develop the competencies and skills we see Jesus doing in the power of the Spirit.

In fact, we’ve found that what most people call training, is really more teaching. We highly value teaching. Indeed, if you’re building a disciple-multiplying culture, we believe it is not less important but more important. Even so, teaching always has to be balanced with training if you are going to get multiplication. To stretch our minds to see some generalized differences between teaching (preaching & speaking) and training, consider the chart below:

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← TEACHING —————	————— TRAINING →
Classroom/ Auditorium Space	Lab/Life Space
Content & Curriculum to Complete	Character/Competence to Develop
Monologue	Dialogue
Stimulate the head & stir the heart	Equip the hands and activate the heels
Information & Inspiration	Imitation and Innovation
“Tell How” learning	“Show How” learning
Mitigates failure with clarity & expertise	Introduces failure with practice & feedback
Low relationship	High relationship
Creates a culture of dependence	Creates a culture of empowerment

Take a moment to reflect on this question: How are we doing as a leadership team in cultivating a culture of training—not just a culture of teaching?

Our dream is that over the next 40 years, church leaders would put as much imagination, creativity and effort into training as they have into teaching the last 40 years.

Regrettably, if disciples are not equipped to not only grasp the teachings of Jesus but also put them into practice in every aspect of their lives throughout the entire week—be it their profession, family, hobbies, or any other facet—then the process of multiplication halts way before it ever reaches the fourth generation.

This happens because, without a culture of training, discipleship efforts tend to center around spiritual activities that Christians prefer. These activities often seem, at best, indirectly related to the real-life challenges faced by outsiders. The whole endeavor moves to become insider-focused very quickly. Spiritual reproduction is never activated.

### SENT INTO ALL OF LIFE

Moreover, once a disciple is called and trained, they still have to be sent. Similar to calling, sentness isn't something we manufacture for people but something God has already granted them. When Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” he wasn't just talking to the disciples in Jerusalem the day he rose but to all disciples everywhere for all time (John 20:21).

Practically, disciples often don't realize they've been sent until they discern the specific place and people they're meant to serve and understand what they need to do with them.

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For example, imagine a basketball coach who's had hundreds of people come through her program. She may have a general notion that she should positively influence her players, but it may never have crossed her mind that she's actually been discipling them all along. What if she added some gospel intentionality to these relationships?

Imagine if her eyes open to the reality that as she's been discipling them in basketball, she starts to see what a short step it is to say to her players, "I've been teaching you to play offense and defense on the basketball court; now follow me, and I'll show you how to play offense and defense with your life."

Or imagine a banker who's climbed well up the corporate ladder and realizes that he's been helping younger employees learn banking for years. Once he realizes that is how disciple-making works, he then sees that he has the opportunity not only to make a new generation of bankers but also to make the kind of bankers who bank the way Jesus would bank if Jesus were a banker.

Or imagine a woman with a disability who is homebound and isn't able to work a steady job, but she's known to the neighborhood as the friendly face on the front porch who will share a cookie and talk with anyone. Imagine if she realized that her ultimate contribution in life was to be the person who everyone in that little neighborhood felt safe to share their story with. She could then recognize her opportunity to point people to Jesus as the truest comforter who hears all stories, and she could teach some of them how to listen to others the way Jesus does.

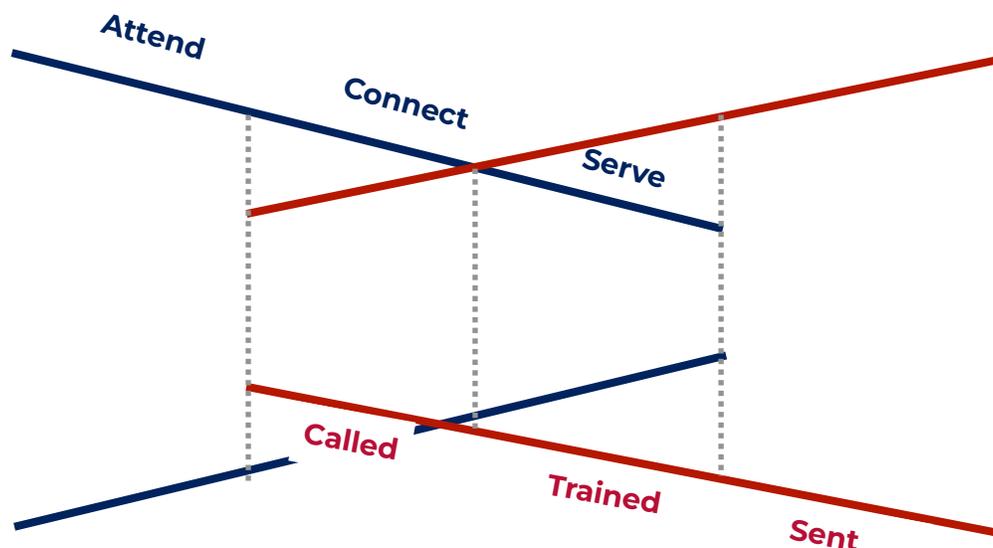
If people's eyes open up to their sentness just one time, they see it everywhere. They may already be doing it accidentally, but they can learn to do it intentionally. The possibilities are endless; there is no limit to how they can multiply their life.

## Move the Finishline

We must move the finishline of ministry faithfulness from creating converts who become volunteers who serve (assimilation funnel only) to developing disciples who become leaders who are sent on mission into the everyday places of life (multiplication funnel).

Can you imagine the possibilities for multiplication if a growing core of people in your church were able to identify the Ephesians 2:10 calling which God designed them for, were trained live as a disciple—your Dream Disciple who step into the places where they live, work, learn and play with gospel influence.

For most churches, the answer to moving with greater disciple-making intentionality into the future is not simply to throw away the Assimilation Funnel of attend-connect-serve for Jesus' Multiplication Funnel of called-trained-sent. What is required, however, is a forging of the two funnels together.



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These two funnels are forged with heat and hammering over time. Heat represents leaders' courageous conviction that comes from God's Word and consistent dissatisfaction with the status quo of the prevailing model alone.

At the end of the day, this must be driven by more than an idea you read in an article. It has to be your own certainty that God has spoken and planted in you a discontent and a desire to change things.

Hammering is the result of persevering through repeated deliberate actions. It doesn't happen overnight; instead, it evolves through a series of intentional steps taken by individual disciple-making leaders, the core leadership team, and ultimately, everyday followers of Jesus.

These collective efforts reshape the culture of the entire church over time. In the process of forging funnel fusion, it's important to remember that progress should take precedence over perfection every time.

Many leaders wait to get things perfect before they start working, so they never start. Others start with what they think will be the perfect model only to find that it doesn't work perfectly in real life causing them to give up and conclude that funnel fusion doesn't work at all.

The truth is that there are no perfect models for doing this, and even churches that have been working on this for a long time would tell you that their multiplication funnel doesn't function perfectly.

In the **Disciplemaking Pathway Accelerator** we'll look at your church in particular and begin taking steps to make your assimilation funnel efficient so that your multiplication funnel can become more effective over time. The goal is to design a ministry disciple-making process that make it more and more likely for your **Dream Disciple** to emerge.

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