

Does Your Leadership Structure Impede the Progress of Discipleship?

At [LifeWay Research](#), we are passionate about the state of the church. It is the focus of the vast majority of our work. One of the conclusions of an overwhelming amount of statistical evidence is that healthy churches are utilizing small groups.

Whether they call them cell groups, small groups, Sunday School classes, missional communities, or one of a number of other monikers, healthy churches are moving people move from sitting in rows to sitting in circles, in order that they might engage in community for ministry and mission.

If we take a good look at the state of our churches, however, we also see that there is a dearth of disciple-making. People are neither being disciplined nor trained to make disciples, and much of that problem springs from a lack of small group community participation.

We surveyed North American churchgoers, and found: less than half sacrifice their own desires to provide for those in need; over one-third never exercise their spiritual gifts to serve God and others; and only 19 percent read their Bible every day.

Discipleship Deficit

So, statistically we see churches have a major discipleship deficit. Those who have realized this have tried to address it in various ways. For some, the answer is more exciting worship. For others, it is better programming or better preachers.

All those can be helpful things, but it can be deceptively hurtful when our focus becomes all about the weekend. A dynamic communicator and wonderful music can gather a crowd, but they often do not move people forward in discipleship.

In the book [Transformational Discipleship](#), we specifically zeroed in on that particular deficit. What we found in our research is that one of the keys in the discipleship process is tight-knit community. Small groups are vital for creating disciples.

The Need for Community

There are at least 30 commands in the New Testament you cannot obey unless you are actively engaged in a local church. And you will not fulfill these “one another” commands by simply attending a church that is all about the weekend. You have to meaningfully engage in relationship-building with other believers who will walk through life with you, thereby fulfilling the one anothers together.

Because of all that we have learned in our research, small groups are now an assumed necessity, in my opinion. If you want to develop healthy disciples who make more healthy disciples, a healthy small group ministry is required.

But they are challenging, as is anything that requires deep, intimate relationships. So what makes them work. **One of the most glaring issues we have seen in the creation of healthy small group culture within churches is leadership.**

The Priest of Priests

I think one of the great challenges in the church today is that of “clergification.” Let me explain what I mean by that.

Most of the people reading this are Protestant, and one of the keys of the Reformation was the focus on what would eventually be called the priesthood of believers. This is a key theological position within Protestantism—we do not need a priest for access to God. (I do understand and appreciate that some traditions see the pastor as having important functions related to the the ordinances or sacraments, so I am talking in general about spiritual access to God and the importance of community.)

The problem is that while it is held broadly theologically, it is not necessarily held in practice. Many churches are set up as if some remarkably gifted, talented, or trained leader must teach and explain the Bible in order for the people to understand it.

Most churches have created an environment in which, if someone needs to understand the gospel, the leader has to be the one to explain it. We don't hold *theologically* to the necessity of a priest, but we do *functionally*.

We act as though people cannot approach or understand God themselves.

I'm not unaware of that challenge of individualism, which is why I prefer the plural priesthood of believers. Yet, it is important to note that there is an undeniable tendency inherent in human nature to turn over our religious commitment or devotion or obligations, as we see them, to our religious hierarchies.

In effect, we create priests to carry out the religious rituals. This is the common trajectory for most churches, even in churches that are not theologically liturgical or sacramental. The acts of our faith become centralized on the clergy, hence, “clergification.”

I believe in biblical offices in the church. I believe that “pastor” is one of those offices, and some people might not agree, and some think there are more. Our ecclesiology determines those things, but we don't have to agree on this to agree on the broader point.

Regardless of our conclusions on those matters of theology and practice, I believe that if we honestly assess the current situation we can (should) all agree that **too much of the ministry and mission of the church has been centralized into the clergy.** The result is hindering the life and ministry of our churches.

Discipleship and Clergy

Part of the discipleship deficit that exists in our churches is there because clergy has become the religious shopkeepers who provide the religious goods and services necessary to our faith. The people come to them as customers instead of co-laborers.

In order to engage small group community well and counteract the deficit we've created, we must work toward the de-clergification of the work of our churches and embrace the empowerment of a new breed of leaders.

Declergify

I'm not asking you to cast aside your leaders and leadership models on a whim. Also, I am definitely not, in this small article, encouraging you to change a well-thought theological view of your clergy. **I'm encouraging you to not unintentionally clerlify your ministry to the detriment of your service and discipleship.**

I am simply encouraging you to prayerfully consider how your leadership structures might actually be impeding the ministry and disciple-making processes of your churches.

Consider how you might empower new leaders to begin to engage people within the church in small group community and how new leaders just might spring out of those groups, as well.

> [Read more from Ed.](#)