

Lecture: When the Discipleship System Overwhelms Worship Capacity¹

Craig Miller defines a faith community as made up of two cooperative, interacting components: worship and a discipleship system.²

Fully utilizing a Discipleship System is a major change for most churches. These churches utilize a more traditional approach which could be called a ***proclamation paradigm***, sometimes known as an “attraction paradigm” or “come structure.” In this paradigm of church, believers invite the world to come to the church to hear the gospel. The focus of the proclamation oriented church is on the event of worship in the temple rather than on the process of discipleship within a network of people. In churches based on Discipleship Systems, followers of Jesus go into the world and bring the gospel to the people, and then bring new believers into the church for teaching and maturation.

It is rare in this twofold expression of ministry for worship and the discipleship system to be in balance. Normally one will gain a priority and the other will be neglected. When worship has a priority over the discipleship system, then proclamation or preaching will be perceived as the primary means of evangelism. The role of proclamation has been prioritized over the discipleship system in the Church in the centuries since Constantine.

Conditions on the American frontier allowed for a great evangelical success through an emphasis on worship and proclamation while minimizing the work of a discipleship system.³ Institutional churches are attempting to update the traditional proclamation model. Contemporary worship is an attempt to update the traditional form to create a proclamation event that draws a crowd for making disciples in the current sociological context. Growing megachurches known for contemporary worship, however, often have robust discipleship systems that gather the crowd in convenient grace and disciple it afterward in sanctifying grace.⁴ The discipleship system is the engine of growth in these great churches; copying the attributes of megachurch contemporary worship rarely results in quantitative or qualitative church growth. Poor quality worship with guitars, drums, projectors and a plexiglass pulpit is still poor quality worship.

The smallest churches in the world are worship driven; often worship is their only significant program. If these churches were unable to provide worship, they would disappear overnight. Worship is

¹These paragraphs are extracted from *Chapter Two: Discipleship Systems*, www.disciplewalk.com/resources, to illustrate the often competing roles of worship and the discipleship system. The original should be consulted for the full footnotes to all sources; links to some of the online resources cited are provided in the workshop materials section for Unit 2.

Yoido’s discipleship system is so competent that it has overwhelmed the ability of the congregation to provide space that would allow worship for the entire congregation. This is so unusual by western norms that it is worth examining how this church copes with more converts than they can house in a house of worship.

²Craig Kennet Miller, *NextChurch.Now: Creating New Faith Communities* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000), 114, 116. Balancing the dual aspects of the large group worship service and a discipleship system of cells in a “two winged church” is a major emphasis of cell church author Bill Beckham, *The Second Reformation: Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1995).

³“Prairie DNA” is described in *Chapter One: Systemic Problems*, www.disciplewalk.com/resources, 16-28.

⁴This is the heart of Willow Creek’s seven-step strategy, which defines a process where seeker- friendly individual relationships as a means of convenient grace lead to seeker-sensitive worship and finally to seeker-supportive small groups as a means of sanctifying grace. Cf. Bill Hybels, *The Seven Step Philosophy* (Barrington, IL: Seeds Tape Ministry, 1999), tape c9002.

all that links the people, and they function more like an audience than a congregation. In times of persecution when large public worship services cannot be held, discipleship systems continue to function. Believers of the Ethiopian *Meserete Kristos* movement grew tenfold, from five thousand to fifty thousand during nine years of persecution without public worship that ended in 1991.⁵ Growth also occurred under similar conditions in China.⁶ The discipleship system practiced in homes continued to produce believers in the absence of open, public worship. Persecution also frees the discipleship system from the negative influence of an *institutional world view* and *stranger evangelism*. During persecution, no energy is invested in maintaining an institutional church; it all goes to disciple-making. When public worship resumes, the world is astonished at the growth of these churches during a time of persecution and without the pulpit ministry Americans deem necessary. The discipleship system continues to function and make disciples whether or not there is public, Christian worship. This continuing growth when persecution prevents public preaching suggests that, with an effective discipleship system in place, the form worship takes is irrelevant to disciple-making. The New Testament record indicates that a particular form of worship is not necessary to build a thriving, growing, disciple-making church based on the example of the early church described in the book of Acts.⁷

Common church growth wisdom is based on a prioritization of the proclamation system over a discipleship system approach.⁸ The priority in proclamation system evangelism is inviting non-Christians to worship. Everything must be subordinated to the comfort and convenience of the seeker so that non-Christians will desire to spend sufficient time in institutional worship services to become converted. This becomes impossible in a church the size of Yoido, where “the average member has to

⁵For growth in the Sudan Interior Mission in Ethiopia, 1938-1943, see Bethel University, *Ethiopian Protestantism: The "Pente" Churches in Ethiopia*, www.bethel.edu/~letnie/Ethiopia Protestantism.html (accessed June 13, 2007). Cf. Jeremy Wells, “Ethiopia: ‘The Country Blessed of God’,” *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2005.

⁶For current restrictions on worship in China, see U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71338.htm> (accessed June 18, 2007). The church multiplication movement strategy is rapidly planting indigenous churches in China without flashy public worship considered a requirement for growth in the United States. David Garrison, *Chapter 2: CPMs Up Close; A Region in China*, <http://www.imb.org/CPM/Chapter2-ChinaRegion.htm>. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 49-64. Cf. David Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1981), 82-84.

⁷The Great Commission does not command us to worship. Jesus does not conduct worship (as we would define it) in the New Testament, nor do the disciples. The church of Acts attends Jewish, not Christian, worship in the temple where Jesus Christ is neither named or honored in liturgy. Neither Jesus nor the disciples have any leadership role or control in the worship that takes place in the temple. Temple liturgy was not Christian and did not express Christian belief or theology. The disciple-making work of the Church of Acts occurs without the disciples having the slightest influence on the worship forms of the Temple until Acts 6:7. (Presumably an attempt to influence temple worship results in their immediate ejection via persecution by the balancing process of the Temple system.) Nor does it seem that the Apostles sought to influence worship forms at all; they seem perfectly content to attend the temple and worship as they always had prior to the resurrection of Jesus. There is no New Testament correlation to contemporary or traditional worship in Acts 1-6.

⁸Church growth principles for a proclamation system based evangelistic approach are well stated by William Easum, *The Church Growth Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 43-54. These principles remain valid; Easum correctly indicates that improving worship brings immediate, positive results. Contemporary conditions, however, require an effective discipleship system cooperating with God in prevenient and sanctifying grace to bring in the people to worship. Both are necessary, but throughout history it is the discipleship system which has been neglected.

wait at least one hour in a long line just to get a place to sit down in one of our seven services.”⁹ It is impossible to accommodate 700,000 Christians in what is considered ideal in the west: a single worship service leaving more than 40% of the seating area unoccupied so that seekers are not crowded or uncomfortable.¹⁰ The logistics are impossible and as a goal, irrelevant; growth continues despite these negative conditions in worship, proving that common American convictions about worship services and church growth are rendered irrelevant in this ministry context by Yoido’s powerful discipleship system. Every week more persons participate in cell than worship, while worship participation dominates participation in the United States.

Seven worship services occur each Sunday, two on Saturday and three on Wednesday.¹¹ Yoido worships in a main sanctuary that seats twelve thousand and six chapels in the same building seating another twelve thousand where the service is televised on a giant screen.¹² Comiskey estimates 133,000 in worship the Sunday he visited in 1997, plus twenty thousand children in Sunday School, for a total attendance at the mother church of 153,000. Twelve other regional chapels add approximately 100,000 for a Sunday total of 253,000.¹³ This Sunday attendance represents 28% of the membership; Southern Baptist attendance in the United States, without the logistical problems of Yoido’s size, reflects 35% of membership.¹⁴ The worship style at Yoido is traditional rather than contemporary, although large projection screens are used.¹⁵ By American standards the sanctuary is crowded and uncomfortable, yet the church has grown for years despite this inconvenience and discomfort.

The American concern for ample, convenient parking is irrelevant. In a church of this size it is impossible to provide parking for a hundreds of thousands of attenders. Networks of cells at Yoido charter over a hundred buses; the church itself has no involvement.¹⁶ The ride on a chartered bus to

⁹Paul Yongii Cho with R. Whitney Manzano, *More Than Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 50. The facilities have since been expanded.

¹⁰For a western visitor’s less than enthusiastic experience of Yoido worship, see Harpocrates [pseud.], *254: Yoido Full Gospel Church, Yoido, Seoul, South Korea*; <http://www.ship-of-fools.com/Mystery/2000/254Mystery.html> (accessed June 18, 2007).

¹¹Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church*, 13. Dr. Cho preaches at 9 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Sundays, at 2 p.m. on Saturday and 2 p.m. on Wednesday. A video is played of Dr. Cho’s sermon is played in the 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. services on Sunday, 5 p.m. on Saturday and 7 p.m. on Wednesday. A guest or staff pastor preaches at 6:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. Sunday, 5 p.m. Wednesday and in two-hour cycles during each all night prayer meeting from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church*, 153.

¹²These estimates are from Joel Comiskey’s 1997 visit to Yoido. Comiskey has difficulty with so many Yoido members not attending worship in the church building, but indicates Cho’s response is that their tithing indicates a proper level of commitment. Cf. Matthew 6:21. Joel Comiskey, *Yoido Full Gospel Church*, <http://www.joelcomiskeygroup.com/articles/worldwide/yoido.htm> (accessed June 13, 2007).

¹³By 2003 Regional Sanctuaries had increased from twelve to nineteen. Yoido, *Organization*.

¹⁴Kevin D. Hendricks, “The Case of the Missing Church Members,” Church Marketing Sucks Blog, entry posted July 26, 2005, http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/archives/2005/07/the_case_of_the.html (accessed June 13, 2007).

¹⁵Southern Baptist Ralph Neighbour wrote in 1990 that Cho’s Pentecostal service was “just about as formal as a Presbyterian church.” Neighbour, *Where Do We Go*, 150.

¹⁶David Yongii Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1981), 61-62. Cf. Cho, *More Than Numbers*, 53.

Yoido Church provides a time of cell fellowship to and from the worship center. It is also likely that many use public transportation. Many others no doubt watch the Yoido service on television at home, either with their families or as a cell group; this is more common since 2001 due to live Internet broadcasting on Sunday and Wednesdays.¹⁷

With the worship center so crowded, the traditional “altar call” would be impossible. At the proper time in worship, persons wishing to receive Christ as Savior and Lord stand where they are and participate in a prayer of salvation, surrounded by the cell group members with whom they attend worship.¹⁸ Attending worship with the cell as a group ameliorates the seemingly negative conditions of the overcrowded sanctuary and chapels.¹⁹ The relationships of the cell surround the convert throughout all the stages of grace in the largest church in the world.

The most successful pattern of evangelism in the world involves no initial participation in worship due to the inconveniences of the size of Yoido Church. New people participate first in the discipleship system, and only later attend worship.²⁰ The path to membership begins with a relationship built through ministry visitation followed by an invitation to participate in a friendly small group meeting on the potential convert’s home turf and not on an invitation to worship. **The basic church growth lesson from the world’s largest church is stunning but simple: the most successful path to church growth involves inviting people to small groups which build relationships instead of inviting them to worship.**

New people should not be invited to worship but rather to a small group fellowship activity that builds relationships. Persons who become active in a small group will inevitably attend worship with members of that group. Yoido loses no prospective members due to worship visitors slipping through the cracks and wastes no energy on ensuring member assimilation beyond worship involvement. When new converts attend worship for the first time, they are already completely assimilated in the sanctifying grace process of the small group discipleship system. They are not strangers. Groups provide conversations and worship services provide presentations; persuasion toward conversion happens in the midst of Christian conversation prior to attendance at worship. Media and proclamation are only effective at reaching the first 16% of a population; the diffusion of innovations teaches that conversion to Christ beyond this 16%, like any innovation adoption, is the result of multiple conversations between near peers “in the midst of community.”²¹

¹⁷Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church*, 129. The services are broadcast over seven television stations, reaching most of South Korea. For Yoido’s early media strategy, see Cho, *More Than Numbers*, 55-71.

¹⁸Hurston, *Growing the World's Largest Church*, 105, 106. Converts attend a six-week School of Conversion, then are returned to the cell system. Staff, “Breakfast With David Yonggi Cho.”

¹⁹In 2001 Cho spoke of Internet broadcasting to Rick Warren: “Korea is very small - not like in America with a lot of space, so we can't enlarge our church buildings. Besides, every year we have 20,000 new converts in our churches, and we can't put them all in our church building or even our branch churches. So now we have an Internet church and many of the young generation participate in the services at home . . . I say to the young people - don't come to church - just stay home and get your teaching through the Internet.” Cho indicates that most of the cells are attending worship via internet broadcasting. Staff, “Breakfast With David Yonggi Cho And Rick Warren,” *Rick Warren’s Ministry Toolbox*, Issue #17, 7/25/2001, <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?ID=17&artid=578&expand=1> (accessed June 13, 2007).

²⁰Cho, *More Than Numbers*, 44-48.

²¹Craig Miller, *NextChurch.Now*, 6.