

# Making Disciples: From the Fish Bowl to the Ocean Approach

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*As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20, NIV)*

Jesus called the disciples by inviting them one or two at a time and met them where they were in their lives. In order to "fish for people," we need to know a little more about the fish and where they live and learn how to go about catching them. There is always the question, "What happens after we catch them?"

A.K. Best, a respected name in fly fishing, once said, *"The fishing was good; it was the catching that was bad."* I believe this quotation points out a very common struggle in ministry today. The "fishing" is good in the congregation. People are coming in the doors and they seem to be engaged in ministry, but when we begin to dig a little deeper into the spiritual lives of the people, it appears we haven't been "catching" them at all. If we can't "catch" them, the *fish* in our own tank, how do we think we can reach out to others and go beyond the church walls?

As I began to think about Jesus calling the disciples and his stories about fish and fishing, I thought about the analogy of my own experiences as a fisherman but soon turned my thoughts to where the fish live. And then reflected more on providing a home for the fish rather than "catching" them. As a result, I have outlined an approach with a vision to move *our fish* from the fish bowl to the ocean.

## The Spiritual Gift Connection

*God has given each Christian two vitally important gifts. The first is the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, his work of redemption, and thus forgiveness of sin. The second is the gift of one or more special abilities, which are to be used for the purpose of unifying the body of Christ and for the growth of God's Kingdom. These abilities are called spiritual gifts and they are received through our baptism. Like other presents, it is impossible to fully appreciate and make use of our spiritual gifts until they have been opened. (Neal Boese and Patricia Haller)*

For most of us, our faith journey began in our home or in a congregation when we first went to Christian education classes. In most places it was called Sunday school. If we were fortunate, we had adults in our lives who modeled the importance of Bible study and prayer. If you are reading this, there is a good chance that somehow, somewhere in your life, an adult felt it was important

enough for you to become part of the next generation of disciples. It's why you may be interested in this article. Those of us involved in lifelong learning thirst to read as much as possible about how others are passing on the faith in their own settings. From my experience in consulting with congregations I have learned we all face very similar challenges ranging from worrying about participation numbers to engaging young children and their parents to wondering how to sustain a youth ministry. There is no magic pill. It is one step at a time and one person at a time. Often we find that what we think is working well in our congregation is not part of God's plan—it's our plan.

My own faith journey involved being raised in a small, rural congregation where my great-grandfather built the church. Throughout the past six decades of my life, I have experienced raising a family, and living in several different states and two other countries. By the time our youngest son was in second grade, I realized I truly was what they were calling me, "a church groupie." At that point in my life, I was invited to join a church staff. I didn't even blink before saying yes. I literally had no clue what I was in for. I found I thirsted to learn about as many resources as possible to do my job well. After a few years of learning the hard way, on my own, and getting burned out, I decided to attend a spiritual gifts assessment conference. I discovered I was given the gifts of leadership, administration, and faith. The difference in the way I viewed my work after the conference changed the way I did ministry forever. I began to connect my personality and spiritual gifts along with my life experiences and suddenly found a passion I did not realize was a gift from God. I had been raised in the church. I couldn't help wondering why I did not learn about connecting my spiritual gifts with my ministry earlier in my life. I found I was not alone and that many of my colleagues had not connected spiritual gifts with their ministries either.

I wrote this article with a passion to help you and those in your congregation reflect on their own faith journey, recognize God has given each of us gifts to use in our daily lives, in the congregation, and in the world. Each of us has a passion. Our passion is directly tied to the gifts God has given us. What we choose to do in our lives and how we open our hearts and minds to finding places to execute and use our gifts is essential to fulfilling goals along our faith journey. It helps us move one step closer to being the person God is calling us to be.

Realizing God has called you is empowering. I am always amazed to discover how very few congregations have taken the time to discover the gifts God has brought together in one place. And even more surprised to learn the act of empowering these gifts can often be seen as a threat to existing ministries. The importance of helping those in our congregations realize they are on a faith journey and providing opportunities for them to recognize their spiritual gifts cannot be underestimated. How and where they fit into the journey in our congregation is essential to our ministries. It's an "Aha!" moment when we tie passion with experience, and use it to help others. Uplifting spiritual gifts and teaming them with passion invites the Holy Spirit to grow vibrant ministries. The end result is modeling our faith and making disciples.

## From the Fish Bowl to the Ocean

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)*

A focus on spiritual formation leads to transformation of the church. Where do we start? Spiritual gifts assessments and seeing where God is growing you in your own setting. It all begins in the fish bowl.

### Step 1: The Fish Bowl

This is where most of us get our start in the life of the church. Parents, guardians, and/or grandparents made sure we got to church when we were children, or friends invited us when we were adults to gather for worship once a week. We may be involved in Sunday school or Bible study. The fish bowl is an analogy to describe our beginnings of making disciples in our congregations. We begin our faith journey in the congregation. When we buy a few fish and put them in a bowl at home, we know they will only grow as big as the bowl allows. We can't add more fish, or some will not have enough oxygen. We feed them daily and watch as the water grows cloudy from too much food or the fish get lethargic as they lack space to swim. But we continue to enjoy watching the fish stay in the bowl. We feed them and watch them and feed them and watch them until they can no longer grow or multiply.

I invite you to think for a moment to reflect on this analogy of a fish bowl. Whether we are a large or a small congregation, we feed those who come to be fed. The church walls are only so big. We can teach, nurture, and model lifelong learning through small groups and sometimes large groups within the church walls, but if we do not take steps to move beyond the walls, we only grow as large as the building allows. We get comfortable where we are and dismiss thinking about providing space and "oxygen" for others to join us.

***Fish Bowl Action.*** Stop reflecting on numbers, reflect on individual people. Provide opportunities for them to understand that God has given each one of them spiritual gifts. The importance of each person understanding they are on a spiritual journey cannot be understated. The time spent helping individuals connect their lives with God's gifts will not only transform their thinking but contribute to the larger picture of where God is calling the congregation.

✧ How can you recognize the gifts God has placed in your fish bowl, so that you grow?

### Step 2: The Fish Tank

The next step up from a fish bowl is a fish tank. It is larger and allows for a greater variety of fish. There is room for the fish to grow depending on the size of the tank. Oxygen is needed so we invest in generators and tubes and cleaning supplies. For the congregation that desires to grow, there is an investment in diversity in the congregation and more room to grow. Oxygen is supplied through a staff or volunteers who can oversee programming.

In the fish tank stage of a congregation, there are many decisions to make about how and where to spend dollars to maintain the building. And decisions are made on how to “school” the fish. Teaching and learning opportunities are much more frequent than they were in the fish bowl stage.

***Fish Tank Action.*** You can now gather many different types of people together with a variety of gifts. Provide the opportunity to talk about the gifts God has placed in your tank. It is time to invite the telling of faith stories. Modeling our faith for others happens very slowly if we do not know one another through our shared faith stories.

- ◇ How will you know which ministries are most effective in your setting?
- ◇ What will happen if you connect gifts together and empower ministries shaped by the gifts of the people?

### **Step 3: The Aquarium**

At this stage in the life of a fish, people come to visit, study, and get to know different fish. They learn about them and there are programs to learn more and even contribute to their welfare. As ministries begin to grow and be shaped by the gifts of the people, others will feel the passion and begin to come and see.

***Aquarium Action.*** At this stage in the life of the congregation, family, friends, and other congregations are intentionally invited to events happening in your congregation. People come to observe and learn. Others can openly see how you live your faith through being part of a gathering. At this point, those who thirst to be with you each time and begin to ask questions are invited to assess their own spiritual gifts.

- ◇ What type of events could your congregation host?
- ◇ What could others learn from your congregation?

### **Step 4: The Ocean.**

Many times the next step an aquarium takes in helping a species survive is to release them back to the ocean to prosper and multiply. There are many opportunities outside the congregation to serve and grow.

***Ocean Action.*** It is time to identify places outside the church walls where the gifts and ministries you have grown together can make a difference in the world. When many gifts together answer Jesus call to make disciples, the spiritual journey is one the congregation takes together. Transformation happens.

- ◇ What are we doing to help grow disciples and send them out into the ocean?
- ◇ In what stage of making disciples is your congregation?

## A Leadership Note

I believe every congregation has the ability to grow beyond the fish bowl. Size does not matter. It all begins with you: how you lead small groups, how you lead the staff, and how you reflect the use of your own spiritual gifts.

When I was on staff in a congregation, we took the gifts assessment as a leadership team and then involved one group at a time in the congregation. By the time 75 people had taken the assessment, we began to notice new ministries popping up everywhere. Once people began to recognize, verbalize, and affirm one another's gifts, it was incredible how the shape of ministry changed. People were energized and felt empowered. Providing support for and opening new doors for ministries began to happen. Transformation took place.

Ken Blanchard, an author and management expert once said, "EGO means Edging God Out." As leaders sometimes we are guilty of having a bit of an ego. We cannot let go of our own ministries. Hoarding ministry can impede the work of the Spirit. It's time to grow the church beyond our egos and equip and empower the people God has gathered in our midst. Our goal should be to move people from the fish bowl to the ocean

- ◇ What step describes your congregation today?
- ◇ Where can you begin to move your congregation towards the ocean?

## Spiritual Gift Resources

*Gifts for You, Opening Your Spiritual Gifts:* [www.womenoftheelca.org/resources-pages-5.php - sthash.7BZDswGh.dpuf](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/resources-pages-5.php-sthash.7BZDswGh.dpuf)

Discovering or recovering your spiritual gifts and exploring how you can better use them is part of growing in faith and discipleship. *Gifts for You*, complete with two Bible studies, will help you in that discovery with its spiritual gifts assessment.

*LifeKeys: Discover Who You Are.* Jane Kise, David Stark, and Sandra Krebs Hirsch. Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2005

This updated comprehensive guide helps people discover how God has uniquely created them. Engaging stories, inventories, self-tests, and other easy-to-use exercises make *Discover Who You Are* a one-of-a-kind tool. It will help those longing to find or deepen meaning in life, considering volunteer opportunities, contemplating career changes, or desiring to become more useful to God.

PLACE Ministries: [www.placeministries.org](http://www.placeministries.org)

PLACE is an intentional process to connect church members into purpose-driven ministry including self discovery, individualized ministry coaching and tracking from workshop training to ministry placement. Through the PLACE process, people discover that God has created and gifted them with a unique capacity to serve others.

S.H.A.P.E. (Saddleback Church): [www.saddlebackresources.com/SHAPE-C156.aspx](http://www.saddlebackresources.com/SHAPE-C156.aspx)

Finding and fulfilling your unique S.H.A.P.E., or unique blend of Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experiences, has never been easier with this book and six-week small group study. It will help you, your church staff, and your congregation unlock your God-given potential, uncover your specific purpose.

*Spiritual Gifts: The Power That Drives the Congregation.* Neal R. Boese. CSS Publishing Company, 1995.

You have within you a God given gift that is to be used for service. Within the pages of this book, there is a listing of the spiritual gifts; scriptural definitions of each gift; stories of individuals who possess the gifts and an inventory that can help you determine your own gift. There is also a chapter that includes methods of how you implement the study of gifts within a congregation.