

Unit 5: The Third Wave of Cell Innovation  
Lecture: Willow Creek Community Church

At some time in his mid-sixties, my father was visiting a high school friend who lived in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago, and she invited him to attend church with her family on Saturday night. He said that he wasn't much for going to church; she said she thought he would like it. As he described it, it was the strangest thing he had ever seen. The building was huge, more like a concert hall than any church he had experienced. Down on the stage a big band was playing jazz arrangements of hymns. (A "big band" to my father meant a large jazz band like those of his youth, with 20-30 musicians; famous big bands were led by Benny Goodman, Glen Miller, the Dorsey Brothers, Count Basie and Duke Ellington.) According to his high school yearbook from 1944, my father's ambition had been to play trombone with a famous big band. Now he was hearing familiar hymns played in his favorite style of music by his favorite kind of band. Then there was a very interesting message. He was so enjoying this "church" that he hadn't even realized that the service had lasted over 90 minutes. After the service he wandered down to the bookstore and asked them what he could buy for his "minister son" to learn about this new sort of church. They sold him an audiotape, #C9002, entitled "Seven-Step Philosophy." It is still one of my prized possessions.

My father's first experience of Willow Creek Community Church had been in the presence of a trusted friend; that's the key point. They were a small group of at least two at the beginning of his introduction to Willow Creek.

In the early days Bill Hybels would annually repeat the "Seven Step" philosophy or strategy message to the Willow Creek church. In this message he would recount the story of the founding principles that undergird the church and call for a covenant commitment to them. The 120 page Participating Membership Manual for new members introduces the Seven Step Philosophy with this paragraph (*numbers (1) and words below in bold print are my emphasis*):

*WILLOW CREEK IS NOT PREACHING A NEW MESSAGE. Unwrap the contemporary packaging, (1) **which is obvious to the casual observer**, and you will find the rich treasure of Jesus' 2000 year old Gospel. We have no desire to alter (as if we could improve!) our Savior's message. We only want to translate it into the vernacular. As someone who is considering joining Willow Creek, you need to know this important truth: (2) **Willow Creek's innovative distinctive is not our theology**. We stand firmly in the historic Christian faith "once for all delivered" to the church (Jude 3). The teaching transmitted by Jesus through His apostles contained in the Bible governs our individual beliefs and conduct. It is our full and final authority. (4) **Where we have become somewhat of a novelty among contemporary churches is in our approach to reaching seekers. That methodology—what we call our Seven Step Philosophy—is the summary of our strategy to reach the lost. It isn't our message; it's the plan for delivering our message.***

*Seven Steps—Sinner to Saint*

*WE DO NOT CLAIM THAT OUR SEVEN STEP PHILOSOPHY is the only approach a church could take to reach the lost. We certainly don't think it's THE biblical formula, though it is supported by biblical examples and principles. (5) **It is no more or less than a pragmatic approach that works.** (6) **It is effective in reaching the lost primarily though supporting the individual evangelistic ministry of our church members.** (7) **And beyond reaching seekers with the message of Christ, it guides them to***

***maturity in Christ. (3) In short, it's the track we follow for cultivating fully devoted followers of Christ.***

There is much to learn about Willow Creek in these two paragraphs; each of my comments below is linked to a phrase identified by a number in parentheses above - example: (1).

**First**, Willow Creek's "contemporary packaging" of the message as contemporary worship is immediately obvious to casual observers. You can't miss the auditorium architecture, theater seats, the plexiglass pulpit and the absence of traditional symbols. The belief that Willow Creek's growth is due to seeker worship services is a universal misunderstanding; institutional pastors who merely copy Willow Creek's innovations in the worship "wing" of the church find that it just doesn't work in their setting or they set themselves up by drawing in vast numbers of "Eddies" or contemporary *consumer Christians*. (It always amuses me to see a plexiglass pulpit in a church; to me it is the sure sign of someone who does not understand.) **The seven step philosophy is Willow Creek's original discipleship system, and the discipleship system is the engine that drives the growth in worship attendance.**

**Second**, institutional Christians want to find something in the beliefs or theology of Willow Creek that is different. If you can prove them heretic, you can justify ignoring their results. Hybels is correct in his statement that their theology is entirely orthodox; the theology is the same. There is one significant difference, however, in the theology that is preached in both kinds of churches. At Willow Creek, members are expected to live by their beliefs, obey the Lord Jesus Christ, read their Bibles, learn and grow in faith, serve the Lord and fulfill the Great Commission by the means of each member seeking the lost. In short, they intend to practice what they preach; there is nothing new about this theology except the widespread expectation that they are actually expected to act accordingly. If you ignore this obedience, it is easy to claim that Willow Creek attempts to attract the shallow and uncommitted and leave them in that state; if you ignore the discipleship system, that is all you can see. Jesus said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). **The first priority of the cell church is that Jesus is Lord and that Jesus is to be obeyed; this leads to prayer and to goals; obedience leads directly to subordinating all the activity of the church to the purpose of obeying the Great Commission, which is the second priority. This obedience is not optional; hypocrisy is not an option.** The internal intolerance of Christian hypocrisy is a primary characteristic of all church growth movements. (Consider the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.)

**Third**, the seven step philosophy is the *equipping track* - "the track we follow for cultivating fully devoted followers of Christ." **The third priority of the cell church is the presence of a clear definition of a clear path of spiritual growth from spiritual immaturity to maturity; this is the equipping track of spiritual development.**

**Fourth**, the seven step philosophy is Willow Creek's methodology or approach to reaching seekers. The seven steps are a "summary of our strategy to reach the lost." There is a lot more to it, but this is the place to begin if your goal is to understand why Willow Creek is successful.

**Fifth**, People who have no concept of a discipleship system pick up on only one of the steps, #3: *Invite to a Seeker Service*. As their worldview insists that everything be done in a single service of worship, they are unable to perceive the other necessary aspects. Many attempts to implement Willow

Creek's seeker sensitive approach even ignore the important New Community service (step #4).

**Spiritual life requires that the entire discipleship system be employed.**

**Sixth**, an effective discipleship system requires the *working involvement of every believer* in seeking the lost, which is basic to what it means to be like Jesus. *Planning for anything less is an intentional disobedience to the command of the Great Commission.*

The seven step philosophy "is effective in reaching the lost primarily through supporting the individual evangelistic ministry of our church members." One weakness compared to Yoido, however, is that the primary outcome of this evangelistic ministry is to successfully invite people to an institutional church service. Over time Willow Creek would come to see this weakness and ask their people to do much more than simply invite people to worship; one end result is the Neighborhood focus brought by Randy Frazee that you encountered in Unit 2.

**The Great Commission is to be fulfilled by individuals, not institutions; all Christians are called to work with the lost.** One of Willow Creek's famous mottoes is that "if lost people matter to God, they should matter to me."

**Seven**, an effective discipleship system not only helps people enter faith, it helps new believers to grow in faith to the point of becoming disciple makers themselves. Beyond "reaching seekers with the message of Christ," the seven step discipleship system "guides them to maturity in Christ." Willow Creek is continually fine tuning its discipleship system; they recently humbly acknowledged that their programs that help people mature spiritually were not as effective as hoped and they were intentionally focusing on improvement. Using my terminology, maturation was stalling between the "child" and "teen" level. This 2007 "apology" became very famous; there is a folder on it in the Workshop Materials of this course.

Here are the seven steps as Willow Creek describes them in their new member manual, the "Participating Membership Manual;" a copy is present in the workshop materials folder of the course. *(My comments are in italics within parentheses.)*

### **1. Build a Relationship**

THE FIRST STEP IS TO REACH out to "Unchurched Harry and Mary" personally. Rather than beginning with the message of Christ, we seek to make connections so that when we do share the message, we have credibility. People are more inclined to consider a radical message from a trusted friend than from a stranger. The love and interest we show cultivates the ground in preparation for sowing the seeds of the Gospel. *(Discipleship systems are primarily relational.)*

### **2. Share a Verbal Witness**

A WITNESS IN A COURTROOM simply describes accurately what he or she saw. That's what we do when we witness to unchurched friends. We describe the life we knew, the Savior who came to us, and the changes He's made. It is not enough just to be "nice people"—unbelievers must hear why we are the way we are, who can save them, and how. *(Discipleship systems are about uninhibited conversations where we are able to be honest about our spirituality without dominating communications.)*

### **3. Invite to a Seeker Service**

EVERY WEEKEND, we use the services at the church to present some facet of the message of

Christ—what we call, “Christianity 101.” Every aspect is coordinated so that the seeker is the primary target audience, not the “already convinced.” The elements work together to communicate a consistent theme, and we try to use a variety of means to get the message across in a compelling and often unexpected way. The combination of the groundwork done by the individual’s verbal witness followed by the impact of a highly relevant, creative presentation brings home the message so that unchurched Harry and Mary consider anew the age-old truth of Jesus Christ. The seeker services are also designed to facilitate a process of evangelism; that is, most people are not ready to throw out their world-and-life-views after a one-hour church service. Experience shows that people need time to process information. When that process is honored, the commitments made take root better than poorly informed impulse decisions. *(The faith community created by attending with someone trusted helps this process.)*

#### **4. Become Part of New Community**

AT SOME POINT, unchurched Harry and Mary accept Christ as their Forgiver and Leader. When they do, generally the next step is to begin attending the New Community. Through in-depth Bible teaching they gain a better grasp of God’s Word. The New Community is a service designed for believers, so Harry and Mary—now “Believer Bob and Betty”—experience worship through song, prayer, and the sacrament of Communion. *(New Community, while still seeker friendly, is the worship of the faithful, and the teaching replaces Sunday school.)*

#### **5. Participate in a Small Group**

LIFE CHANGE HAPPENS best in the context where you can be known authentically and where you share your spiritual journey with others. A small group is often one of the best places to do that. Four to ten believers gather at least two times a month to share their lives, learn from God’s Word in a discussion format, and serve one another. Groups often also serve the body at large, either by being a serving group, or through periodic short-term service. *(Willow Creek has tried a variety of small group formats, finally settling on a modified Metachurch model. During their transition to become a church of small groups they reallocated 25% of their budget to support this ministry. )*

#### **6. Serve in the Body of Christ**

EVERY BELIEVER is given a spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit, and that gift is to be used for the common good. Whether in a small group or on a serving team, every participating member knows he or she is truly part of the church when his or her spiritual gifts are being used to further God’s work in the church—and beyond. *(Gifted-oriented ministry service is a key catalyst in growing through adolescent spiritual stages.)*

#### **7. Steward Financial Resources**

WHEN GOD BECOMES MASTER of our spending and giving habits, we can be confident He is master over one of the most personal areas of our lives. All our resources are entrusted to us to use for Kingdom purposes as well as for meeting personal needs. The last step in the Seven Step Philosophy is to allow God to have freedom in this area of our lives. That way, what we keep as well as what we give (using the historic benchmark of 10% of our income as a starting reference) honors Him in every respect. *(Jesus said in Matthew 6:21: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.)*

Willow Creek continues to evolve, adapting and learning continually in order to achieve their goal: *The mission of Willow Creek Community Church is to turn irreligious people into fully devoted*

*followers of Jesus Christ.* One early modification was seeker small groups, as some seekers found small group fellowship more effective than the seeker sensitive worship. Randy Frazee was brought in as a teaching pastor along with the neighborhood focus he pioneered as *the connecting church*; this ministry in local geographical neighborhoods strengthened the sense of interactive community for members with each other and with their lost neighbors. Willow Creek members began to become servant leaders in their local communities and neighborhoods.

On my last visit to Willow Creek on a Saturday night, the thrust of Bill Hybels' message was that all of those present - at a seeker service - needed for their own spiritual benefit to find a place to serve Christ in the community. (This duty laid on people at a seeker service would have been unthinkable a decade earlier.) I then walked out of the auditorium into a Saddleback style Ministry Fair - twice as large, but the same model. This image more than anything reinforced my understanding that Willow Creek will do whatever it takes *to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.*

That understanding has been reinforced with the so-called "apology" that Willow Creek delivered in the fall of 2007. Using my terminology, internal research that began in 2003 showed that Willow Creek was excellent at helping people "cross the line of faith" and become spiritual newborns; they were also excellent at helping newborns begin learning the faith through New Community, their extensive system of small groups and publishing excellent resources. Despite the widespread use of Network, however, which helps people discover their spiritual gifts, calling and beginning planning a ministry involvement, research showed that few people comparatively were entering the teenage and parental stages of spiritual maturity. One frequent term used is that they were "not learning to feed themselves spiritually."

This research was extended to 500 other congregations and preliminary results were published in book form later that fall as *REVEAL: Where Are You?* by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson.<sup>1</sup> In the January 2008 issue of Charisma (also in the Workshop Materials folder), executive pastor Greg Hawkins notes: *Willow Creek has nothing to repent for, but the "seeker obsessed" church will re-engineer itself from within. "Repenting, in my mind, deals with confessing sin," he said. "There is absolutely no sin involved in this deal, just good, old-fashioned learning. This is nothing new for us here at Willow. We are passionately committed to learning."*

One key concept of the Reveal study is the spiritual continuum which is another form of discipleship system functioning in the four layers that have already been mentioned: *Exploring Christianity (newborn), Growing in Christ (child), Close to Christ (teen) and Christ-centered (fully matured, i.e. parent/grandparent).* This sort of multi-stage equipping track is very established in the cell church understanding and they have worked with it for decades.

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<sup>1</sup>An entire folder is devoted to this issue in your Workshop Materials section.