

MAKING DISCIPLES

RESOURCE SUMMARIES

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SUMMARY 1

Book: [*Forming Intentional Disciples*](#)

Author: **Sherry Weddell**

Associated Websites: www.siena.org and [Facebook Forum](#)
(Facebook Group 436537336408999)

This series of summaries is intended to help busy pastoral professionals and church volunteers know whether a resource is going to be helpful to them. If a resource looks useful – PLEASE BUY IT! I do not wish to take away the livelihood of any author by summarising their key points online!

Overview

Of all the books currently available on church growth and discipleship, this one is the stand-out. It is written by someone who has applied the teaching in dozens of US parishes and seen churchgoers transformed into disciples. If you only read one book in this area, this is the one to read!

The first chapter is very heavy with statistics giving firm evidence for the current state of the Catholic Church in the USA. If numbers aren't your thing, skip this chapter on the first reading. The good stuff comes later!

The Current Reality

We no longer have a church culture where the young lapse but come back for marriage or because they want children baptised. The main reason Catholics lapse from religious practice or join other churches is because they do not arrive at a lived experience of a relationship with God through their Catholic upbringing or RCIA experience. And only those who are already in relationship with God can communicate its importance to others!

External practice, sacramental initiation and inner discipleship ought to be correlated – but this is not necessarily so in practice.

There are five thresholds which a person (who might already be a church-going Catholic) must cross in their relationship with God before they reach the level of being committed disciples. A person's place on the journey cannot be assessed by external religious practice – only by an honest conversation about the person's inner relationship with God. (p128)

The same thresholds are typically found in the journey from another religion to Catholicism. (p131)

People may advance quickly between thresholds; they may relapse; they may waver between two stages. We cannot force the process, though we can assist. When a person chooses to confide the story of their personal experience of faith with us, it is crucial to honour and accept the person's experience. It would be all too easy to deter a person from talking about faith, or even from growing through one of the thresholds, if our response were negative or lukewarm.

The most effective evangelisation takes place among peers of the same generation. But whoever is evangelising, we must avoid cynicism or wishing anyone away from the Church. We will never evangelise what we do not love. (p136)

Threshold One: The Ability to Trust

The first step requires the person to establish a relationship of trust with Christ, the Church, a Christian believer or something identifiably Christian. (p129)

Outreach programmes for lapsed Catholics have to work on re-establishing this trust.

Whoever the person meets – priest or laity – as the “face of the Church”, the person needs to establish trust and ensure that they are trustworthy (e.g. not making promises they can’t keep).

Threshold Two: Curiosity about Christ or His Church

The second step requires a passive curiosity (mild or intense) about Jesus or some aspect of the Christian faith. (p129)

To stir up this curiosity, we need to talk about Jesus, and about the lived experience of an inner relationship with Him. This isn’t easy when our Catholic culture makes it aberrant (and sometimes abhorrent) to speak of the inner spiritual life. (p 141ff; also p56 – Weddell tells the story of convert Sara who finds cradle Catholics get upset when she asks them about their relationship with God.)

It is vital for clergy to talk about the possibility of every person enjoying a conscious relationship with God – we should refer to this in pastoral conversations, in preaching, in newsletter articles...

The curiosity can grow through various phases: passive awareness, active seeking out of information; then engagement in dialogue. When you have an enquirer at this stage, don’t give answers on a plate - provide a safe space for them to grapple with the questions. Make use of stories – Jesus did! (p 145-149)

Where We Are At

Weddell’s working principle is that in the typical parish, most worshippers have yet to pass Threshold Two, perhaps even Threshold One. They are nowhere near being ready for being called to discipleship, but we must re-tell the Great Story of Jesus (she borrows the expression from [Revd Robert Barron](#)) *and emphasise that Jesus is someone we can have a relationship with today.*

The Great Story of Jesus

Told well, this story awakes the desire to be a disciple!

1. God loves us and gives us a life which is Good and full of meaning
2. Jesus is the face of God's presence among us
3. Jesus did divine things – he healed and forgave sins
4. Jesus embraced the Cross out of love for us
5. Jesus overcame death, and is now alive forever
6. We are invited to follow Jesus
7. Our sins also can be forgiven (in today's culture people may be less aware of personal faults and more of systemic sin – social injustice, climate issues, economic imbalance)
8. We can accept God's Holy Spirit, through baptism, or repentance of past sins – this requires us to set out on a way of life that leaves something old behind
9. Many Christians now walk the path of being disciples.

Talking About Our Prayer Life

“Tell me about Jesus, and your connection with him.”

Can you describe your lived relationship with God, up to this point in your life?

These questions require active listening, not catechetical feedback; they are to help the speaker approach a threshold at their own pace.

OPENING: Tell me the story of your relationship with God so far.

Expect the person's sense of God to be one of these five positions:

Atheist / agnostic / impersonal force / person I don't connect with / person I do connect with

If a “label” is used (e.g. person says they were a theist, a Mormon, etc), get the story behind it – what does it mean to the person using it?

We are we listening for: What do you believe about God and the possibility of a relationship with God? Are you affiliated to a religion? What bridges of trust do you have to Christ/ians? What threshold are you at?

CLOSING: If you could ask God one question which He would answer right now, what would it be?

Weddell suggests exposing RCs to a group of non-Catholics talking about their experiences of God... it will open their eyes!

Threshold Three: Openness to the Possibility of Change

The third step requires definite (but still passive) openness to the possibility of personal and spiritual change. (p. 130)

This is the most delicate phase in our postmodern generation. People may waver for a long time on the scary threshold of change, and may be tipped over it by a major life-event. (p158)

To help a person cross the threshold of openness... (p162-163)

- Speak honestly about your own struggles and reliance on God.
- Ask deep questions – “What do you do when life gets hard?” “Where is God in this for you?”
- Reflect back in ways that highlight what God is doing already
- Encourage them to ask God for a sign
- Ask if you can pray for them to be open to God, and consider praying *with them* for this
- Ask if they are willing to pray for themselves
- Introduce them to Adoration
- Offer intercessory prayer on behalf of those on such a threshold!

A PARISH MISSION can awaken a parish to openness to God. The trap is to channel the new enthusiasm into “filling ministries”. Rather, the newly enthused must be offered an opportunity to grow and be formed as disciples, and then the volunteering will come naturally.

Threshold Four: Actively Seeking God

The fourth step is active seeking, “Dating with a purpose”. The person reaches out to God and is asking: Are you the One to whom I can entrust myself? (p. 130)

Now we need to re-introduce Jesus to the seeker; in Catholicism it’s not just “Me and Jesus” but also in the context of the community – the parish experience and the teaching of the Church. (p 168-170)

This is also the time when the seeker will be ready for catechesis, and for exposure to different forms of prayer. In our age, catechumens will struggle with the Church’s claims to absolute truth, teaching on personal sin, and the idea of surrendering to Jesus as Lord.

Awareness of sin may only come at this stage for the current young adult generation, and it may come through awareness of systemic problems rather than personal failings.

Talk about the importance of following Jesus – in conversations, in preaching.

Threshold Five: Choosing to Follow Christ

The fifth step is to “drop your nets” (in the sense of leave them behind, not cast them for fish), when the person chooses to follow Jesus and accept any associated life-change. (p. 130)

Sometimes it’s our job to pop the question. If the response is “No”, a natural follow up is “Why not?”, and attempting to deal with the blockages people present.

There will be many obstacles at this stage, and spiritual warfare is needed on behalf of the catechumen.

Acknowledge a person’s fear of “what would happen if I said yes to God”?

At this stage, the St Catherine of Siena Institute offers the [Called & Gifted](#) process – an interview process to identify parish members’ talents & vocation.

Weddell believes that an integral part of a priest’s vocation to govern his parish is to call forth the talents present or latent in parishioners for the good of the whole community, entrusting responsibility to them in the most appropriate ways.

The Commitment Zone

For Weddell, thresholds four and five together form the Commitment Zone.

Programmes aimed at personal development and using gifts will appeal to those in this area. Until many members of a parish are grown into this zone, there will only every be a faithful few taking part.

The vision that drives Weddell is one of a “normal Christianity” (not in the sense that it is typical of what we see around us, but rather the clear vision of the New Testament) which is summarised by seven statements of what is normal, which can be found on her blog: siena.org/july-2007/it-is-normal

TASKS

Throughout the book, Weddell identifies certain tasks for the clergy and laity in a parish:

- There must be a foundation of PRAYER.
- Share the Gospel – not least with catechists and other key leaders.
- Offer multiple opportunities for the baptised and non-baptised to encounter Jesus – how do you make best opportunity for this within existing activities?
- Seek to draw out unbelievers, non-practicing Catholics – identify, invite, welcome them.
- Foster intentional discipleship and spiritual growth
- Help all members discern their charisms and vocations; form and equip them.
- How and where can we make Jesus known? Home, workplace, church...
- Support those called to extraordinary apostolates which don't "fit" the parish plan.
- Transform society!
- Make best use of your resources!