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Deliberate Crazy

Pursuing deep spiritual growth in a seeker targeted church.

By Brian Wells

Good News and Bad News

Since we launched Crossroads five years ago our rallying cry has been “walking with the seeker in becoming more complete followers of Christ.” What we meant is that we all grow to be more like Christ by sharing our lives in real, unvarnished ways with our friends who don’t know Him. God seems to be blessing the “walking with the seeker” part in big giant God-ways. We all know story after story of radical real life change that make up the crowd that now calls Crossroads home. People like Chuck, who went from leading outreach efforts for the local Unity church to a follower of Christ and full-time staff member here in the last four years, or Greg & Heather, a divorced couple who found not only new life but remarriage to each other at Crossroads and are now core members in our first church plant, or Paul, the agnostic law professor who now leads a book club that reaches out to his seeking friends. That’s the great news that has flown from the good news. But what about the other half of our mission, the “becoming more complete followers” part? That’s not so clear. It’s not like we know we’re falling short here. It’s more that we don’t know whether we don’t know. In the middle of all staff meetings, weekend services, small groups, spiritual gifts tests, midweek worship, soup kitchen outreaches, database upgrades, building campaigns, hiring and firing, counseling and consulting, there was a growing problem. If we didn’t do something different, all of this good and mostly necessary stuff was going to morph into a vague activity fog that defined our existence. We would call that ministry. A key early indicator for me was when I found myself using mild expletives to replace the name of ministry activities on my schedule (i.e. I’ll be a little late, I’ve got this *#%# I’ve got to do at 6:00).

So we found ourselves asking: “How are we doing on this more complete follower thing?” This quickly brought us to “What does a more complete follower look like anyway?” Without going into the painful details I think it’s accurate to summarize our answers as “Uhhmm, I don’t know.” I know that was my answer. I am the Director of Spiritual Development. This is a problem. Even if I don’t have the answer I think I at least owe everyone a better *sounding* answer. So we set out on a quest to try to answer some of these questions.

The Quest

If there is one problem solving method that has consistently worked for us it’s “beg, borrow and steal.” So, we began looking around to see what others have learned on this front. This is where it got a little discouraging. Most church leaders seem to be

wrestling with the same question: "Can you be a church focused on aggressive outreach to 'seekers' and also be a deeper 'discipling' church?" That's great. The discouraging part was the answer that many seemed to have come to: "No. You've basically got to choose." Now not everyone always said it so openly (although some did), but if you look at where their time, resources and attention fall, you've got to admit they've made the choice.

This shocked us. No, really, it did. Not only did it not seem to be the best choice, but it didn't even seem to be a possible choice. Is this true? Do we really have to choose? That became the Quest. For me, it's been a year long trek through scripture, prayer, and many of the classic writings in this area. The end result was a refreshing scratch of my contemplative and intellectual itches and pretty much more confusion than ever. But at least now I could answer the million dollar question with a convincing "I've spent some serious time studying and praying about that very thing, and . . . uhmmm, I don't know." It's not that God wasn't using my prayer and study; it's just that it wasn't coming together in a form my little head could make sense of. Sometime just after we were married, my wife Nancy shared something with me that was important to her, but I didn't understand. I responded with, "I don't have any connectors for that. I can't process that information." I thought that was funny. I wouldn't recommend it. But in this case it was true; I felt God was revealing the answers but I just didn't have the connectors for it. And then along came the connectors. This too was more than a little shocking. It didn't come through books, a retreat or a church model to study. It was people. As a pseudo introvert (I want everyone to like me and then leave me alone) this qualifies as shocking.

Here's what happened. As a final part of this quest, I asked each of our elders and our executive staff to tell me the 2-3 people who had most impacted their own spiritual growth. These folks would be followers of Christ who's walk had so impacted one of our key leaders that they ended up giving birth to our church. These believers, in a very real sense, are the spiritual grandparents of Crossroads. What if we could better understand the journey on which God has taken each of them? What if there were common themes of spiritual growth that emerged from this broad variety of parents, friends, pastors, spouses, musicians, authors, and professors, almost none of whom know each other? I set out to spend time with each of them over the past year. The consistency of their responses to questions about personal paths of growth was remarkable and often brought more conceptual thoughts into sharper focus. I laid their responses back against scripture and found profound truth reflected there. God seems to have used each of these "spiritual grandparents" once long ago to invest in those who birthed our church and now again to put "flesh and bone" on some eternal principles.

What We Learned

What follows is a little learning from our quest. A couple words of caution: 1) The learnings are rather raw and don't seem to fit nicely into a tight package and don't always have an easy next step. That's probably a good thing. On the other hand it could just indicate that we really don't know what we are doing, but like to talk about it anyway. The truth is probably somewhere in between. We have, however, been hard at work on the nuts and bolts of how this looks on a day to day executional level at our church. That summary is in the works but is not fully reflected here. 2) This is

not intended to be a definitive summary of Christian discipleship. We do, however, know we need to start somewhere and have chosen to focus in these areas and see what God does. 3) This is just a look at values and experiences that God seems to have concentrated on in the lives of the spiritual grandparents of this church. This seems to be the call for our church.

There are probably other ways to do church that make more sense or seem more focused. Things have been a little insane around here in these first five years. This could bring a little more insanity and less control before it does anything else. We should, however, find some comfort in another church planter's words:

If we are out of our minds, it is for the sake of God...
2 Corinthians 5:13 (NIV)

Maybe we can at least make it some sort of Deliberate Crazy.

Deliberate Crazy

Pursuing deep spiritual growth.....and radical outreach...in the same church.

If we are out of our minds,
it is for the sake of God...
2 Corinthians 5:13

A Little Structure

I've divided our learning three ways:

5 Windows

There were several themes that came up over and over again when I would ask our spiritual grandparents if there were any particular times they look back on as being particularly crucial to their growth. I let them define "time" however they wanted, from a general season of their life to an individual moment or event. The similarity in responses among the variety of believers I spoke with was moving. I call them the Five Windows because I found a way to force them into a group of five and "windows" seems kind of interesting without sounding too Oprah/Yanni/Deepak pablumish.

3 Tensions

There are several debates that seem to keep popping up wherever I look within Christian circles regarding spiritual formation. They often seem to be framed within an "either-or" proposition similar to the well-worn "election or free-will," "pre- vs. post-trib," and "Ginger or Mary Ann" debates. I don't know the answers (these may not even be the right questions), but it seems that like a lot of this, the truth is a synthesis of both. I call them the Three Tensions because there are three of them and everyone that talks about them seems to get tense.

5 Principles

These are just some basic values we want to weave into our approach to all of this as we start to figure out how this looks in our church. No massive conceptual learning here, but some common sense stuff we haven't always done.

5 Windows

- New Believer
- Crisis
- Cross-Cultural Serving
- First Leadership Opportunity
- Being Part of Someone's Conversion

New Believers

The first two years after accepting Christ have a huge impact on the trajectory of a believer's journey. Not a huge surprise. However, I'm afraid we don't always put our money where our mouth is. It really centers around two concerns: One is with quantity and one with quality.

First, quantity: If we really believed this was a critical window we would put a disproportionate amount of our resources (time, money, energy, talent and prayer) toward our new believers. Are we really doing this? I know I plead guilty on this one. This will change.

But it's not just a quantity thing. It also has to do with the quality of the new believer experience. What experiences and learning are we sharing in this critical season? I think the content needs some attention. We can tend to take our new believers and sit them down for six weeks of "How to pray," "How to read the Bible," "Why serve," etc. All stuff they definitely need, but here's the problem, at least for us at Crossroads. This seems to create a handy process for the very driven, activist flavor of a new believer to blow right past this real repentance and grace thing. So in this grace vacuum, their path looks like this: "I'm sorry because my past actions have screwed some things up. I don't like that. I'm sorry. So what do I do now? Well, if I look around here it seems that what this thing is really about is getting up 15 minutes earlier to read my Bible and then serve my tail off with whatever spare time I have." Not bad things in themselves, but the result of this is an "I'm sorry, so I serve" cycle that brings some nice cosmetic change but has no roots of real transformation, no understanding of a holy God and what sin means to Him, and no amazement with how crazy and scandalous grace really is.

It all reminds me of Robert McGee's "Search for Significance." We can take people's faulty search for significance equation (My worth = My Performance + Others

Opinions) and slap a nice spiritual coat of paint on it and hand it right back to them and the poor soul never knows the difference. It helps people a little, so they'll take it. It's better than nothing, but obviously far from the Gospel.

...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being **rooted and established in love**, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.
Ephesians 3:17-18 (NIV)

Paul said the whole thing has to start with being "rooted and established in love." If it doesn't start with grace, it's just not starting in the right place. Serving and spiritual disciplines are all things that draw us closer to Christ, but it can't start there. And while right now we don't technically start there, it's where the emphasis very much is. We have to push back the disciplines and serving part a little later to make sure the sin, repentance and amazing grace is where we are starting with our new believers. We'll start with that and then gradually move into the basic disciplines (prayer, Bible, worship, serving). This is also where we will prioritize the development of personal "discipleship" relationships and incorporate as much non-classroom experiential learning as possible.

Crisis

The next key window that came up in almost every discussion was a time of crisis, pain or chaos in someone's life. Almost unanimously, our spiritual grandparents pointed to their own personal crises as one or more defining spiritual seasons for them.

This shouldn't be much of a surprise to anyone who spends much time in the core of the Crossroads vortex. Many look at our congregation and the neighborhoods that surround us and are fooled by the veneer of happiness. It's like the Psycho house on the Universal Studios tour, "a clever façade created by the magic of Hollywood." There's so much pain behind the clever facades that our congregations live in, drive, and wear: Looking real good and hurting real bad. I would guess that at least half of our community has been personally touched by either chemical, physical or sexual abuse. And then there are the marriages hanging by a thread.

But here's the final 10%. I'm not just talking about the seekers. Sometimes this crisis is one that leads us to Christ. But sometimes it's one that strikes us many years into our walk as a believer. In fact, I think the "hurting really bad" seem to be equally distributed between those who call themselves Christians and those who don't. In one of my interviews a long-term growing Christian professor described a recent crisis which deeply challenged his faith. It was through this that he found a walk that moved beyond his intellectual commitment out of the meaningfulness of the faith to a deeper "commitment within meaninglessness" of tragedy.

We need to put a lot more thought into how we can make Crossroads both a place that feels safe for people that are breaking and broken and one that helps them deal with their own sin and move past the wounds.

I did my first jail visit last year (stuff from college doesn't count does it?). It was frustrating. I found myself at a complete loss of what to say. It was almost an out-of-body experience where I saw this stranger that looked and sounded just like me babbling trite soundbites and clichés about suffering and God. I remember thinking, "God, why am I here?" I didn't do any good, and I really don't think I needed to discover a whole new area of personal inadequacy. And then there were the kids. The kids. The 5 year old boy next to me talking to his dad through the glass partition on the phone. What good does that do? I think that dad had his little boy come down here for the same reason I'm here. To try to relieve my own guilt. What good does it do for me to be here? What good does it do for him to have someone haul his boy down here? He can't give him anything through the glass. He can't even hold his hand or give him a hug. And there in the middle of my self-centered stress, in the middle of another's crisis, I saw a little more of God and what a little idiot I can be. How much of this stuff I like to call ministry do I try to do on my own? So much that I've begun to think that the value ends when I can't personally get through the glass. I was here for a holy reason. And so was that boy. There was huge good in what that dad was doing. No, he can't get through the glass. But there is something that did: his love. The father's love gets through the glass. It's the only thing. That boy will take that home with him. It's not about my impressive efforts to get through the glass. It never has been. The only thing that gets through is the only thing that matters. The Father's love gets through the glass.

We have to find a better way of sharing the Father's love with our friends trapped behind the glass - whether its marital problems, chemical dependency, post-abortion, whatever - for the spiritual growth of both believers and seekers. Too many of our people are finding ways to divert and/or medicate around their crisis. To borrow from Oliver Wendall Holmes, they're settling for a simplicity that's on the wrong side of complexity. It's a false peace. We can create a place that helps people consider their crisis from a Biblical foundation, learn from it and then redeem it for the kingdom and play a role in passing it to others.

"...the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

We need to be careful not to overpromise because it's going to take a long time to get this stuff moving. But we are going to look at who has learned what in these areas (I'm currently looking at Saddleback, the Vineyard and College Hill who have some learning in this area) and we're going to beg, borrow and steal to grow in this area. We do know we will need to address three key areas: 1) Preventative maintenance learning available church-wide, 2) Frontline leader equipping for how to shepherd people in crisis, and 3) Intensive care crisis ministries for those dealing with a particular intense crisis (chemical dependency, divorce, etc.).

Cross Cultural Serving

"You go on these trips thinking it's about serving, but it's about God growing you. You come back a changed person." Vivienne Bechtold

This quote was played out again and again from the lips of those who started our church or significantly impacted those who did. It's what we are called to.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." Mark 16:15 (NIV)

However, I don't know if I've ever really considered that maybe, just maybe, Jesus's call for us to go into all the world was as much for our own growth as those we share God's love with. It makes sense. If God really does call us to His work, not because He needs us, but because He wants to grow and bless us (thank you Don Cousins), isn't this the way cross-cultural evangelism and serving in general would play out, especially for our church? There just seems to be something sacred that happens when we share and experience God outside of our white-collar American box, whether it's sharing a meal in the inner city or sharing your faith with someone in Russia, experiencing God thriving in unfamiliar smells and sounds, without penicillin or even Starbucks, this seems to help us see the real Him more clearly.

We already discovered this in varying degrees. Our food kitchen partnership, Habitat for Humanity, International Student partnerships and elderly outreach are good examples. However, we need to get more strategic about preparing people to look for and wrestle with the spiritual lessons and growth opportunities that come out of these experiences. We're going to work to transform these opportunities into "living classrooms" for spiritual growth. I'm not sure exactly what this looks like, but we might think of the actual serving projects as "field trips" within a spiritual growth activity.

We've also found these to be prime opportunities for connecting with seekers. We originally developed these as places for our believers to serve, the theory being that seekers would come to know Christ through our church and then be motivated to step out and serve. That is definitely happening, but we have found just as many cases where seekers relish the opportunity to "give back" and in the process of serving along side believers come to find Christ. We need to think more about what this means and how to develop this.

Beyond ramping up the proactive spiritual guidance within our local projects, we will be looking for ways to marry our missions support with spiritual development through a few new opportunities we are exploring internationally. Our ideal design will marry church planting cross-culturally with outreach/benevolence and spiritual development for our own people. We are making progress in identifying just one overseas church we can truly partner with in all three of these areas.

First Leadership Opportunity

I know I mostly think of leading as an opportunity to use the growth I've experienced to help others. That's definitely part of it. It's hard to lead others somewhere you haven't been yourself. But the rest of the story seems to be that leading itself is a

prime tool that God uses to develop us. If God is calling us to lead not because He needs us, but because He wants to grow and bless us, this should come as no surprise. We rarely learn or grow as much as when we lead others. In particular, it seems that the initial opportunity, the first time someone challenges us to shepherd others for the kingdom, is ripe for our spiritual development.

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.
1 Corinthians 11:1 (NIV)

Crossroads has become a pretty good place for leaders to stretch themselves, but we do seem to have a pretty big hole. While our culture tends to attract and enroll people with leadership gifts, we are not really a place that develops and takes leaders to the next level or helps those with latent leadership abilities grow. We recognize and value leaders and give them challenges without a lot of red tape, but we are much better at unleashing those with very developed leadership gifts than developing and growing the other 90%. We also need to calibrate our leaders' expectations that a fundamental expectation of their ministry is their own personal growth. I'm not sure what this looks like, but we need to put our best leader on this one soon.

Being Part of Someone's Conversion

Again and again I heard these seasoned followers of Christ describe the change they underwent through sharing their own story with others. And, as many times before, my description can't compare with how C.S. Lewis captured it:

"My feeling about people in whose conversion I have been allowed to play a part is mixed with awe and even fear: such as a boy might feel on first being allowed to fire a rifle. The disproportion between his puny finger on the trigger and the thunder and lightening which follow is alarming."

C. S. Lewis "A Severe Mercy"

Over and over I have heard the radical impact of the thunder and lightening on the owner of the puny fingers He uses. It's this strange fact that walking with the seeker is as much for your own spiritual growth as it is for their spiritual awakening. You grow by being part of it. You grow by being around it.

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."
Mark 16:15

Our weekend services seem to be working very hard on this one. The model of using "prime time" to talk to seekers instead of focused, believer equipping is a gift which God is using to reach our unbelieving friends. We, however, need to do a better job of equipping our believers to share their lives with their seeker friends and better utilize tools like the weekend service, small groups, and Quest for God. It may just be finding ways to better weave "Contagious Christian" training into the life of our church, but it probably goes beyond that and will overlap significantly with the other windows.

Overall Thoughts on the 5 Windows

There do seem to be a few threads that run through these five development experiences:

- All 5 seem to be places where we rediscover our personal inadequacy. It makes sense that places where we see how much it's not about us, and how much it is about Him are the places where we would be most open to God's work in us.
- One of our staff has pointed out that the sum of these 5 seem to develop into a picture that looks an awful lot like how Jesus developed his disciples.
- The thread of community runs throughout each of these windows. While there is absolutely a place for silence and solitude in our walks, each of these 5 windows happen primarily during interaction with others.
- None of these windows are a replacement for basic healthy themes which are present in any Christian community (Word, worship, prayer). In fact, each can only be carried out through Word, worship and prayer.

3 Tensions

- Monk vs. the Maniac
- Pharisee vs. Freeloader
- Personal vs. Public

The Monk vs. the Maniac

In this corner we have the Maniac. He's the builder, the leader, the maker of evangelical things that happen. His goal is to take all that those slackers Rick Warren and Bill Hybels have learned and use it to really get serious about reaching the lost. He has a shelf life of about 10-15 years before he flames out and ends up spending the rest of his life helping people meet their insurance and investment needs (not that there's anything wrong with that).

And in this corner the Monk. He's the contemplative. He lives in his virtual cabin surrounded by Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and a few dozen cats. Both are very suspicious of the other. The Maniac just knows the monk is a closet slacker and probably a pseudo-Eastern mystic in the Kung Fu/Oprah vein. The Monk is convinced the Maniac is shallow and misdirected. I don't know whether these folks really exist, but the tension certainly does. It's a "serving and building God's work" verses "solitude and prayer" tension. There's obviously a problem on both ends. Maniacs don't finish. No one can sustain God's work without being grounded in listening to Him and His timing. Maniacs don't finish. But Monks (these kind) don't start. They

never seem to get around to rounding up a search party for the lost sheep. Maniacs don't finish and monks don't start. And neither extreme looks much like Jesus.

It seems where God wants us is right square in the balance between the activist and the contemplative. It's the picture that Henri Nouwen draws out of Mark:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.
Mark 1:35-39 (NIV)

Nouwen draws the comparison of this passage to Jesus's ministry in general. He started with solitude and time with the Father, moved into sharing community with others and from that sprung forth ministry to others. He points out that we often get it backwards, starting with ministry to others. Then, when we discover we can't accomplish our vision on our own, we develop community and enroll others in the work. Then, when our plans still don't play out, we pray (from "Solitude, Community and Ministry," a talk by Nouwen at the 1993 Foundation Conference).

Yes, it's about solitude. Yes it's about community. And Yes, it's about ministry.

The Pharisee vs. The Freeloader

Accountability. Along with community it's become a top 10 Christian buzz word. Men being in accountability groups. Pastors being accountable to their boards. Churches being accountable for their stewardship of resources. Accountability seems to be everywhere. This is good, except that it seems to be everywhere except in the one area that is to be our one key competency: Helping people develop to be more like Christ.

I think I know why. It's the Pharisee and the Freeloader. The Pharisee takes whatever indicators we may be able to discern that help people grow and turns them into a patented checklist of spiritual merit badges: Quiet time, check. Tithing, check. Evangelism Training, check (and it wouldn't hurt to get a fish on the back of your car either). It's scary. The minute you start talking about trying to measure spiritual growth, the legalistic ditches are huge. I know for myself it's a frighteningly short trip to my inner Pharisee. The problem though, is our reaction has been to run to the extreme. We give up on trying to create any diagnostics of our personal or corporate spiritual growth at all. All spiritual growth is such an intimate, intangible thing that to try to monitor our progress in any way is to overstep our bounds. We drift along, convinced that God has called us to monitor our progress only in things that are indirectly related to spiritual growth. We've kind of become spiritual Freeloaders.

As in most of these things, I think there is a tension in the middle where God has called us.

The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the LORD. Proverbs 21:31 (NIV)

It's living in the constant awareness of our call to prepare the horse with the understanding that the results are God's alone. So how can we develop mirrors to hold up periodically to see if we are personally growing and if God is blessing our efforts corporately? And how do we do this without creating a Pharisee factory? We are currently working on both a personal mirror and a corporate mirror we can periodically hold up to try to get a sense of whether our environment is conducive to God's work. We need to do this in a way that clearly communicates that while we are a resource, the responsibility for growth lies with the individual and is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. We haven't much of a clue how to do this, but we are going to start with mirrors based on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19).

The Personal vs. The Public

This is the "one-on-one" versus small groups discussion. There are those who feel that the word "discipleship" is a registered trademark that exclusively refers to one-on-one experiences, and then there is the "real growth happens in small group community." I don't really think there's many on either side that would discount the value of the other but we do need to think specifically how we are going to leverage both of these valuable tools Jesus used within our community. We do know if we are going to deliver on more personal discipling relationships, it will be at the new believer level and incorporate small group experience. We will focus on providing a "spiritual coaching" relationship for our new believers while creating an environment, training and expectation that growing Christians will develop on their own. It's a mix that seems to be modeled in Jesus's ministry:

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.... Matthew 5:1-2 (NIV)

He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Matthew 10:1 (NIV)

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Matthew 17:1 (NIV)

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night.... John 3:1-2 (NIV)

5 Principles

- **Simple**

We aren't going to try to do everything at once or try to be a case study on the full service church. We are going to start small and move from there as we learn.

- **Pervasive**

Spiritual development will never be a silo ministry you visit. It will be a pervasive web woven throughout our ministry. Everything from missions to outreach projects will be looked at not only from the perspective of who we are reaching out to, but also at how God will shape us through this.

- **Experience**

As much as possible, we are going to try to follow a model of incorporating experience and serving as the learning mechanism. There will be teaching, seminars, and study as part of all of this, but throughout we are going to try to get people out of the "sitting quietly facing forward" mode into biblically based, hands-on learning and "field trip" experiences.

- **Strategic Redundancy**

There will be a few key themes repeated wherever you go in the church. The same learning principles will be incorporated at different levels of depth and intensity. The basic themes like grace, forgiveness, community, commitment to growth, and balanced disciplines will be found everywhere. Teaching will focus on these themes, not at the complete exclusion of others, but certainly at their expense.

- **Celebration**

We have been invited into a new life. We have available to us this incredible thing called the church. We should regularly celebrate both the small and big victories in this.

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