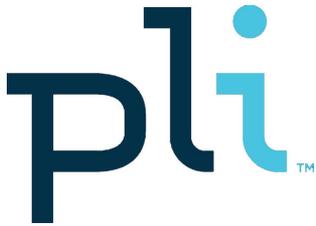


THE CHURCH OF 2030 LOOKS VERY DIFFERENT

...AND
THAT
FUTURE IS
BRIGHT





25 Century Blvd
Suite #405
Nashville, TN 37214

www.plileadership.org
info@plileadership.org

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Welcome, friends!

Here we are at the beginning of a new decade. Do you remember where you were at the beginning of the last decade? Life and ministry have certainly changed over the last ten years. There have been many challenges and joys along the way, but God has remained faithful.

Reflecting on what has been, we feel optimistic as we envision the future of the church here in the United States. We don't know what the church of 2030 will look like, but here at PLI, we want to start a conversation about some of the possibilities.

PLI wants to help the church of today become the church of tomorrow... and we believe the church of tomorrow thrives!

We believe that if we begin to discuss and engage with what the church will look like in another decade, we will be better equipped to lead the church toward a vibrant future.

We invite you to be part of the conversation we've started over on the PLI Blog (www.plileadership.org). You may agree with us. You may disagree. This is good. Feel free to comment, ask questions, or share these posts with folks who may want to join in discussion with you.

As always, PLI is here to help you lead there. We want to walk with you as you lead congregations, families and neighborhoods toward the bright future God has for His church.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gail and Jock". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gail + Jock Ficken

The Christian Church in 2030

For Gail and me, here's our sobering reality:

By 2030 the Christian landscape in the United States will be mostly cleared.

- Historic denominations will be a whisper of what they once were...by 2030.
- Congregations gone. Many more will be simply shadows of what they once were...by 2030.
- The Christian "footprint" of the people of God will be minimal...by 2030.

Will there be congregations that defy that reality? Of course!

But, by and large, by 2030 there won't be much left of what we've known.

Ask any conscientious congregational leader...they may not have named it, but they feel the burden. Add the congregation's curious questions of why...
a bit more work...

a bit more programming...

a bit better preaching...

...couldn't take us back to the heights of yesteryear.

Disagree?

- Look in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. Churches are almost all gone in these hard soils. (And the pastor-champions that are plowing oftentimes feel undervalued by the rest of the church.)
- Count the under 50 crowd in your own congregation this Sunday.



Still disagree?

Exponentially accelerate and you arrive at a “not much left” 2030 landscape.

“We are one of only two churches left in our denomination in the entire city. The rest have closed.”

PLI Leadership Essentials Participant

You’re welcome to disagree with us and/or remind us in 2030 that it wasn’t so.

But, if we’re correct—or better—if you think we might be correct...

–What if we name the harsh reality of losing what we’ve loved and we start to imagine what God might be planning to do next in the U.S.?

–What if we begin to pray for the mysterious Spirit of God to blow and create and empower and guide us as the birth parents of what comes next?

–What if our current vantage point looks more like the children of Israel BEFORE the Promised Land of milk and honey?

- Giants.
- Jericho walls.
- Ominous obstacles.

All too big for the God who...

- Brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm.
- Parted the Red Sea.
- Provided in the wilderness.

Again, you're welcome to disagree.

So now, we'd like to ask you to take a risk, before we start.

We'd like you to share this with your leaders/board/staff and together react. Tell your gang that you don't know if you'll like what we write either. But, tell them that the challenge in front of us is more difficult than we've imagined, and our congregation is not going to arrive at a better future unless we discover together and lead together. (This is a leadership challenge of immense proportion!) Tell them we'll be free to...

- Agree/disagree
- Protest
- Dismiss
- Be moved to pray
- Form a conviction of our reality
- Commit to a brighter future

...but, together, we'll get ready to not sit helplessly on our hands as victims.

One thing has become incredibly clear for us at PLI. When we look to the future...

The mission opportunity is not measured by the numbers needing to be reached. The mission opportunity going forward is measured by the number of baptized people of God disciplined and trained to lead into the mission.

Exactly opposite of what we've been conditioned to think!

What brought us here in the decades upon decades when the culture valued going to church as a good thing isn't going to take us forward in a culture that's mostly apathetic or hostile toward the church

Thanks for leading! We care deeply about you as a leader!

U-Haul Truck

By [2030 much of the institutional church in the U.S.](#)¹ will have significantly collapsed. We're not wishing it to go away. It just is. It's exponentially accelerating toward that juncture now!

You can tell that we're not campaigning to win a popular vote right now!

It's incumbent upon us to help give birth to what comes next... different as it might be, but deeply rooted in faithfulness to the Word of God and the central gospel of Jesus Christ.

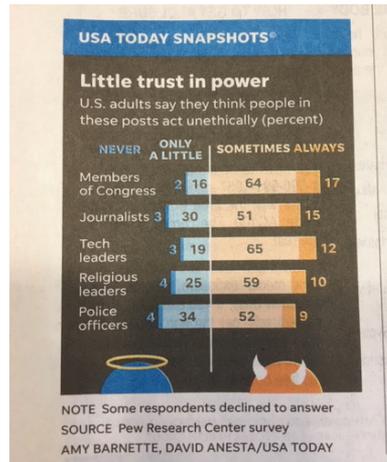
3 words of disclosure before anything else:

- We're champions for your pastor and spouse (if married). Big believers. They're facing a difficult task. (See graph above...69% of Americans say religious leaders act unethically.)
- We're cheering for your congregation to thrive, not die, by 2030.
- We're thinking it's a difficult path forward. You can't do it alone. You can't wait too long.

Put us in the camp of hopefully realistic!

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.
Habakkuk 3:18-19

Allow us to offer two illustrations today.



1 <https://www.plileadership.org/the-christian-church-in-2030/>

A few years ago, we stepped in to assist a spiraling congregation in rapid decline. You would not be surprised to know that they were: Discouraged. Frustrated. Fighting. Unhappy. How they got there is less important than what happened next.

They recognized that their situation could be terminal. They started building hope.

They gathered members in groups around a meal. Everyone contributed...

1. Tell a story when our church was at its best.
2. What needs to change?
3. What needs to be kept?
4. What do we need to start?

Together they prioritized. Together they made a plan. Together they charted a course. Together leaders led. Together they began the difficult task of pointing toward a new future if God would so bless it.

Not easy.



We did a similar thing, personally, with a U-Haul truck when we moved to Nashville after decades in Chicago. We were downsizing to a much smaller home after decades of collecting and accumulating. Some of which would go forward with us into the future, other things would not.

We made 3 piles:

- Pile #1 Keep. Goes to Nashville.
- Pile #2 Give away. Throw away. It's not going to Nashville.
- Pile #3 Undecided. Too difficult to decide now.

Much of Pile #3 ultimately we had to say: "We've loved you. You've served us well. Now we must say, 'Good-bye,'" and place it in Pile #2.

The Church, your church, if it survives and thrives in 2030, will be saying good-bye to a lot of things that have served it well.

Our larger concern is that you'll procrastinate in developing the new skills, the new posture, the new convictions that you'll need. You'll procrastinate too long. You'll wait until it's too late.

“Stop seeing a shrinking church body as a threat and start seeing the opportunity.”

1000 Young Leader participant

We believe the future is bright—very different, but bright—for congregations that can build some collective leadership courage who don’t wait too long.

It’s so easy in the midst of being deeply invested in the rhythms and routines of the congregation to deceive ourselves that our reality is not as harsh as it is. Therefore, we do nothing differently.

So, bring some of your leadership core along to delve into what a vibrant church in 2030 could look like.

- Let them disagree.
- Say it ain’t so.
- Be challenged.

But, bring them along. None of us get there by ourselves.

A Picture of a Vibrant Christian Church in the U.S. in 2030

Part One: A Lighter Backpack
page 9

Part Two: Making Disciples for Life
page 11

Part Three: Communities of Missionaries
page 14

Part Four: Leader Teams
page 17

Part Five: Life-Giving Networks
page 20

Part Six: Theological Education
page 22

Part Seven: Indigenous Leaders
page 25

All articles in this book can be read and shared online at
<https://www.plileadership.org/tag/the-church-in-2030/>



Part One: A Lighter Backpack

The institutional church, possibly Christianity in general, will be a whisper, mostly a shadow, in the U.S. by 2030.

But, there's good news in 2030 of a small, vibrant, emerging Christian church in the U.S. It's certainly the work of the Spirit breathing breath into dry bones (Ezekiel 37). But it's also because some leaders in some churches began to invest in a different future a decade ago.

The Church in 2030

In 2030, there are scattered exceptions of congregations that have defied the harsh winds of change in our culture.

They are "God's chosen people who are living like foreigners" (1 Peter 1:1) in a country that's hostile toward Christians.

The backpack they carry is light. It used to be filled with church programs for men and women. Youth and children. Bureaucracies. Buildings. Worship services. Bible studies. Board meetings.

What has emerged is...

- A crazy willingness for adventure while living like the "chosen foreigners" in the U.S.
- A willingness to embrace the ambiguous and trust the Holy Spirit to lead and guide.
- A trained confidence that God can be trusted to provide and protect.
- Energy. Enthusiasm. A deep and abiding faith that comes with being on the outside.
- A deep devotion to the Word of God and the central person of Jesus.
- Relationships are everything. Believers depend upon each other.
- Consumerism has left the building.

...all of it starting to emerge.

Unfortunately, most churches a decade earlier...

- Minimized the obvious cultural warning signs everywhere.
- Chose not to embrace the journey.
- Found the leadership challenge too daunting.

The believers in 2030 have a deep sense of being...

- Covenantally linked to God. Like Abraham! Needing to trust God in the face of opposition greater than themselves.
- Called to live without compromise. Like Daniel! Faithful yet committed to being a blessing to those with whom they neighbor and work.
- Called to be representatives of God. Like Joseph! In Egypt. Humbly stating, “I can’t interpret dreams but God can.” (Genesis 41:16) (Suffering and marginalization has produced humility and reminded the church of the Source of its confidence.)

In 2030, the church finds itself depending upon the non-Christian community. People who demonstrate peace (Luke 10:6). They actually become partners in what the church is doing. They help. They open doors. They make connections...in a miraculous sort of way.

And, in 2030 church consumerism is gone. Believers no longer move from church to church for better preachers, nicer buildings, bigger organs or better bands, more convenient times of worship. It’s not “convenient” to declare “Jesus is Lord” in 2030.

In many ways this sprouting, vibrant church in 2030 possesses these marks because a decade earlier believers started to act their way into a new way of thinking. They were challenged and encouraged to a new level of follow-ership. Similar to Jesus and the 72 in Luke 10.

The harvest is great but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.

Luke 10:2

So, we’ve asked you to share this with the right leaders in your church so you could react and respond to it together. We know that if you’re a solo leader you have absolutely no chance (humanly speaking) of helping your congregation start investing in a different 2030 future.

React together:

- Compare where your church is at today to this 2030 picture of the church.
 - What stirs you that you like?
 - What don’t you like?
 - What do you think might be wrong with our description? (We humbly think it might be wrong too.)
- If the sending of the 72 in Luke 10 were to offer us some clues on our journey toward 2030, what could we learn?
- Who needs to be added to this conversation among your church leaders before The Church in 2030 Part 2?



Part Two: Making Disciples for Life

No one single shift did more to change what emerged as a vibrant church in 2030 than the rapid development of relational discipleship/apprenticeship. A disciple investing their time, energy, skills, and life in others to make better followers of Jesus.

It's hard to imagine that a decade earlier it would have been unusual for most Christians to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus had only three years to invest in the disciples to be like him and live like him. By the power of the Spirit they changed the world.

Here was reality a decade earlier in 2020...

- Churches focused on making members, volunteers, listeners, attenders, but strangely not disciples.
- Pastors and a relative few were stressed, tired, frustrated, and discouraged by the lack of commitment demonstrated by members.
- The lives of people inside the church were not appreciably different from those outside the church.
- Pastors had been taught to preach, teach, administer sacraments, conduct meetings, administer programs, visit the sick...but few had modeled for them how to invest in/disciple/apprentice people around the Word of God.
- Cultures of congregations tended to center around a personality, politics or programs...seldom discipleship.
- Church "scorecards" remained slavishly focused on counting only Worship Attendance. And Offerings. Both lagging indicators. Both swatted away the strategic shift to making disciples instead of attenders.

"For the first time I'm getting the tools to actually start discipling people."

D2MC Washington, DC, participant

Jesus preached to the crowds but discipled only a few. He...

- Invited the few: "Come, follow me."
- Challenged the few: "You give (the 5000) something to eat."
- Invested in the attitude and behavior of the few.
- Developed competency of the few.

- Built courage in the few.
- Modeled compassion to the few.
- Demonstrated the Mission to the few: “Zaccheus, I’m coming to your house today.”
- Loved the few...no matter what.
- Loved the few...too much to leave them where they were.
- Created accountability for the few.

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.
Matthew 7:24

Jesus invested in the few to reach the many.

Churches stopped aiming at the many and only getting a few. They started doing what Jesus did. They began to shrink the gap between what people heard and how they lived.

The few disciples did in Acts what Jesus did in the Gospels because Jesus invested in the few.

This single shift a decade earlier of slowly learning to disciple a few who could disciple a few more...did more to change the trajectory of congregations than anything else.

- Once dying congregations experienced surprising vitality.
- Urban congregations began to stabilize.
- Small rural churches that were frequently ignored captured a vibrancy of mission.
- Large churches watched consumers become Kingdom contributors.
- Churches with no one under the age of 60 regained a new vigor.
- Isolated outposts began to engage their neighborhoods and represent Jesus.
- Young, disaffected millennials experienced authentic love and belief and growth.

You’ve had countless Christian guardians, but you don’t have many spiritual fathers.... So I encourage you to imitate me.
1 Corinthians 4:15-16

...All because people began investing their time, energy, skills, and life in the discipleship of others. They learned a simple model that ordinary people who had been discipled could now disciple others who could disciple still others.

For many, the Christian faith captured a new level of joy and fulfillment unlike anything they had experienced...even in the face of adversity.

So, how about some conversation around the leadership table at your church!

Take an honest look at your congregation:

- Is there a “gap” between what’s being taught and how people live?
- IF you discontinued a popular ministry/program or changed the time of the worship service in your congregation would “consumers” go somewhere else or would they reinvest themselves in helping each other grow?
- Do you have more disciples or volunteers in your church? Disciples are interested in listening and following Jesus no matter the cost. Volunteers need to be reminded of the vision, thanked, encouraged, constantly recruited.

Is it possible that the biggest problem in your church is the inability to disciple people in the words and ways of Jesus?

PLI’s [Discipleship to Missional Community](#)¹ (D2MC) equips leaders to invest in a culture of discipleship that is bearing fruit. It’s not the only way. But, it’s “a” way. What would keep you/your board from learning more and contacting Raechel with your questions? Now! And stop helplessly procrastinating and start investing in the single greatest shift that will impact the future of your church!

*“D2MC changed my life. Seriously. I will never be the same.
Thank you.”
Congregational Chairman in Nebraska*

1 <https://www.plileadership.org/connect/learning-communities/d2mc/>



Part Three: Communities of Missionaries

You already know the institutional church is a whisper of what it was in 2030. Mostly gone.

But, over the last decade a vibrant church has begun to emerge...

- The church discovered that it could carry a “light backpack.”
- It invested in relational discipleship. Changed the congregational culture. It was the single greatest shift responsible for what emerged in 2030.
- The baptized people of God assumed their rightful posture as missionaries. It was the second greatest shift responsible for a vibrant church in 2030.

In spite of hostility and persecution in 2030, disciplined believers embody an air of excitement and deep abiding trust.

Unfortunately, a decade earlier most leaders opted out of discipleship. Dismissed it. Didn't know how. Didn't try. Didn't recognize the power of starting with a few. Most of their churches just got older and weaker. They didn't try.

But, a few...pioneers!... they courageously made the jump and now in 2030 the people of God see the Mission of God entrusted to them.

- They eat meals together.
- They build relationships together.
- They share life stories together.
- They speak grace and truth from the heart of God as they represent Jesus together.
- They trust the Holy Spirit to transform lives through the Word.

It's difficult to imagine what's emerged from a decade ago. A decade ago...

- Only 25% of the U.S. population said they worshiped at least once a month and that their faith was very important to them. (“A Snapshot of Faith Practice Across Age Groups” Barna, 2019.)
- Most of the 350,000 churches in the U.S. focused on the 25% and ignored the exploding, growing, 75% distanced from God and His church.

- Churches were tagged judgmental.
- Pastors were distrusted. They felt defeated.

JESUS

Jesus was identified as a friend of sinners. (Matthew 11:19)

Pharisees complained that he ate with tax collectors and sinners. (Luke 15:1-2)

Jesus said: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Sent by a missionary God who wants His world back.) (Luke 19:10)

Jesus said: “As the Father sent me so I send you.” (We are sent as missionaries, too.) (John 20:21)

Many decades ago, Christians acted with love and mercy.

- Built hospitals.
- Built schools.
- Built orphanages.
- Built adoption agencies.
- Built retirement communities.
- Built low income housing.

They were the “builder generation.” Outstanding! Absolutely amazing!

A decade ago institutions became distrusted...including the church.

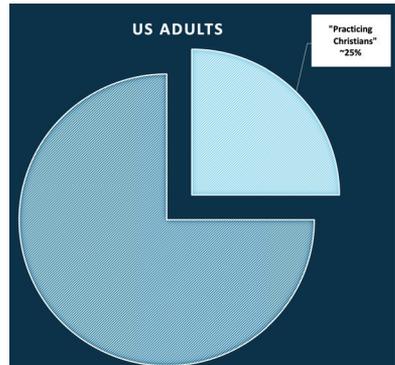
The reason a vibrant church emerged in 2030:

Christians were disciplined to step over the “us and them” posture between the church and a hostile world. They demonstrated love and mercy... personally, not just through institutions. They ran toward needs. They functioned like the early church...the outlawed, persecuted church...they told the story of Jesus. Believers gathered together welcoming “sinners” into their communities.

This was difficult for the pioneers. Most were “sensors” in Myers Briggs language. “It’s difficult to imagine what I can’t sense...see, touch, feel, smell.” They made plenty of mistakes. They persisted. They found places to learn... models to observe. They miraculously began to observe fruit being born. They were encouraged.

The anger and distrust toward Christians was overcome one person at a time across kitchen tables and backyard fences, not from pulpits and media campaigns.

The beliefs, values, and behaviors of the 75% outside the church were



“A Snapshot of Faith Practice Across Age Groups” Barna, 2019. *Barna graph.png*

much, much different than people imagined. (See “[Reaching People: Why It’s So Difficult Today](#)”¹.)

They became a friend of sinners.

- Living lives of disciplined integrity and compassion.
- Always prepared to give an answer.
- Inviting people into small communities with Jesus at the center.

Most church leaders a decade ago chose to...

- Ignore reality.
- Shrink away.
- Leave no legacy of a church for their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren.
- Blame someone.
- Search for the magic answer.

But a few church leaders summoned the courage to lead...

- They were discipled and began to relationally disciple others knowing that discipleship had always included mission.
- Others took baby steps. They used [BLESS](#)² as a tool. Every time the board/class/group met...
 - Each one shared a story of how they BLESSED
 - People celebrated and gave thanks. Encouraged.
 - They prayed together for those they BLESSED.
 - They began to act their way into new discoveries.

So, how about some conversation around the leadership table at your church?

- Make a list of everything that’s “wrong” with what we’ve written above. Explain what you don’t like. Tell each other why it won’t work at your church.
- Now, look in the Gospels or the Book of Acts. Read anything that might support what you read above?
- Allow us to be bold! We don’t know your church, but we’re guessing the fire alarm is ringing. 2030 doesn’t look pretty. This is the most difficult challenge you’ll lead. (We’ve seen God surprise humble, dependent church leaders!) Start today. Take one of two actions:
 - Read the BLESS blog. Start practicing it every time your group gathers. You’ll start acting your way into a new posture. Think Luke 10 and the sending of the 72.
 - Join PLI’s 2 ½ year [Discipleship to Missional Community](#)³ learning community if you want to start to shift the culture and learn the skills. No one pioneers their way forward by themselves.

1 <https://www.plileadership.org/reaching-people-difficult-today/>

2 <https://www.plileadership.org/bless-people-and-turn-unlived-aspirations-into>

3 <https://www.plileadership.org/connect/learning-communities/d2mc/>



Part Four: Leader Teams

A vibrant church has emerged in 2030 that's led by teams of disciple-making leaders. There are very few full-time salaried pastors now in 2030.

There are plenty of wonderful exceptions. Large churches. Other models. But the vast majority of what has emerged is being led and gathered by teams of leader-disciples...oftentimes collaborating alongside pastors.

Teams—not a lone pastor—share the leadership load of the gathered. They keep the gathered engaged in the mission frontier.

They balance a focus on:

- Pressing out into Mission.
- Demonstrating hospitality/caring for each other.
- Remaining faithful to the heart of God.
- Inviting people. Sharing the Gospel.
- Teaching the Word of God.

“The number one problem in the American church today is leaders that have not been discipled.”

Alan Hirsch

A vibrant church with leader teams emerged because a decade earlier churches and their leaders...

- Embraced and learned a model of relational discipleship to complement their preaching/teaching.
- Congregational program backpacks were steadily lightened.
- The people of God grew in their capacity to represent Jesus in an unfriendly world.

A decade ago most leaders dismissed the alarm bells going off. Most churches simply assumed that the future would be a diminished extension of the past. They all assumed that somewhere... elsewhere... anywhere... things were better in those churches. No sense of collective reality. Few fell to their knees and interceded to God for needed workers for the harvest field.

They simply didn't see the variables coming together.

- Seminaries struggled with [diminished enrollments](#)¹ years earlier. Recipients of mostly empty “under the age of 40” congregational pipelines.
- Larger congregations failed to recognize that their financial viability—and ability to afford a salaried pastor—was attached to an aging (and mostly generous) membership.
- Seminary candidates questioned the value exchange of 8 years of higher education with a questionable promise of earning a livelihood.

SO... the sad reality? Most churches were crushed or crippled.

But, there were a few—leaders—a decade ago who had the courage to pioneer...to experiment...to learn from each other.

Pastors saw “the writing on the wall”. Boards blessed them to [freelance](#)²... build a parallel career. Pastors (and leaders)...

- Prioritized discipling people... Now with a sense of urgent necessity.
- Discovered their marketplace gifts they feared they didn’t have.
- Engaged the mission field, modeled the way, where they freelanced.
- Further lightened the programmatic backpack.

“This has been our life for 5 years. We’ve found church systems and church attitudes to be more hostile toward us than the culture.”

Former Pastor, now Marketplace Entrepreneur/Missionary

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

1 Peter 2:9

It created all manner of new questions churches never asked before But church leaders had stopped wishing things were different years earlier and had hoisted their sails toward a vibrant 2030 confident that God could lead and God could provide.

“I’d hire 100 pastors tomorrow.”

State Farm Insurance Executive

48% of 2136 survey respondents believe discipling others holds the key to their church’s future.

[dougpaull.org](#)

So, for the conversation around the leadership table at your church:

- There’s hope!
- Massive, almost overwhelming change is coming.
- You’re not helpless.

1 <https://www.plileadership.org/do-you-care-about-the-missing-emerging-adults/>

2 <https://www.plileadership.org/will-freelancing-become-normal-pastors-ministry-leaders-church/>

Truthfully? It could bring out the best in you and your congregation! Like the early histories of most of our own denominations. Like Early Church histories that were vibrant and alive.

Discuss:

- Name the early warning signs in your congregation of what's been noted so far in this series.
- If you were to invest in only one change...to start somewhere...toward a vibrant congregational future, where would you start? Each person share one.

PLI's [Discipleship to Missional Community](#)³ helps you create a new culture in your big/ small/ tired/ rural/ urban/ enthusiastic/ discouraged/ suburban/ frightened/ courageous congregation! We believe that investing in this culture is the hinge point toward a vibrant 2030. No one gets there without leaders leading the way.

- [1000 Young Leaders](#)⁴ offers training for young, godly millennials to boost your impact with the generation that's gone from your church.

Thanks for sharing the journey. Thanks for having the conversation. Thanks for taking a step forward.

3 <https://www.plileadership.org/connect/learning-communities/d2mc/>

4 <https://www.plileadership.org/young-leaders/>



Part Five: Life-Giving Networks

No one gets there on their own!

This was the common theme a decade ago when leaders and congregations started charting new, hope-filled courses toward 2030.

- They knew the stakes were high.
- They knew the sense of loss of the treasured, the familiar, would be overwhelming at times in congregations.
- They knew that they didn't know! But they were willing to try, and to trust, the Holy Spirit to guide and empower.

They named it. The United States was a vast unreached mission field with remnants of a church world that once existed.

They named it. Vast unreached mission fields need missionaries.

They named it. They were the missionaries. They'd always known they were, should be, but had never been disciplined, to be.

- Comfortably living among the people.
- Listening to their life stories...and longings.
- Blessing them.
- Bringing Jesus to them.

These leaders actually surprised themselves once they began to include risk and adventure—and a trust in the Spirit of God—into the everyday rhythms of life.

Leaders recognized a decade earlier that they lacked the knowledge, resources, skills, simple resiliency, and the networks to get from here to there.

Networks were formed. Life-giving ecosystems formed. Like organic energy grids...mission grids...resources were delivered to ordinary people...ordinary groups on mission.

Ordinary people, the baptized people of God, accustomed to being served by professional clergy, began to rise up as partners. They assumed their rightful roles as the representatives of Jesus in their own mission fields. They stopped complaining that there weren't enough good leaders. And, amazingly, they began to take responsibility for a different future for the Church in the United States.

They looked for the networks. Created the networks. Identified what was needed. Connected to sources of hope.

Denominational systems in many ways tried to play this role. Gifted, godly people tried to play these roles, but the system naturally resisted change and tilted toward trying to preserve a past that no longer existed. Naturally tilted toward preservation and control...not resource.

These fluid networks that emerged...

- Offered support and accountability.
- Fostered a confidence in the Spirit.
- Encouraged risk and adventure.
- Anchored leaders in the Word of God.
- Offered resources.

Some of the other shifts toward a vital 2030 noted in earlier blogs had been bone jarring for congregational leaders a decade ago:

- Light programmatic backpacks
- Relational discipleship
- Missionaries
- Leader Teams

But networks, life-giving ecosystems, simply made sense. Hungry leaders sought them out like the roots of a tree searching for water in a dry land.

A decade ago, at every level, people asked: Where are the leaders who can lead us forward? Slowly at first, but one by one, they recognized that they'd forgotten how to disciple people like Jesus disciplined people, like the Apostle Paul disciplined people. Leaders were missing because discipleship had been missing. Relational discipleship was the hinge the door to the future hung on.

So, around the leadership table at your church...

This week, smile. Take a breath. The last few weeks have been challenging topics. Right? This one is good news. You won't get there by yourself. You're tempted to surrender. Some of the leaders around your table, maybe all of you, are going to be like Moses on Mount Nebo...leading people through this wilderness toward a promised future land for the church in the U.S., but you won't step into the new land.

3 questions:

- What resources would you need from a network described above to make this journey?
- As a group... is it worth the journey? Is it worth trying? Worth trusting?
- What would keep you from getting started in the Discipleship to Mission Community learning community?



Part Six: Theological Education

A vibrant church has emerged in the United States in 2030. The hinge that swung the door toward a vibrant future hung on everyday followers of Jesus learning to disciple others to follow Jesus. Contrary to popular imagination a decade earlier, theological education in 2030 has become more important and more widespread.

The shift from a Christendom world to a post-christendom world did not invalidate the theological education models that had worked so well for generations. The shift simply...hesitatingly...apprehensively...required a new paradigm.

Three Notable Dynamics of Theological Education in 2030

FUELED BY DISCIPLESHIP

Widespread discipleship across the church has heightened interest in additional theological education. A decade earlier, congregational leaders... in small/big/tired/energetic/rural/urban/small town/simple/sophisticated/almost dead or vibrant churches...ordinary congregational leaders...stopped helplessly watching and started to learn the rhythms of discipling others. They saw it as more than the transfer of biblical information and doctrinal truth. They acted!

*So I urge you to imitate me.
1 Corinthians 4:16*

People following Jesus, and willing to count the cost, were no longer just recipients of the gifted work of professional pastors and leaders! They created a strong interest in theological education. Communities of people commended leaders for further theological education. They saw it as a sacred investment in the future.

MARKED WITH CHARACTER

The increased focus on discipleship placed greater emphasis on character development attached to theological education. Study in fundamental disciplines and the development of skills remained important but the recovery of trust in the church was built upon the development of character in its leaders.

DELIVERED THROUGH LIFE-GIVING ECOSYSTEMS AND NETWORKS

Theological education is connected to and delivered through life-giving ecosystems and networks designed to provide training and resources to people and the ministries they serve. Theological education was one of the fundamental resources provided. The use of technology and platforms made it accessible for a theological faculty to deliver training to disciples being raised up all across the country.

THE JOURNEY FROM “HERE” TO 2030

It’s never easy. Each portion of this Vibrant Church series has offered no easy...silver bullet...to get from “here” to 2030. It’s placed the challenge on you as leaders to step boldly forward.

- Grieving what you’ve loved and valued that might be lost.
- Fearing what you don’t know.

A DECADE EARLIER

- A decade earlier it was critical that some of the great theological minds, respected seminary professors, missiologists, visionary entrepreneurs and practitioners collaborated to create what emerged as theological education in 2030.
- A decade earlier leaders knew that there was a lot at stake here! History had proven that it’s easy to go theologically sideways, and what started as biblical, Christ-centered, mission-focused training over the course of a few short years/decades can go sideways.
- A decade earlier trust in the American church suffered greatly from the examples of failed character among its leaders. Sometimes highly publicized failures. Sometimes covered up. Sadly, churches were not trusted. Pastors were not trusted. Most demonstrated integrity, honesty, humility, faithfulness with money, sexual purity, relational wisdom and compassion. But the collective reputation of church leaders was scarred by too many examples of arrogance, pride, lust, adultery, divisiveness, and gossip. As a result, the church suffered.
- A decade earlier the people of God began to recognize their own “sentness” and stopped delegating it only to missionaries and chaplains and clergy. The baptized people of God started to own the mission of God and developed a thirst for additional theological education.

So... the conversation around the leadership table at your congregation!

First, a word of gratitude to you as leaders. And, to your pastor. (Allow us to encourage you to express your own gratitude to your pastor!) We all know that faithful service and leadership doesn’t come without sacrifices. And if there’s a spouse and family? Sacrifices there, too.

- Change usually doesn't occur in congregations, or anywhere, if there's not:
 - A "[Why we can't stay here](https://www.plileadership.org/we-cant-stay-here/)¹."
 - A picture of what a different...better...[future](https://www.plileadership.org/look-into-the-future/)² could be.
 - Leaders that are willing to lead for the sake of the mission.

SO... what is it that you need to start talking about... and keep talking about...and then actually do?

1 <https://www.plileadership.org/we-cant-stay-here/>

2 <https://www.plileadership.org/look-into-the-future/>



Part Seven: Indigenous Leaders

The 7th and final portion in this series! A vibrant church has emerged in 2030 significantly fueled by immigrant/foreign born leaders and missionaries who have brought a fresh vitality to the U.S. church, particularly through churches being planted.

A decade earlier there were over 44.5 million foreign-born residents in the U.S.! That's 14% of the US population, and the largest percentage of the population since 1910.

A decade earlier churches/leaders made great efforts to

- Meet them
- Listen to them
- Affirm them
- Learn from them
- Acquaint them with their new context and culture
- Connect them to the network/life-giving ecosystem/platform and its resources, partnerships and training.
- Recognize them as critical partners in what God was doing in the U.S.

A decade earlier this was incredibly difficult for many congregational leaders:

- Congregations often felt great loss when immigrant groups reset neighborhood demographics. It was difficult to not take a fortress mentality toward “those people ruining our neighborhood.”
- Congregations felt helpless and out of control.
- Language and customs and practices made it difficult for existing congregations to build bridges.

A decade earlier it had been further compounded by those same congregations:

- Struggling to simply survive in their changed neighborhoods.
- Struggling with measuring lagging indicators of worship attendance and offerings with little consideration for measuring investments into the future.
- Struggling with not knowing what to do...feeling like foreigners in their own neighborhoods.

- Searching for pastoral leadership...and being able to afford it...competent in guiding them through this maze.

A decade earlier the church had been employing a “come to church” posture, not recognizing... or not knowing what else to do... in a mission field world. (The U.S. is the 3rd largest mission field in the world.) It had boxed itself in on two separate sizable missionary frontiers, failing to recognize the significant barriers—cultural, worldview, background, language, etc.—to a meaningful communication of the Gospel.

- The 44.5 million foreign-born U.S. residents noted above. Plus, their 2nd generation English-speaking American children...different than their parents.
- The 74.3 million millennial generation, including many of their own sons and daughters and grandchildren.

A decade earlier they had failed to recognize both as mission fields. They failed to recognize the need to summon their resources and energies to send indigenous missionaries to both.

indigenous definition: The definition of indigenous is something or someone who is native to an area or who naturally belongs there.

But! An amazing thing happened a decade ago. Churches stopped wringing their hands and developed three simple practices:

- Pastors prioritized relational discipleship. People prioritized relational discipleship. They didn't separate mission from discipleship. Baptized people of God entered the amazing adventure...quite fearful and apprehensive at first...of giving birth to a vibrant 2030 future. It started painfully, slowly before exploding into a missionary movement.
- Churches...people...pastors...prayed earnestly for the Lord to send out more laborers in the harvest field.
- Leaders learned to manage loss. This was DIFFICULT. They had started this new course too late to offset: Decline in numbers. Decline in finances. Closing programs. Selling buildings. Adjusting “the way we've always done things” to the new mission field all around us realities. All on the way to giving birth to something vibrant and alive in 2030.

It wasn't easy for foreign-born leaders and missionaries either!

- Oftentimes they surrendered the status, position or resources in their country of origin.
- Oftentimes they were left to feel like second class citizens by the larger church.
- Oftentimes they felt undervalued and isolated as missionary partners.

“Go and make disciples...” Jesus

Now, the conversation around the leadership table in your congregation!

- First, let me simply say thanks for leading and being willing to set your sights on giving birth to something vibrant and alive in 2030. So much easier to complain or wish things were better or blame someone or something. Sometimes it will be the pastor—many times it will be people in their 50's, 60's, 70's—occupying leadership seats in congregations that choose not to surrender to trends and demographics as if God were not God while partnering with a relatively few equally passionate young adults. Together, they recognize that if they don't do something now...it will be so much more difficult in 2030 for someone to start from nothing.
- Jesus taught the crowds. He discipled a few. Fundamentally it starts here. PLI can help you learn a simple, repeatable pattern where you can learn to disciple a few who can each disciple a few, etc. It's our belief that you simply can't skip this. It's the hinge the door to the future hangs on.
- Who are the foreign-born residents in your neighborhood. How well do you know them? What are you already doing to bless mission and ministry among them? What would be a small, very small, simple step you could take in the right direction?

Thank you. We're so encouraged by leaders like you who are stepping forward to be counted. To invest in a vibrant 2030. To lean in when the "odds" seem stacked against them. Tell us your story. We're starting to hear all kinds of stories of how congregational leaders are having conversations they've never had before. Thank you.



If not you, then who?

You've read our 2030 reality for the established church! You've considered our snapshot of a vibrant 2030 church that has emerged! You've done well. It was not easy reading the last few months.

We have some easier reflection and review today. A bit of a break. We'll go back to where we started next week.

We are highly...highly...optimistic regarding the vibrant 2030 church that has emerged.

The future of the status quo? Not optimistic!

Are there exceptions? Certainly. Wonderful exceptions!

And, of course, no secret here! We are strong believers in you! Those occupying the leadership seat in your congregation, and those believers in the group of women and men around the leadership table with you. You're incapable of making this jump alone. (Messy! Isn't it?) We believe that together you can agree and disagree...repent and pray... risk and try... stumble and fall... experiment and celebrate... on your way to a vibrant 2030 church that has emerged... that looks quite different. That's a blessing for generations that follow.

Don't discount your own role! If not you, then who?

This is a decision to be made around your own congregational leadership table. (And tens of thousands of leadership tables just like yours.) You can't delegate it to someone, somewhere that should do something.

God, we believe, has entrusted this to you. His baptized people.

And to varying degrees, you're caught in two different worlds: maintaining and leading what exists today and beginning to invest in a 2030 vibrant church. It's not easy!

We believe that the door to a vibrant 2030 church swings first and foremost on the hinge of relational discipleship. Jesus said: Go and make disciples.

And, it's easy for leaders to get busy doing everything else.

Overwhelmed? Start here: [Discipleship to Missional Community](#)¹.

And, if you haven't invited the rest of the board, group, team, onto the journey, it's not too late. Introduce them now.

Here's our picture of what the vibrant 2030 church that has emerged looks like:

- The church is carrying a light backpack.
- It starts with discipleship.
- The baptized people of God own the mission of God.
- Leadership teams... few paid clergy... men, women, all types of giftings.
- Supported and nurtured by a life-giving ecosystem. A network!
- Theological education highly valued and delivered through networks.
- Embracing, identifying, "learning from," incorporating foreign-born leaders and missionaries.

So, let us guess! You don't agree with everything! That's OK. Maybe...

- Today's church a shadow in 2030? It's not that urgent? Not until 2035?
- Can't imagine full-time paid pastors not shepherding the congregational landscape?
- No need to learn from foreign-born leaders and missionaries?

So, at your leadership table:

- Where do you agree?
- What can't you imagine?
- What action could you start to take January 1?

Here's what we do know:

- It's URGENT!
- It's SIMPLE! It starts with discipleship that happens in relationship, not just a classroom.
- It's EXCITING! A hope-filled season of new discovery.

We're already seeing it in [1,000 Young Leaders](#)² as young women and men with full-time jobs and careers or busy stay-at-home parents are being discipled to simply be missionaries where they live, work, and play. They're infusing hope and inspiring adventure.

But, it's not "young leaders" only. It's folks in their 50's and 60's and 70's unwilling to watch their church erode and one day "wish they would have done something."

Finally, if investing in your future might include developing some executive leadership skills for directing multiple staff, development or an effective organization, take a closer look at Senior Leader.

1 <https://www.plileadership.org/connect/learning-communities/d2mc/>

2 <http://1000youngleaders.org/>



Evidence for the Need for a Vibrant 2030 Church

We've sounded the alarm that there won't be much left of the established church in the U.S. by 2030...a why we can't stay "here."

We offered a snapshot of what an emerging, vibrant church might look like in 2030...a picture of "there."

We did our best to invite you as a leader to gather some other leaders around you. Learn and listen together. And begin to plant the seeds of a different future.

...and then we took a break for Christmas and the New Year!

Responses?

- Some agreed.
- Some did not.
- Some said, "Show me more."
- Some said, "It's not that bad."
- Some said, "True, but can we wait to do anything until after I die or I retire?"

Totally fine to disagree. Right?

Totally fine to live in denial. For a while. Right?

What's difficult to imagine is the radical shift from the church as the center of culture and community to being so rapidly pushed to the cultural margins.

So...Let's take the next few weeks and make sense of getting from "here" to "there."

Let's start with some requested "show me more."

(It would appear that the very large churches and the very small churches are most likely to rise above some of the harsh trends.) The rest of us? It might be time to begin investing in a different future that we believe fundamentally hinges on rediscovering relational discipleship.

- In the 1950's (the high point for U.S. churches)
 - 95% of the population self-identified as Christian
 - 63% of Americans were members of a church body
 - 50% of the population was in church on Sunday
 - ("Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down" Gallup, 2015)
- Today "practicing Christians" make up 25% of the U.S. population
 - ("A Snapshot of Faith Practice Across Age Groups" Barna 2019)
 - "Practicing Christian" is defined as attending a worship service at least once a month and indicating "my faith is very important." (Not a high bar!)
- 80% of churches in the U.S. worship less than 100. Most are plateaued or declining slowly or rapidly. (Exponential)
- 96% of the millennial generation will not be in a Christian worship service this weekend. (Ranier)
- "By 2030, a large portion of an older generation with high religious commitment will give way to a critical mass with little or moderate religious commitment." (Bredholt)
- 35% of millennials believe that attending church can result in more harm than good. (Barna Group) (Millennials make up the largest adult generation: 74.3 million and the most diverse with 43% nonwhite.)
- 59% of millennials raised in the church have dropped out. (Barna Group)
- The church is in rapid decline in virtually every major U.S. population center.

"Most people in most churches are asleep and don't recognize the crisis facing the U.S. church."

An 80+ congregational leader

Add to this in my own denomination:

- There are nearly 4 pastors ages 55-65 for every one pastor ages 25-35.
- In 1982, my own seminary graduated about 150 pastoral candidates. 40 years later it will graduate 39 candidates. (Remember the 96% number above?)
- One LCMS district recently announced two-thirds of its churches cannot afford a full time pastor.

So... some evidence. Some thoughts. For you and your congregational leaders.

I'd simply propose that we're much closer to a 2030 reality—and the need to start today investing in an emerging vibrant church—than the 1950's past!

What if...

- A missionary God is inviting us into something more? ...while we try to sustain and survive. And consolidate and cut.
- We're looking at a vast unreached mission field? ...and the need to become simple, ordinary missionaries ... and not resurrect a 15-year-old church program that used to work.
- God wants to use you to say: There's hope. There's a future. It's different. Join me in risking and venturing forward?
- And, what if it really is 2030 urgent?

So, my thought?

- You need to share this with the leadership group in your congregation.
- Discuss it at your next meeting.
- Celebrate some good things that are happening in your congregation.
- Reassure them that we need to continue doing much of what we've been doing...while we commit ourselves to beginning to become pioneers toward an emerging vibrant church on its way to 2030.

Thanks.

Rev. Dr. Jock Ficken

Learn more about PLI and sign up for our weekly ENews and blog posts at www.plileadership.org.



Discipleship to Missional Community (D2MC)

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