NALC Discipleship Identity (Not a program or ministry, but our identity)

How did it all begin?

How many here this morning have experienced the kind of grief that caused your life to come crashing to the ground? Your hopes seem hopeless, your priorities are irrelevant, your sense of purpose is pointless, your dreams are now a nightmare, your future is consumed with surviving the next minute, all the things you though you could count on in this life have vanished. The questions of why are too large for any amount of truth to reach and God seems distant and uncaring. Have you been there? My wife, Kristi and I experienced that kind of grief at the death of our firstborn son, Joshua. He was only six years old when he died in a car accident. The grief, the pain, the loss overwhelmed us. My comfortable little world, as a successful pastor in a growing congregation, unquestioning loyalty to the institution, implementing every program and priority that was pumped out from the top seemed like a faithful existence. There wasn’t a liturgy I couldn’t sing and a service I hadn’t memorized. I was connected in the community, the synod, and churchwide. I thought I had it all and in a moment when the voice of an emergency room doctor walked into the small family conference room and said I’m sorry, we tried but there was nothing we could do, it was all gone, my son and this life I had loved. I began to ask myself, what is there we can count on? What is it that is lasting and endures?

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself what is it in this life that has eternal significance? What is going to be around forever? I must begin by confessing to you that it took the tragic death of my six year old son and the devastating grief that followed for me to come to the realization that the only part of life that lasts for ever are relationships, our relationship with Jesus and our relationships with the people He has given to us to love and care for. Everything else, as Jesus said, is dust and rust!

Following our son’s death my grief was all consuming and my depression so deep I could barely get out of bed. On one occasion I remember laying on my bed praying in my anger, “Lord I am not moving from this bed until you show me what it is you want me to do. My life has no more purpose or meaning.” A few minutes later our four year old daughter Jessica came into the room and said Daddy, I want you to play with me. I said not now Jessie, daddy’s praying. I continued to pray, “Lord if you want me to get out of bed you had better show me what you want me to do because I’m not moving until then.” Again Jessica returned to my room with the same request, Daddy, I want you to play with me and I want you to play with me right now. This time she grabbed my hand and pulled my arm. It just so happened that because of the way I was laying in the bed when she pulled my arm I fell out of the bed onto the floor, flat on my face. This was the first redemptive moment in my grief. There was no doubt Jesus was answering my prayer by placing before me my daughter who needed me to invest in her life. What I was mourning was my inability to invest any more of myself in my son and the Lord said, don’t you see this life in front of you needs you to invest in her. And I did.

This is how Jesus began to direct my life toward the pursuit of discipleship. His redemptive love transformed my grief into a blessing, a life focused on the only thing that truly matters in this life, relationships with Jesus and those He has placed in our life. When you have that you have everything in life that will bring meaning, purpose and fulfillment. If you don’t have that, then you can have everything else in life and still be empty and unfulfilled.

The Lord placed a man in my life who began to disciple me by helping me to focus on Jesus, the Jesus revealed in His Word. His name was S. James Kocsis. He was the first person to comfort us in the Emergency Room. Every one wants to give you books and devotional material when you are grieving but I told Jim I wanted to hear from Jesus. He told me Jesus was willing if I was ready. I said, if he is willing why don’t I hear from him. Jim asked me how much time I spend in the Word. I said a lot after all I am a Pastor in the Church. He said well I would like you do spend a little time evaluating how much time you spend in the word. I want you to keep track of everything you read including the Bible. The next day he showed up with a logbook and said he would be back in touch after a week. I followed his directions and at the end of a week I concluded it must have just been a bad week. I wanted to rip out that log but I knew he would know so I left in the truth that revealed I spent more time reading the newspaper than I did reading the Word. The real shock was that the second week was not much different.

Even more important, Jim helped me to change the way I read the scriptures. Instead of reading them as though I was the authority I read them as though I was seated at the feet of Jesus along with the other disciples listening intently to his every word. Jim showed up every other week to hold me accountable. We read scripture together and prayed together, talked about what Jesus was saying through His Word to provide direction for my life and what steps or plan I was willing to make for following His guidance.

I must confess there were times when I tried to hide from him in my own office and he would sit and wait until I was ready to talk. I preached his funeral and confessed that were it not for his love and willingness to invest in my life I would not have made it through my grief. In the course of our time together not only did I hear from Jesus but his Word began to transform my life until I recognized that there was a John before my son’s death and then there was the John after this transformation process began and the two are no longer related!

I went back and found things in Luther regarding the truth and wonder of the Word that I had not notice before. Luther wrote things like this, “Let the Bible cease to be heard and soon the remembered Christ becomes an imagined Christ, shaped by the religiosity and the unconscious desires of his worshipers.” “The authority of the Church becomes nothing more than the wisdom of popes and councils…”

“The Bible alone is to be trusted because it is through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all.” All leaders must subordinate themselves to its witness…“The pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, an angel from heaven – these should not be masters, judges, arbiters but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture.”

\*\*NEW Smallcald Articles 3, Part 4: We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren, Matt. 18:20: Where two of three are gathered together, etc.\*\*END NEW

Jesus said to those Jews who believed in him, “If you remain in my word you will truly be my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32)

This journey into discipleship began 30 years ago. I have never been less focused nor could I be more focused on this singular command by Jesus, this singular mission of His Church and this singular commitment of my life of following Jesus, being a disciple, making disciples and equipping others to do the same.

I must confess I was never alone in this journey and it was the love of a vast community of believers that supported and opened us to the growth that Jesus had in store for us.

Kristi and I experienced the loving arms of Jesus embracing us through the love of brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world. We were drawn ever closer together as we treasured our relationship. For the first time in our relationship we began praying together daily. It was the fellowship of those believers in our congregation that restored our sense of joy and helped us to learn to laugh again. Our worship life, the music, the Word, read and proclaimed; participating in a Baptism, receiving communion, the means of Grace, blessed our hearts with hope. I quickly realized that the pursuit of discipleship does not happen in a vacuum, but only in the context of a local congregation, a Christian community, committed to nurturing disciples.

The commitment of those first followers of Jesus is clearly visible in Acts 2:42-47. (Read the text) I see seven key elements that define that disciple nurturing culture.

1. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles even as those first disciples devoted themselves to the teaching of Jesus. The community must be devoted to learning, studying the Scripture, pursuing not just information but intimacy with Jesus.
2. The disciples shared fellowship with Jesus and one another, they led the church to do the same. Their fellowship was focused on sharing meals together and praying together. This is often neglected in many congregations. People will find fellowship elsewhere. We can’t compete. (Ingesting common food together and praying together create a unique sense of community that binds hearts, minds and bodies together.) (Hebrews 3:13)
3. They manifested a passionate spirituality with an intensive focus on prayer. They expected Jesus to act and He did. There was a sense of awe and wonder that strengthened their faith. (We don’t hear the stories about what Jesus is doing in our midst and we deprive ourselves.)
4. The Christian community cared for one another. They loved one another the way Jesus loved His first followers and gave His life for them. Giving up possessions as a way to care for the needs of fellow disciples. They cared so much that they **shared everything**, every care, every concern, every joy, every sorrow… everything. Imagine being part of a community where you felt safe and sufficient trust to share everything!
5. They gathered together regularly. **They worshipped together**. Inspirational Worship is also a critical part of this atmosphere. They praised God in the Temple and in their homes. This produces and strengthens HOPE. They understood what it meant to stand in God’s presence. They recalled how Jesus came into their presence. He spoke; they listened, prayed, confessed, repented, obeyed. They had a mutual sense of obligation to be together to support one another and to share their faith in Jesus. Average worship attendance among Christians is 1.3 times per month. (According to this passage how often did they worship?) Spiritual gifts - are given for what purpose? … to build up the body of Christ. If you don’t show up the body can’t be build up. We need one another and others are depending on your Spirit given gifts to strengthen them.
6. Their love and commitment spread from the worship center into their homes. They manifested the love they experienced in Christ through the **love t**hey had for one another. Their community was marked with **joy and sincerity in their hearts**. They came together, ate together, with glad and sincere hearts, enjoying the favor of all people. This manifests and strengthens our ability to experience real JOY. Of all the people in the world we have the most to celebrate and be filled with joy.
7. **The world was watching** how they lived and treated one another and Christian community became a witness that captivated many others. The way they lived in community with each other drew people to Christ.

The disciples had experienced this love and community as they followed Christ. Christianity is not just a statement of faith, a body of knowledge, it is an experience. It is not a matter of being a member of an organization or institution. It is more than theologies and liturgies, vestments, or strategies, structures and constitutions. It is about one thing, rather one person, Jesus Christ. It is about following Christ, believing in Christ, serving others in Christ and living in Christ.

There is seldom an opportunity when I speak that I fail to mention the Great Commission as one of the four core values of the North American Lutheran Church. What we are talking about today is reflective of Jesus teaching regarding the Great Commandment. (Love the Lord and love your neighbor as yourself.) But I want to add one to that list that we need to take seriously and think through with great conviction. Dallas Willard calls it the Great disparity! (Dallas died last year and was a treasured friend.) This is the difference between the life of discipleship we are called to lead following Jesus and the life we actually live that is almost completely secular in nature and focus. How different would our lives be if we began to live following Jesus teaching and example as he made those first disciples? It is this great disparity that causes people to turn a blind eye to Jesus and strengthens their contempt for the Church.

Living life the way the first disciples lived it manifested Christ’s presence in word and deed, profound love. This is the nature of servanthood, of taking up the cross, of following Christ. It is only in such a community that disciples grow and become effective in making disciples. It is only in a Christian Community with these qualities that transformation of people’s lives will occur. That transformation is desperately needed in our own day and time.

This is why the work of CDM is so very important. Integrating disciple-making into the DNA of the local congregation is the best way to insure the healthy development of disciples and equipping people to be effective disciple-makers.

I must say that I had a thorough understanding both of the process of Disciple-making as Jesus implemented it with his first followers and the nature of a community that can nurture disciple makers. What I lacked was a proven process that would work today in the life of the Body of Christ.

I tried to do it myself. I wrote about it, preached about it, taught about it, read about it dialogued with many about it including Dallas Willard, who became a good friend when I was in Huntington Beach. I developed an initiative for the ELCA focused on discipleship, wrote a bible study on the subject and spoke at numerous Synod Assemblies about the subject. The net effect was miniscule.

The church council at Grace in Huntington Beach became interested and the executive committee came to meet with me in my office. They began by saying that in order to pursue discipleship as you have described it we would be making major cultural changes in our congregation. I agreed. Then they said, we have only one question. How long is this going to last? I said that is an interesting question. Tell me what is behind it. They said, our experience is that every new program in the church has a shelf life of about 3-5 years. Then a new program is installed and the old one fades away. The culture changes that are required for what you described will be overwhelming and if it is only going to last for 3-5 years we do not believe it is worth the investment of time and energy it will take to accomplish it. My response was simply this, for me this is all there is. I am not looking for another program or ministry focus. I am convinced that this is the mission of the church in its entirety. They looked at each other and finally said. OK, then we will do it!

I tried encouraging reading about it. I tried a check list of activities: attend worship regularly, give generously, read scripture and pray daily, be involved in at least one ministry. This is what disciples do!

I then tried to turn it into a small group focus with lots of books focused on discipleship.

I then decided to start my own small group that I would train for 3 years. After the first year they would start their own small group and begin passing on what we had studied. We were great with information but not transformation. Even though we talked about it not much was happening. We had seven or eight groups of 10-12 people each. But the results were small. Very few people one generation removed from the original small group I trained ever thought of being a small group leader let alone developing their own small group that they would train.. On the other hand our sense of community was growing stronger, but we still lacked the mutual sense of responsibility and accountability.

Then I realized I needed to investigate what others were doing to implement discipleship. It as at this point that I first began to discover the Navigators and their Life to Life approach as well as CDM.

I engaged in the coaching process for three years. Went through coach training. Engaged in actual coaching relationships with others. Led my staff to do the same. Equipped the Executive Council utilizing the Ways of the Alongsider as a study and devotional resource. Through that process I developed the following vision and plan for the North American Lutheran Church.

Vision Statement: (Four Core Process)

The North American Lutheran Church realizes its core values through its commitment to nurturing disciple-making communities that produce disciple-making followers of Jesus Christ.

Vivid Description:

Transforming ordinary people Jesus calls to be his followers into the extraordinary leaders of His Church - Making and Maturing Disciples through life-to-life discipling as a continuing pattern for life in the Body of Christ.

Vision:

The North American Lutheran Church understands and acts on discipleship as the core conviction upon which all of its values are based. Every pastor and congregational leader share a deep and abiding commitment to follow Jesus as a disciple and to lead others to become disciple-making followers of Jesus. There is clarity and consistency in our definition and understanding of discipleship according to the scriptures and Jesus interaction with His first followers. Discipleship is a process, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in which a person comes to a life- saving relationship with Jesus, accepts and embraces the content of the One Holy and Apostolic Faith; lives a transformed life through faith-filled obedience to all that Jesus commands, and is willing to become a spiritually mature leader in the Church by discipling others and equipping them to become mature disciple-making followers of Christ Jesus.

The ministry in each congregation is focused on making disciples through a highly relational process of challenging each individual to grow in their faith through action and reflection focused on the Word of God, Holy Scripture, utilizing, meditation, prayer and action steps designed to implement the guidance and direction received from God’s Word through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We acknowledge the process outlined in the Scriptures that Jesus used in shaping the first disciples: Accepting Jesus' invitation to follow Him; learning through the Word who Jesus is and the nature and purposes of His Kingdom; ministering to others through the power conferred by Jesus offering hope, direction and care to those in need (preaching, teaching and healing); living a transformed life through faith-filled obedience to Jesus (living in the Kingdom now) witnessing in word and deed to all regarding the difference Jesus is making in our life, and maturing in our faith to accept the responsibility of leadership, leading others to become fully equipped disciple of Jesus who are capable and willing to equip and empower others to become disciple-making followers of Jesus influencing, family, neighborhood, community, nation and world in everyway possible, building relationships, offering Christ’s love, serving those in need, demonstrating in word and deed their faith in faithful living and bold witness.

Each congregation accepts the responsibility to become a disciple-nurturing community committed to: valuing relationships as the primary means by which the Gospel is shared and people are discipled, demonstrating the love of Jesus in every ministry within the community and beyond, create clear expectations and a pathway to maturing faith and fully equipping others to become disciple-making followers of Jesus, through catechesis, vocation and relationships grounded on mutual responsibility and accountability. Each congregation understands the nature of the Body of Christ and provides meaningful opportunities for fellowship expressing the joy that is ours in Christ, teaching that is always focused on the Scripture, a pray life that grows broader, deeper and more intense, uplifting worship that glorifies Christ in Spirit and in Truth, and creates relational connections through dyads or triads holding one another accountable for effective disciple making by growing in the character of Christ including generosity in faithful stewardship that supports the mission of making disciples.

This focus on discipleship is integrated into every area of the life and work of the North American Lutheran Church, including the theological training and mentoring of pastors and lay leaders, resource development for strengthening congregations, every outreach into the community, every ministry within the congregation, the focus of every staff person of this church and a topic for every ecumenical conversation.

Throughout the pursuit of discipleship this church is growing stronger through the personal spiritual growth and development of each individual among us. As our people grow stronger in Christ as his disciples, fully equipped as disciple-makers, the congregation grows stronger and more effective. As our congregations grow stronger the witness of the NALC throughout North American and the world is strengthened, Christ is glorified and His mission realized.

Vision Strategy:

**Phase one** of the Vision Strategy consists of teaching and preaching about Discipleship. Engage in intentional conversations about the nature of discipleship and the primacy of discipleship in the mission of the church with all leaders. Develop resources that help to unify the NALC around this focus.

**Phase two** is to discern and develop an intentional partnership with a ministry capable of resourcing our congregations in the pursuit of discipleship including person to person or life to life discipleship (Navigators).

**Phase three** is launching a pilot project in at least four Mission Districts involving at least five congregations in each mission district to begin an intentional five year discipleship process to transform congregational ministry, by transforming pastoral and lay leadership until each congregation reaches the tipping point of complete congregational involvement. (CDM)

At the end of the first year and each following year conduct an evaluation with Navigators regarding process, content, leadership and means for improvement.

**Phase four** is the process for congregational participation in pursuing discipleship and providing intentional Life-to-Life resources until the NALC has reached the tipping point of the overwhelming plurality of congregations participating in this process. (CDM) Utilizing Deans who are involved to influence other Deans who can influence the Pastors and lay leaders of their respective congregations within each Mission District.

**Phase five** is the development of a NALC Life to Life leadership team to promote the growth and development of disciple making followers of Jesus across the culture of our congregations and the throughout the culture of the North American Lutheran Church. The goal is shared leadership and a variety of voices both pulling and pushing in the same direction to fulfill this vision and the Great Commission.

**Phase six** is the development of pastors and laity who are competent in leading other congregations in this process and the integration of this focus in each ministry relationship and structure within the NALC. (Certified Coaches and CDM leaders)

**Phase seven** is the training of pastors and other leaders to become coaching mentors in order to further expand the work of the Great Commission and make the NALC a blessing to other church bodies.

We are making progress, but as we have learned it is taking longer to implement cultural change. A culture is a group of people who share a common set of values. To implement cultural change they have to see an alternative value as something that is more highly prized than the other values that comprise their existing culture. Cultures are transformed one value at a time.

We have met with resistance from some who make many excuses and resist even trying. Theologically some have said it is just not Lutheran.

Culturally even more have said we have never done it that way before.

Ohio Mission Region is in a unique position of leading the NALC in these efforts. You were among the early adaptors and have led the way. Before you is the task of influencing other Deans and Mission Districts and through them other congregation both within your various Mission Districts and beyond helping us to reach the cultural tipping point within the North American Lutheran Church. Take the leadership baton and run (Share with them the baton given to me.)

We have influenced the ACNA in the direction of discipleship with our witness and as the Lord was working among them. We are dealing with a joint convocation not this year but the following year completely committed to Discipleship. An entire Lutheran week focused on this critical area of our life together. I encourage you to take the baton and keep running the race. (See Paul’s words to Timothy)

Lets take a few moments for questions and answers.

Bible Study with Ohio Gathering

"And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, 'Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.' Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves." (Mark 11:12-17)

**Divide up into dyads or triads. Read this text to each other.**

Jesus cursed a fig tree just before He cleansed the temple and drove out all those who bought and sold there. The similarity of these acts is striking and I believe they are connected in symbol and message.

**Have you ever dealt with these texts as though they were integrated as one message? Why or why not?**

Jesus notices a fig tree with many leaves. Jesus approaches it and examines it closely to see if it is producing any fruit. But He finds nothing but leaves. Perhaps Mark is making excuses for the fig tree. He writes, that it was not the season for figs, suggesting that Jesus may have had illegitimate expectations for the fig tree. Some who read this text believe that Jesus is being unfair in his demands. But a far more important question is who created the fig tree? Who has the right to set the expectations for the fig tree? Who has created in the fig tree the capacity for producing fruit? Then Jesus curses the fig tree. Let no one eat fruit from you ever again. The fig tree would live but lack any real purpose. It would live but in a way that was contrary to God’s design and God’s will. It would remain but be unproductive and unfulfilled providing nothing for anyone.

**Which is worse to simply die or to live not being able to be productive and to live contrary to God’s intended purpose for your life? Why?**

Immediately Mark takes us to the temple and now Jesus is throwing out those who were using the temple as a business, buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers who were making a living off of overcharging the people who came to worship God offering sacrifices and giving offerings.

**What point do you think Mark is trying to make? Do you see any connection yet? Is there any way that the religious leaders at the temple were like the fig tree?**

These two pieces are part of the same message. The temple was no longer a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and His people. It was no longer about faith in God but a religious system that sought to maintain its position of power and influence controlling and manipulating people for the sake of perpetuating its own existence. The religious leaders were functioning in a cultural climate of Roman influence that was hostile and the leaders were primarily interested in their own survival, influence and financial success at the expense of the people. They were no longer good shepherds caring for the spiritual wellbeing of God’s people.

They were just like the fig tree, lots of leaves and no fruit. There were many in Jesus day who made excuses for the religious establishment and said it just was not the right season for bearing fruit. In difficult times, let’s just try to get along and remain passive so we avoid conflict with the culture and preserve whatever we have. They thought Jesus was being unfair in His criticism and expectations. In fact, they were in favor of getting rid of Jesus to preserve their own religious institution. They were no longer interested in the mission God had given them. Instead, they created a new mission, survival, preservation of a religious institution, struggling to maintain their control. They were not interested in producing fruit but making more leaves and pretending to be faithful.

The question is whose Temple is it? Who has the right to set the mission for the Church? Who has the right to hold the Church accountable? What happens if the Church forsakes its mission and its Lord and Savior?

**Does any of this seem familiar? Have you experienced anything like this? Have you ever considered yourself part of the problem more than the solution?**

You do not have to look far to find religious institutions that are more concerned about their own survival than the mission Jesus gave to His Church. You don’t have to look far to find religious leaders who criticize Jesus to defend their own, values, morality and behaviors. You don’t have to look far to find those who are no longer spiritual shepherds but those looking for affirmation from the culture, who no longer proclaim the Gospel of Jesus but their own wisdom and agendas, more concerned with being politically correct than leading people to Jesus.

Jesus was cursing all those things that rob the Church of the true power of God, its identity and its true mission. This is the result of what I call the over-institutionalization of the Church.

**How would you define the over-institutionalization of the Church today?**

Time will not permit a comprehensive history of the Church’s struggle with institutionalization but I contend that it began when Constantine, emperor of Rome, made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. Constantine made the Church a state institution. From that point in time until the period of the dark ages (A.D. 1500) much of the church died. Since the Reformation in the last 500 years we saw the renewal, revival and restoration of many truths that had been lost. Now the same Churches of the Reformation era are now falling victim to the past, the over-institutionalization of the church.

Many are more concerned about their buildings, power and control, structures, organizations, committees and acceptance by the world than the mission of Jesus and producing fruit.

From the time of Constantine, the church became a building. He built beautiful edifices and required Christians to attend. The buildings became theaters, the ministers became actors, the people became an audience, and the offerings were the price of admission to the show. (Christianity was the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire.)

Up until that time Christians had met in homes. The truth is that it doesn't matter where the church gathers—in a big building, a small building, a house, a garage, a barn, a tent, or under a tree. The Church is the Body of Christ. It is where the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered. All those who believe in Jesus are temples of the living God.

**How do you understand the Church – not just theologically or from our confessional perspective but practically?**

The Church is not a building and the passage also makes clear that the church is not a business. As soon as the church begins to function more like a business, that is primarily concerned with the bottom line of funding or takes on the identity of a charitable organization, concerned only with humanitarian projects, it will begin to wither and die, just as the fig tree Jesus cursed. The church, above all else, has been called to be the redemption body of Christ at work in this world, leading people to faith in Jesus and helping them to grow and mature in their faith so they too can bear fruit. If the devil can institutionalize it and turn into a powerless religious system it will no longer serve the purposes of God.

Beginning with the rule of Constantine and the Roman Empire, a great distinction was made in Christianity between the clergy and the laity. This distinction shifted the personal responsibility of the individual believer to the institution and its leaders. The individuals became spectators instead of participants. The people are not an audience.

This was true not only centuries ago but is true today. Christianity becomes institutionalized when a building becomes more important than the people, when money becomes more important than the Spirit's workings, when attendance takes precedence over effectiveness, and organization and structure are emphasized more than relationship.

The church is a living organism. It grows from within. Changing outward forms and structures does not add quality to the church. Spiritual quality can only be produced from the inside out.

The fig tree that Jesus cursed had leaves but no fruit. The outside looked good, but a closer inspection by Jesus exposed the tree's flaws and lack of fruit. This was the problem in the temple. It looked beautiful and unblemished on the outside but was unclean and defiled on the inside.

**How do these descriptions describe the church today or the congregation where you are?**

The ultimate results of the over-institutionalization of the Church is that it becomes weak and ineffective like an unused muscle, that will atrophy and eventually die or only appear to be alive but becomes dead on the inside.

Here is my encouragement to you, don’t ever think this can’t happen to you. We must fight against this constantly. We were formed and influenced by former church bodies who over time became over-institutionalized. Their churches are now empty. They are struggling to survive. They are losing members, their young people are not returning, they have abandoned the mission of the Church. Their resources are drying up. Their passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is gone. Their power is not the Holy Spirit but political popularity in affirming the culture and they arm themselves with their belief that every pathway leads to salvation, declaring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be irrelevant when compared to their individual wisdom.

They take consolation in their buildings, structures, staff, programs as they proclaim their own arrogance. In the meantime they are dying. When questioned about their current reality they make excuses, and call attention to their leaves because they are fruitless!

**So what is the solution? What is the direction?**

**First, emphasize the Biblical understanding of the Church.** The word "Church" itself is "ekklesia" which means an assembly. And we see that *"(Christ) is the head of the body, the church"* **Colossians 1:18** and He suffered *"for the sake of his body, which is the church."* **Col 1:24** Thus we see that the Biblical definition of "church" is a corporate body and not an institution. In addition the body of Christ is supposed to be a living healthy body and not a sick or dead body. The difference between these is that a sick or dead body has non-functioning members. I was a chaplain with hospice and was with numerous people as they died. If often happens one part or member of the body at a time. The dysfunction starts with the extremities and move toward the center until the body can no longer function. Now I don’t believe this can happen to the whole body of Christ but you would have to be living in the absolute denial of reality to assume that it does not happen to individual congregation and even denominational bodies. But that is not the kind of assembly the Bible speaks of when referring to the Church.

Notice the Biblical description of the church. **Romans 12:4,5**  Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

**Ephesians 4:11-16** It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets,

some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

According to Matthew 18:20 this happens whenever two or three come together in the name of Jesus, He promises to be there with them.

Thus every individual member should not simply be present, but be functioning. And there should be growth in maturity, mutual accountability and responsive, obedient behavior, living out our faith, and sharing the Gospel in the context of every relationship. That is the objective. Unfortunately institutionalism moves the attention away from the individual function to simply being passive observers of what other institutional leaders and structures are accomplishing.

**How can we counteract inactivity or passivity in the local congregation? How can we promote a healthy understanding of the nature of the Body of Christ as a living organism?**

**Second, focus on the Biblical mission Jesus gave to His Church in the Great Commission. Matthew 28: 18-20.** Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Now, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you and I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

We must lead people to faith in Jesus Christ and disciple them. Teach them the faith. Use the Bible as the primary tool to help them know who Jesus is and the nature of His Kingdom. Help them learn, grow and mature in the faith and be truly transformed, until they are fully equipped to use their gifts from the Holy Spirit to begin to disciple others.

This is the only mission of the Church. Everything else we do is to help us accomplish this mission. We love others so we can share the love of Christ, the love we have first received. We love so we can proclaim Jesus Christ and His life-saving love that is the only source of salvation. We must be disciples and commit ourselves exclusively to making disciples!

**How do you maintain the focus on the central mission of the Church and still do everything else that has become the “work of the church” for previous decades?**

**Third, focus on the Bible, for teaching, preaching, for guidance in the way of living faithfully.** Encourage believers to read and study the Word of God together, to accept the Bible as the norm for all matters of their life and faith. Help the to be so equipped with the Word that they can do what John encourages all Christians to do to test the spirits. 1John 4:1 -  *"Beloved, don’t believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."* The Lord commands every disciple of Jesus to compare all teachings to the truth of Scripture. Notice in Acts 17: Paul commended the Bereans who exercised skepticism towards his own teachings. *"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."*

Jesus encourages His disciples to grow deep in the soil of Christ, to be rooted in Christ. Institutionalism keeps their roots in the shallow soil of the rocky ground of the institution instead of Christ. Mark 4:16-17 “*those who are sown on the rocky places, are those who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with joy. They have no root in themselves, but are short-lived."* Institutionalism tends towards producing unrooted Christians - those who have a faith which is only on the surface, in the institution. Being deeply rooted in Christ is the goal of discipleship.

**How do you insure the spiritual growth and commitment to read and study the scripture daily?**

Discipleship is:

Focused on function not form

Inward nature not outward appearance

Spirit rather than the letter

Grace and mission not law and regulations

Biblical truth not human wisdom

Paul warns Timothy that the day will come when people will only hear what they want to hear and will gather leaders who will only tell them what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3) The authority of Christ is always replaced by leaders of institutions seeking their own political power and acceptance.

**Is there anything positive or necessary regarding the institutional nature of the church?**

I am not attempting to undermine everything that I just said but rather to remind you that Discipleship can only function in a community where there is mutual accountability and responsibility. There must be oversight that requires organization and some structure. There must be expectations. To obey all that Jesus commands requires that we are accountable to Christ and to one another. Jesus was accountable to the Father. The disciples were accountable to Jesus and so we must be accountable to one another and especially those who have spiritually authority over us in the name of Christ Jesus. Discipleship is not in individualized pursuit of Jesus but one that occurs in the context of Christian Community just as Jesus first followers were knit together in a community.

In the name of Jesus, disciples must long for such accountability. It is the only true way to demonstrate love, to have expectations and to hold one another accountable in following Christ. Some institutionalization is not the same as the over-institutionalization of the Church.

Love and structure go together. Love needs structure. Every family knows the importance of structure and expectation if true love is to be experienced. That is the nature of the institution of the family.

Authentic Community needs Institutional Structure

Romanticist needs Classicists

Heart needs Head

Creativity needs Order

Love needs Truth and Authority

Both together reflect the divine nature from Genesis to Revelation, from Creation to the Second Coming of Christ.

We can never forget that we live in a fallen world. Jesus commanded His followers that they must be concerned with binding and loosing people from sin. This is the way to accountability.

Matthew 16:18-19

Matthew 18: 18-20

Institutional Self-Preservation Selfless giving of Jesus Disciples

Programs Process

Demographics Discernment

Attractional Incarnational

Uniformity Diversity

Professionalism Passionate hearts

Decisions Disciples

Monuments Movements

Additions Exponential

Services Serving

Organizational Organisms

Control Mission

Institutions fall in love with buildings, programs, professional staffs, menus of goods and services, organizational structures, that attract and entertain but have little redemptive value in serving Christ’s mission in making disciples of all nations.

Take away discipleship and all you have are institutional loyalists!

See Luther on bags of Scripture for closing remarks