



CONTROL TWEAKS

Finding the right combination of structure and empowerment moved one young church toward maturity.

by Darrin Patrick

When we launched The Journey seven years ago, our first official edict was that you had to live within 10 minutes of the church to attend. It wasn't that we didn't care about those who lived farther away, but we were committed to an "organic" approach to mission and discipleship. Living in close proximity to one another would permit less structured, more spontaneous relationships. As people connected in coffee shops and homes, and as they read their Bibles, we believed they would grow.

But there was another reason for using an unstructured approach—our community struggled with authority. Some might refer to the artistic, bohemian young adults in urban St. Louis as "hippies." They were suspicious of structured organizations, finding them too controlling. They preferred a relationally-focused model, and that's what we created.

But as The Journey grew we faced a significant challenge. Most of our people, including those in leadership roles, were not mature believers. Biblical illiteracy was high, and while most leaders were engaged in discipleship relationships, it was unclear whether they were forming disciples of Jesus Christ or simply replicating themselves.

It dawned on us that everything could not remain organic. A more intentional, structured approach to discipleship was necessary.

Organic blend

In my research I found that churches often lean in one of two directions. Some believe that people should be "self-feeders." The church's responsibility is to create impressive worship services with practical teaching, and maybe connect members into relational groups. From there, however, the people are expected to do the rest. Their spiritual growth is in their own hands.

On the other side are churches who are "spoon-feeders." They



GOT MATURITY?

place a high value on biblical teaching and exposition. The sermons are deep and these churches imply that if you just come and listen, you'll grow in your faith. "Maturity migration" happens when attenders at a "self-feeder" church desire more depth and make the shift to a "spoon-feeder" congregation.

There are problems on both extremes. We should not expect the church to do everything, but we cannot undervalue the role of the church either. Gospel preaching and Bible exposition are vital, but equipping believers to take responsibility for their own growth is also important.

We decided that The Journey should pursue a model somewhere in the middle—a "both/and" strategy for discipleship. We didn't want to get caught up into the "structure or no structure" debate. Instead we asked, "What kind of structure? Can we create structures that facilitate our mission and avoid ones that don't?"

We started to bolster our loose, organic model by launching a leadership training class and aligning our small groups around the same curriculum. Many of our structure-suspicious people did not react well. They accused us of "selling out" and abandoning the promise that "we weren't going to be like other churches." Some said the new initiatives were "too controlling."

Small group leaders were used to calling pastors at all hours of the day and night to discuss their groups and ask for advice—they clearly wanted training. But when we created a meeting where they could be trained, they didn't want it. Many preferred the loose, relational way it used to be.

The tension that arose illustrates the dilemma facing our generation. Young people, including many raised within the church, have low biblical literacy. They need training in the Bible and the basic truths of the Christian life. These have traditionally been taught through structured systems like catechisms and classes. But these same young people are turned off by institutions and leery of centralized control. This makes it increasingly difficult to gather them into these training structures.

Engineers versus artists

The shift was frustrating, but it was partly my own fault. I launched the church with too many pronouncements about how we were going to create disciples—I made too many organic promises. And the loose, relational approach we started

with was also a reflection of my own personality.

I'm an entrepreneur by temperament. I resist structures and don't like formal classes. I was disciplined on the fly—by reading my Bible and having conversations. I expected everyone to operate this way. *Here's a Bible, find some friends, now just grow!*

We should not expect the church to do everything, but we cannot undervalue the role of the church either.

The truth is that many churches default to the personality of the lead pastor, and in the case of The Journey it proved to be destructive. At the beginning our church was very empowering, we were initiating lots of new ministries, and things were very exciting and fun. But some people who didn't share my personality were frustrated beyond belief. New ideas were everywhere, but there was very little follow through. There were many initiatives but no implementation. If we had continued down that path, we would have had a mutiny.

Among our leaders my organic approach was killing the engineers (those who liked structure), just as organizations with too much structure kill the artists. I wanted to empower others to do their work and meet occasionally to hear how it was going. Other leaders wanted formal reports and data on how a ministry was impacting the community. Our styles clashed but I eventually came to understand that we needed each other.

The right combination

We are now in a season at The Journey where my personality style has been diminished for the good of the church as we put necessary structures in place. These organizational elements have taken on increasing importance as we've moved into a multi-site model. Ironically, our more structured format means we are now attracting a different type of person to the church—people for whom organization isn't a buzz kill, but who may see our organic values as inefficient.

We still place a high value on relationships at The Journey—that has not changed. Our ministry calendar includes seasons of more intentional coordination and others of flexibility. We still encourage new initiatives to serve the needs of our community, but we're more mindful to focus our efforts and help these projects launch successfully. All of this is possible because we've sought the right combination of structure and empowerment for our context.

Congregations and leaders need to recognize their tendency to lean in one direction or the other—toward organic or structured discipleship. Once this bent is understood, we can bring in the necessary voices and perspectives to help move toward balance. (L)



Darrin Patrick is lead pastor of The Journey in St. Louis, Missouri, and vice president of the Acts 29 Church Planting Network.