



# UnLearning Church

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"Church growth" was the mantra of the 1980s and 1990s. I attended my first "Breaking the Two Hundred Barrier" conference shortly after becoming Ginghamsburg's pastor in 1979.

Later I enrolled in "Breaking Four Hundred" and "Breaking Eight Hundred."

We became experts at methodologies that involved small group and Sunday school ministries. When it was trendy to do so, we shifted from a programmatic approach to a cell-driving approach. We began to develop associations around the successful megachurches of that day. We learned about the pastor as CEO, and I adopted that model. In the late 1990s, I really thought the contemporary megachurch would be the church of the future—it was the kind of church almost everyone seemed to aspire to become. Our culture preferred Wal-Mart superstores to the corner drugstore and giant Home Depots to local hardware stores. It made sense for churches to follow that same pattern.

As it turns out, in order to move forward, I have had to *unlearn* the megachurch and CEO models. If we continue to copy the models of the 1980s and 1990s, we're going to miss the next generation. A one-size-fits-all approach toward growth will definitely not be the most effective model of the twenty-first century.

Change is so constant today that no one can predict the effective church of the future, yet I don't believe it will be the shopping-mall-sized megachurch. As many growing churches have demonstrated, once you exceed an attendance of four hundred, a majority of growth results from transfers, not new believers. Some megachurches have seen success in reaching unchurched populations, but too often church growth in the United States and Canada does not represent net gains for the kingdom of God.

For any organization to have an impact, it needs a radical product, and the church's radical product is revolutionary people—real followers of Jesus Christ. As churches take seriously Jesus' call to discipleship, they change from consumers to missional movements of God who demonstrate both personal and social holiness.

At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, his church had only 120 people, and his leadership ended in scandal as he was convicted and executed by religious authorities. No one would pay to go to Jesus' church-growth seminar. Yet you and I are Christ-followers today because of those 120 people and the worldwide movement they ignited. Instead of focusing on numbers of people, Jesus focused on the people themselves.

Likewise, UnLearning churches will focus more on church health than church growth. Healthy organisms grow naturally. Churches that are healthy tend to grow in size, but life transformation—not church growth—is their measure of success. The UnLearning church doesn't fixate on how it can grow toward human standards of greatness. Its leaders would jump at a chance to take on a community of one hundred radical followers of Jesus rather than a minimum-commitment crowd of several thousand.

At Ginghamburg, we've learned that sometimes our shifts to higher quality have cost us quantity. At one point, we wanted to offer a talkback time after the Saturday afternoon worship celebration. It would meet a real need for personal interaction for those who attended, and it changed lives. But this strategic focus created some time constraints, and it prevented us from leading a second celebration later that evening.

We did what promoted life-change, not what made the most business sense or would gather the largest crowds. We committed ourselves to the real business of Jesus—life transformation—and not to the sometimes superficial business of church growth.

God has chosen you, called you, gifted you, and promised a fulfillment of your life mission. God would not create you for failure. Your success is based on your willingness to risk stepping out and obediently following God. All of us experience seasons of doubt and frustration; UnLearning leaders step out of the boat anyway.

UnLearning is not about continuing what you are already doing and simply slapping on a new slogan, better technology, or some other additive.

The challenge is to hear and obey God with a sense of radical abandonment. The result will be new ways of ministering to people, using the resources God has already given to you.

UnLearning is about going a different direction. UnLearning means repentance. It requires us to identify ways we were wrong and to rebuild in a new direction.

UnLearning is about breaking away from the pack, because a crowd will always be slower to respond to the radical voice of Jesus Christ. UnLearning is about ways the Holy Spirit can adjust your leadership skills and attitudes; then you, in turn, can lead the way for a similar transformation in others. Most importantly, UnLearning is about experience.

Leaders who UnLearn are a different breed from what you may be used to. They are willing to fail. They break their own rules—at least the rules that prohibit people from becoming passionate followers of Jesus. UnLearning churches demonstrate an uncompromising approach to church mission and ministry. The methods may seem new, but the approach follows an ancient call.

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UnLearning churches focus more on connecting people to meaning than to activity. Fifteen years ago, we would have emphasized getting people to show up for church programs and listen-and-learn meetings. We would have sponsored a seminar and gauged its success by how many people attended. Now we measure success by asking, "How are people finding life-change and purpose through the experience?" People are not looking for church meetings as much as *life meaning*. We want to know if their church experience makes a difference in their relationships, parenting skills, Christian witness, and stewardship.

This paradigm translates into the organization's structure, as well. Major businesses operate with one board, but too often tiny churches become immobilized by layers of committees. They can spend hours debating what color carpeting to put in the church narthex or the precise wording of the congregation's statement of beliefs. Ginghamsburg finds that its people have neither the time nor the patience for multiple committee activities. So we work through one committee of nine people called the Leadership Board. No more staff-parish, missions, or finance committees.

Today's marketing gurus understand that today's culture isn't looking for information about products. Just how much could you write down about a Nike shoe after watching one television ad about it? Today's culture isn't looking to understand. Nike commercials don't talk about or even show athletic apparel. Instead, they offer a thirty-second experience.

The church could learn something from Nike. People don't want information about your religion—what people really want is a life-altering experience. UnLearning churches

understand that. It's not about policies and procedures, or even morality or ideology. It's about relationships. It's about creating environments where people can experience God.

UnLearning churches must be environments of trust. They must create safe spaces where the Spirit can work through people's inquiring quests for God. They welcome people who don't give or have all the "right" answers. They invite people to ask honest questions without chastising folks for struggling with the answers. They create communities of grace-space, allowing seekers the freedom to deal with the deepest questions of their hearts. Through their own honesty, congregational leaders demonstrate that the church is a safe space for questioning.

Imagine a people who live in an environment of grace and unconditional love.

Imagine a safe space where we can be honest enough to work on our "stuff." In this place, we find the freedom to tell the truth of who we really are on the inside. We can move out of fear and into trust. We can begin to truly live and to make a difference in God's created purpose, empowered to leave the safe spaces to practice authentic love in the dangerous places of life.

Being a pastor is similar to being a parent, in some ways. Leaders of UnLearning churches are charged with preparing their congregations to head out from the safe space of the church into a world in desperate need of God's love. They must demonstrate that faith in the God of the universe means being uncomfortable, having your life turned upside-down and inside-out for the sake of God, following the Spirit into the dangerous and unpredictable places of life.

This is the ultimate challenge for pastors, in that it is much harder to inspire people to trust an unpredictable Spirit and to love sacrificially in a dangerous world than it is to simply dictate beliefs. But look at Jesus' words in John 15:9-10: *"As the Father has loved me, so I have also loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."* Jesus' command doesn't say anything about belief. Rather, it is our love that determines

our actions in life, not our intellectual beliefs. Jesus goes on to say, *"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."* (John 15:11-12)

Jesus is calling your church not to religious belief, but to an affair of the heart. This world doesn't need another institution that goes out and tells people what to do and what to believe. Jesus is building and forming is a culture of reckless love. Help him lead your church to that place.

**Michael Slaughter** is Lead Pastor and Chief Dreamer of [Ginghamsburg United Methodist Church](#) in Tipp City, Ohio. Appointed to the small country church in 1979, Mike saw the potential for a teaching church that would transform its community and the lives of people across the globe. Ginghamsburg has grown under his three decades of leadership from 90 worshipers a week to over 5,000. Since initiating The Sudan Project in January 2005, Ginghamsburg has invested \$3.7 million into humanitarian relief in Darfur. The resultant agricultural project, child development program and safe water initiative are expanding to reach a quarter of a million Sudanese refugees and villagers. Locally, the New Path outreach arm of Ginghamsburg Church annually serves more than 40,000 people in surrounding communities via its food pantry, car, clothing and furniture ministries. Mike's books include [UnLearning Church](#), Money Matters and several others. Find out more about Mike at [www.MikeSlaughter.com](http://www.MikeSlaughter.com).