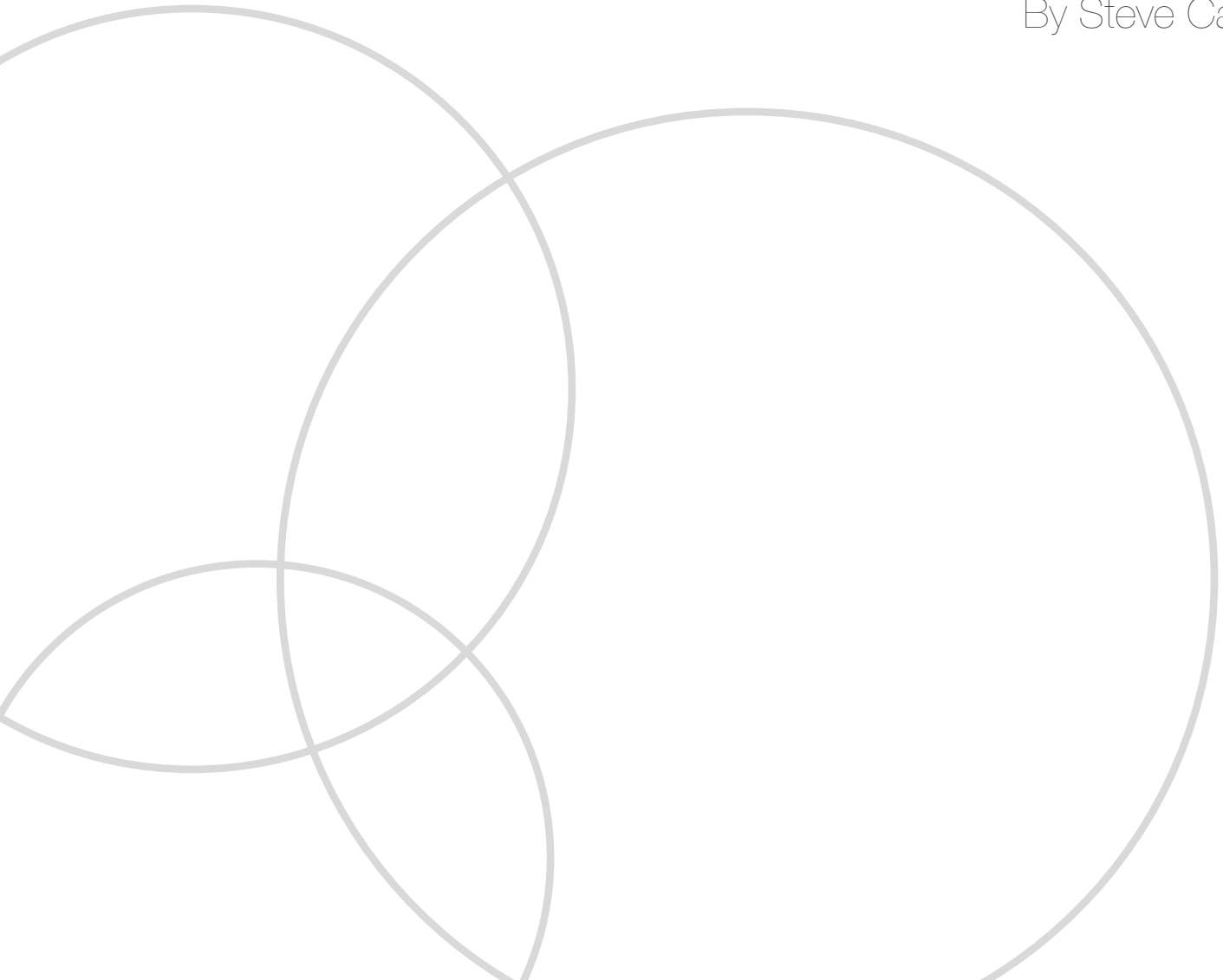


CHURCH COMMUNITY BUILDER

Ephesians 4 In Practice:

How to Equip Disciples for Ministry

By Steve Caton



Introduction

An effective discipleship strategy is one of the biggest challenges facing every church. Finding how best to equip people for ministry isn't just a big church problem; it is a problem for the small church meeting in a school, the established church just becoming multi-site, and the newly planted church alike.

Most of the issues that plague churches — giving, attendance, evangelism, leadership, missions — will be minimized when church leaders focus on building sustainable processes around equipping the saints. When people are growing spiritually, they will give, attend, tell others, volunteer, and serve. The question leaders ask will change. They will no longer wonder what they need to do to get people involved. Instead, they will begin to deal with the 'problem' of having fully funded, fully staffed ministries with an abundance of volunteer leaders who are looking for places to serve. Wouldn't that be a great problem to have?

Paul said it is the role of church leaders “to equip his 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” (Ephesians 4:12–13).

To avoid becoming a church that simply collects people and reports their attendance, you may need to adapt some of your current processes. Ephesians 4 clearly calls us to be an equipping church. Based on my work with all kinds and types of churches across the country (and even around the world), I've put together some ideas to help you bring clarity to how to equip and empower people to engage in ministry. The process of equipping and empowering people is what helps someone move from simply believing in Christ to being His disciple. I hope this is a healthy beginning point for some fruitful and fulfilling work.

How Equipping Begins

- **Define what discipleship looks like in your church.** What does an authentic disciple look like? The Bible describes the disciples as those who set aside everything so they could focus their attention on following Jesus. A disciple must be **equipped** for the work of ministry and actively **engaged** in the work of the ministry.

Today, many people believe being a disciple is something they add to their lives. It becomes one more thing to do in an already busy schedule. But authentic disciples are not the same as worship service attenders or small group members. Discipleship isn't measured in quantity, but in quality. Real disciples affect their environments with biblical values and truth.

What is your definition of discipleship?

- **Create an intentional, measurable, and trackable system for moving people toward becoming functional disciples.** Churches used to display their worship attendance, Sunday School attendance, and giving on a board in the sanctuary. Somehow we started believing those numbers represented spiritual development. That's not true. Spiritual growth is progressive, not instantaneous.

Church leaders must meet people where they are and walk alongside them toward becoming fully functional followers. Equipping someone for ministry requires really knowing them and investing in their lives. Without intentionality, this becomes chaotic or nonexistent. The sooner you begin tracking engagement on an individual level, the better you will be able to respond with options that are really needed. This must be systematic, or you won't stick with it.

Describe your strategy for moving people toward becoming fully functional disciples.

- **Highlight the activity of individuals more than the availability of programs.** Churches that tell stories of life change understand its importance. Many church leaders simply add activities to the church calendar and hope that people will get involved.

Churches that are seeing a dramatic increase in the spiritual climate of the congregation have shifted

their focus away from activity for its own sake to intentionality. This is a big shift for church leaders because they are used to making announcements through the bulletin, from the stage, and on the website. People aren't looking for something else to do; they are looking for something to do that matters!

How do you measure the success of your equipping process — the amount of programming or the level of participation? What are some things that affect it positively and negatively?

- **Evaluate the relationship between existing programs and the equipping strategy.** Don't be afraid to eliminate things that aren't producing results. If you could go back in time and start your church over with just a Bible and no historical or denominational baggage, would you build what you have? If you answered yes, then keep going. However, if you answered no, what are you waiting for?

It's OK to eliminate obsolete, tired, or irrelevant activities and programs from your schedule. Just because you've taken your student group to the same campsite for the past 15 years doesn't mean you have to do the same thing in the years ahead. You need to determine how the programs currently on the schedule result in equipped and engaged disciples.. If your primary purpose is making disciples, your key programs and activities should support that goal.

If you could start over with just your Bible, would you build what you currently have? What would you keep? What would you eliminate?

- **Build scalable, transferable processes that work in any campus setting.** If your church has or is considering multiple campuses, your systems must be scalable. If not, each individual campus will maintain different values and activities and won't have a cohesive relationship with the other campuses. Whatever you offer on one campus should be scaled and offered on all other campuses. Otherwise, you are doing nothing more than loosely affiliating disconnected congregations.

How scalable is your disciple-making process?

- **Develop a leadership training strategy for the purpose of raising up new leaders for future ministry opportunities.** If you put off looking for leaders until you need them, you will probably

compromise the impact potential of your ministry. Most churches start new initiatives with existing leaders. Without adding new leaders to the mix, existing leaders sometimes grow weary and eventually drop out of service all together.

Church leaders who want their churches to thrive recognize the importance of developing new leaders. They are actively engaged in identifying, equipping, and empowering new leaders to serve. They have a functional mentoring program and regular leadership training. Any church that does this well has a defined process in place to ensure growth of new and existing leaders.

Describe how your church identifies, trains, and empowers new leaders for existing and future ministries.

- **Measure more than numbers.** Numbers such as attendance, giving, and group participation are important, but leaders tend to focus on what they measure. Chris Mavity, director of North Coast Church's Training Network, says, "We say we value people more than money, but we count money down the penny and estimate people." If you aren't tracking ministry effectiveness in the community, life change within groups, and leader development, you are missing the natural byproducts of a discipleship strategy.

Many church leaders who measure health based only on numbers will do everything they can to keep those numbers moving up and to the right. They arbitrarily add people because Sunday 'felt more crowded'. As a result, the numbers they rely on to determine the vitality of the church become little more than educated guesses.

Measuring intangibles such as leadership development and community involvement paints a painfully accurate picture of the status of the church. This may be why many church leaders would rather not measure these numbers. However, if equipping God's people for works of service is the talk of your church, shouldn't it also be the criteria by which the health of your church is determined?

What characteristics of authentic disciples can your church measure? What do you think an analysis of these characteristics would say about your church and your leadership?

- **Tell the life change stories everywhere and often.** Highlight them on your website, show them in your services, talk about them in your communication. When people see how others are being affected by what God is doing in your church, they will want to be involved.

People want to know that faith makes a difference in the lives of real people. It's one thing to hire an actor to make a great video. It's something different when you tell the story of a person who overcame an addiction through God's grace, forgiveness, and power.

When disciples are maturing, the stories will be numerous. If you can't find any stories to tell, you probably don't have an effective equipping strategy. People who are growing in their relationships with God will affect others.

Where are you telling the stories of life change?

Conclusion

The church is called to equip people for acts of service. How we help people move from attenders to engaged disciples requires a clear focus. Equipping and empowering people can't be a program the church offers; it must be the environment in which the church exists, and it is the process that churches use to make disciples. It requires church leaders to do the messy work of getting to know people where they are. It requires an army of mentors who are willing to walk alongside those who are new to the faith. It means answering hard questions and asking even harder ones. It calls us to strengthen our own spiritual lives so we can be a resource to those who are depending on us.

But before you can create the right environment, you must understand what the key factors in creating the right environment are, understand how they are functioning in your church today, and evaluate whether the results you are achieving right now are consistent with the mission and vision of your church. If not, it might indicate that your process needs to be refined.

Real discipleship is face to face. It happens in the context of relationships and community. It disrupts the routine and calls people to reassess their priorities. Real discipleship changes the conversation and infiltrates every aspect of life.

Everything your church measures has a real, live person behind it — someone who needs authentic community and help being a Christ-follower. Without an intentional equipping strategy, you'll miss the people behind the numbers.

Numbers only represent an increase in the number of people who have joined the spectators. You need volunteers and leaders to help you do the ministry God has called your church to accomplish. By adopting some of these best practices, you can move the people who attend your church from passive spectators to passionately engaged disciples in ministry to others.

About Church Community Builder

You are called to equip people as they fulfill the mission of the local church. Church Community Builder is called to offer you a better *how* — through practical coaching, software, and 'tribe'-based learning — that supports good process and empowers **everyone** in your church.

Technology alone is incapable of supporting ministry objectives. You must first have people and processes working together in harmony. You must then identify technology which aligns with and empowers those people and processes. Finally, you must constantly evaluate, adjust, and learn from others as you adapt to changes and new challenges along the way. Church Community Builder is equipped to guide churches through all three of these disciplines.

When we encounter needs which fall outside of our core competency, we can point to a variety of thought leaders who excel at providing the inspirational understanding of *what* is possible and the *why* behind it. We then bring the *what* and *why* full circle by helping church leaders implement the *how*.

Our inspiration is "the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11b–12). We believe church leadership and structure is necessary and a good thing, so we encourage leadership-driven processes and systems. We also believe that community between church leaders and congregants is vital, so we provide highly distributive church management software to facilitate connectedness, communication, and insight.