

Chapter 2

The Wrong Questions

Big Idea: Hero makers know that if we focus only on addition, we never get to multiplication.

I've never been shy about asking for advice. In fact, I've put a lot of energy into finding ways to get time with big-dream, high-achievement people who might offer me wisdom. To meet personally with them, I've offered to do everything from hosting their events to treating them to a great restaurant to driving them to and from the airport.

One time I got to pick up Bill Hybels from the airport. He's the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, one of the most influential churches in America. He has been a pioneer in outreach and growth and is a bestselling author of more than twenty books. He's also chaired the board of the Willow Creek Association, a fellowship of more than twelve thousand like-minded churches across roughly fifty countries.

I asked one of our team members to drive the van so I could give full attention to my conversation with Bill. I had a pad of paper with far too many questions for the short time I'd have with him. Throughout our hour together, I rapid-fired questions, and with machine-gun quickness he shot back brilliant answers.

I remember the occasion for several reasons: first, because it was Bill, one of the more impressive leaders I've ever been around; second, because of the insightful answers he gave; and third, because on a later occasion he paid me a compliment, telling me great leaders ask questions, and commended me for bringing a list of them to the airport and wanting to grow as a leader (even though later I discovered that I could have brought much better questions!).

Even more important, his answers have provided helpful guidance as I lead Community Christian Church and NewThing, our church-planting organization, into new territory. In responding to what I asked him, he mentored me well.

Unfortunately, today I look back at that interview with regret. It was a lost opportunity because I asked the wrong questions. I asked questions that focused only on my leadership and my church: “How do I grow a church?” and “How do I develop myself as a leader?” My questions were all about making my current model better or bigger. I didn’t realize at the time that my questions would not lead to a new level, a higher perspective that could alter the status quo by changing how I was leading and doing church.

I asked the wrong questions, not hero-making questions but rather questions about how I could be the hero.

The questions I asked Bill were the same familiar questions that a generation of church leaders have asked over and over again. And for the last fifty years, the answers to those questions have led to practices that focus on simply growing our churches and developing ourselves rather than reproducing churches and multiplying leaders. You might say they are good questions, but not great ones. These are not hero-making questions but rather questions that make us the hero, whether or not we intend that to happen.

We need to think critically about the questions we are asking. Reminds me of a story about two men leaving church after hearing a sermon on prayer. Joe says, “I wonder if it would be all right to smoke while praying.” George replies, “Why don’t you ask the pastor?” So he does: “Reverend, may I smoke while I pray?” The pastor replies, “No sir, you may not! That’s very disrespectful toward our faith.” Joe reports the news to his friend. George says, “I’m not

surprised. You asked the wrong question. Let me try.” So George asks the pastor, “Rev, may I pray while I smoke?” To which the pastor eagerly replies, “By all means, my son. You can always pray whenever you want to.” Think about the questions you are asking. The right questions make a difference!

I remember church growth consultant Carl George telling me, “When you are really onto something, it will lead to questions that are more and more profound.” When Community Christian first stumbled onto becoming a two-site church, several years ago, we knew we were onto something unique. After becoming a multisite church, we started asking, “How could we multiply to ten locations or more?” And as we approached ten locations, we began to ask a more profound question: “How could God use us to multiply networks of reproducing churches around the world?”

When you understand the secret, you become discontent with questions of bigger and better. You find yourself asking more-profound questions about reproducing, multiplying, and movement making. I want to encourage and challenge you to reexamine the questions you ask. The answers to your questions lead to the practices you implement in your leadership.

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In the introduction to this book, I outlined five levels of church development. In short, Level 1 churches are declining, Level 2 are plateauing, Level 3 are growing, Level 4 are reproducing (churches that are planting new churches and launching sites where planting is planned and programmed versus automatic and spontaneous), and Level 5 are multiplying

(starting multiple outreaches that in turn each start multiple outreaches. In the rest of this chapter, we're going to examine different levels of questions and the resulting leadership practices. Here is my challenge for you: Take your questions up a level! In the questions you raise, don't settle until you reach Level 5.

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Level 1, 2, and 3 Questions Lead to Level 1, 2, and 3

Practices

Level 1 churches are among the most common out there (as are Level 1 ministries within churches, which could be a Sunday school, a youth group, a prison ministry, or anything else). Attendance can be in decline for any number of reasons. You may be in or leading a church that has experienced this or is currently working through it. Sometimes the church no longer has clarity of vision and purpose. Maybe the church has become too internally focused. Maybe the church's neighborhood has changed over the years and the church hasn't changed with it. We've all seen this happen. I've also seen churches lose relevance. The way the church has reached out in the past is no longer engaging the community. Maybe there has been unaddressed division within the church, or unhealed scandal. Maybe the church is even struggling to survive.

I've observed how questions like these lead to practices that are more reactive than proactive, more about managing the decline than reversing it.

By the way, nothing requires you to keep asking Level 1 questions. One way to stop asking them is to make statements that reflect the dream of a different future for your church or ministry. How could the following build faith and hope that the pattern of decline can be broken?

- If God's Word says there is an abundant harvest within reach of our church, then what if this coming Christmas (or Easter or Mother's Day) we were to . . .
- If God says all things are possible through him, then why couldn't we develop a plan to . . .
- I believe there are people out there who need our help to find their way back to God, so could we pray and then brainstorm ways that our church could reach out to them and . . .

And as you will soon discover, it's Level 4 and 5 questions that allow you to dream big.

Like leaders of Level 1 churches, leaders of churches at Level 2—those that are plateauing—ask questions relevant to their situation. These churches are gaining ground each year, but their losses during that same time neutralize their gains. Often their identity is wrapped around being whatever size they are; they feel they're in their sweet spot if they can simply maintain their current size, from programming to finances.

If this describes your church, you're not alone—far from it. Churches at Levels 1 and 2 together represent roughly 80% of all U.S. churches.

Nothing prevents you from addressing Level 2 questions necessary for survival while at the same time asking better questions. I think of Mike Slaughter, who, fresh from seminary, received an assignment from his United Methodist denomination to pastor a hundred-plus-year-old church in a central Ohio hamlet of fewer than twenty homes, named Ginghamburg. Since its founding, Ginghamburg Church had hovered at around fifty people. Mike set out to meet their needs but

also to ask better questions, all centered on, “How can I lead this congregation to discover new heights in what it means to be a follower of Jesus?” He started a discipleship group among these saints, and as the months went by, they not only grew personally in their faith but also started inviting friends to join their journey. As Mike reflects, “I jokingly called the process ‘sanctified Amway’ because of how devoted people became to our product—a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. I foresaw the leaders who emerged from our small-group community becoming the Joshuas and Deborahs of tomorrow’s church.”¹

And they did! Mike stayed at that church for more than thirty years, and so did a large portion of that original group. During this time, not only did attendance grow tenfold, but Ginghamburg sent out several teams to birth five more Methodist churches in their area. And two of those births have helped birth other Methodist churches. Likewise, they’ve started ministries from urban Dayton to poverty-stricken Sudan in Africa. The Sudan effort, by the way, began with a congregation-wide question one year: “What does Jesus want from us for this coming Christmas?”

Level 3 churches are experiencing growth, anywhere from slow to rapid. Sometimes the growth is misleading. Perhaps it’s just a reshuffling of the saints because the church across town had a split and your church has a better children’s ministry. I’ve also seen growth as merely an extension of class or race, as when middle-class minorities are moving into an area, many of them already followers of Christ, and one particular church is an affinity match for them.

Other times, however, the growth comes mostly from conversions as the church helps people find their way back to God. Maybe the church has an outstanding student ministry, high-visibility young adult gathering, vibrant missional communities, and/or an effective program of Christ-centered recovery groups. Typically, the teaching ministry is also relevant in content and

regularly invites people to take next steps in becoming a follower of Jesus Christ. More often than not, the church is reaching out in tangible ways to show the community the love of Jesus, especially by serving the disadvantaged.

Level 3 churches make up approximately 16% of all churches in the United States.

Level 4 questions will lead to reproduction, and Level 5 questions to multiplication. We'll go into those in the next chapter. For now, I want you to see and understand that Levels 1, 2, and 3 are about the shift from subtraction to addition. It is good to grow (Level 3), but why settle for good when what God wants for his church is something better (Level 4) or even the best (Level 5)?

Does Something Tell You There Has to Be More?

Asking the wrong questions gives us status quo answers and status quo results. Worse, it leaves too many of us thinking, *There has to be more than this*. We're stuck and don't know what to change. The day-to-day, week-to-week patterns we've settled into aren't consistent with the dreams we had when we entered ministry. When we start to ask the hard questions and honestly assess where we are, we realize we've gotten sidetracked, spending all our time and energy running the church instead of focusing on multiplying disciples and accomplishing the mission of Jesus—the mission we gave ourselves to in the beginning.

I remember a meeting early in Community Christian Church's history. We were trying to clarify our vision and mission, and our young team was struggling with how to articulate where we were going. Troy Jackson, an intern with us, finally spoke up, saying, "I got it, I got it. I know our vision!" Then with a deadpan delivery he said, "We . . . want . . . to . . . be . . . a . . . really . . . really . . . really . . . BIG . . . church!" We all started laughing, and not just because of

his delivery. We knew that what he said was true! But we also knew that we had to do more. Even then, we realized that if we and other churches continued to follow our current pattern of growth by addition, we would not win the world to Christ and make disciples in all the nations. Essentially, we would be disobeying Jesus' clear and passionate call to *all* of his disciples (then and now) in his Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20).

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Let me put it as bluntly as I can. Too many church leaders are stuck asking the same old question: "How do I grow my church?" Let's ask more-profound questions! Let me give you four reasons why that's the wrong question and why we need to take our questions up a level.

1. "How do *I* grow my church?" We were not meant to do this alone or versus others. That "I" should be replaced with a "we." Hero makers know that the mission is accomplished only through the multiplying of other leaders.
2. "How do I *grow* my church?" This is only partially right. Yes, the church was meant to grow. And yes, healthy things grow. But growth is not the endgame. Hero makers understand that growth is not about creating more *seating* capacity; it's about creating more *sending* capacity and expanding God's kingdom.
3. "How do I grow *my* church?" It's not yours or mine; we are only stewards. We've each taught this stewardship lesson hundreds of times to our people regarding their finances and every area of their life, but we need to look at ourselves and the churches we are responsible for and apply it to our own ministries and giftedness. Hero makers know it's all God's.

4. “How do I grow my *church*?” It’s not just about the church (or whatever ministry you lead within a church); it’s about the kingdom of God. This question of how to grow the church is almost always asked with the lowercase *c* church in mind. That’s shortsighted. Hero makers are far more concerned about the growth of God’s kingdom. They see their church through a kingdom lens versus seeing the kingdom through the lens of their local church.

A far better question than “How do I grow my church?” is the Level 5 question, “How can we expand God’s kingdom?” Keep reading, and I will get to that hero-making question in the next chapter.

One-Question Assessment and Online Hero Maker

Assessment

Let me suggest a simple leadership exercise: replace the question, “How do I grow my church (or ministry)?” with the weightier question, “Am I trying to be the hero, or am I trying to make heroes out of others?”

Ask this one question every day: “Am I trying to be the hero, or am I trying to make heroes out of others?”

Ask that question every day, and I guarantee you will multiply the impact of your leadership. How does it work? Like this:

- If you are leading a small group, ask, “Am I trying to be the hero in this group, or am I mentoring other leaders to make heroes out of them?”

- In your teaching, ask, “Am I trying to be the hero in my teaching, or am I developing other teachers who will be the heroes?”
- In leading your staff or team, ask, “Am I trying to be the hero of this team, or am I developing and investing in others so they will be the heroes?”

Making it a daily practice to ask one question is simple but challenging. However, keeping this question in the front of your thoughts and prayers may be the single greatest adjustment you ever make in your leadership.

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Because we want to do everything we can to help you and your team, we have created the free Hero Maker Assessment at becomingfive.org. It’s a unique personal assessment of all five essential hero-making practices, and it will tell you how you have done in the past, how you are currently doing, and how to be the leader you aspire to be. If you haven’t completed this self-diagnostic yet, consider taking a break and doing it. This tool will really help you.

You Are More Ready Than You Realize to Be a Hero Maker

As a young leader, I thought I had a very big vision for my church (notice I was saying “my church.” Ugh!). I wanted to lead a church that would reach one thousand people. Then I heard a paradigm-shifting challenge from author Neil Cole that caused me to start asking different questions. He said, “Take your current dream for your church and multiply it by one million.” I

quickly did the math. One thousand times one million equals one billion! I started thinking about trying to reach a billion people, and it immediately challenged my current practices. I knew that I couldn't turn my dream into reality with one leader or one church. I knew that I would have to multiply my efforts through hundreds, maybe thousands or tens of thousands, of leaders. It took my questions to a whole new level!

Don't stay where you are. Don't stay stuck asking the same old questions. If you do, you will get the same old answers and same old results. You were made for more. Ask yourself every day, "Am I trying to be the hero, or am I trying to make heroes of others?"

What is the dream for your leadership? Multiply it by one million. Now, how could God accomplish that? If you want to know, let's move on to the next chapter, where we start asking the really big questions.

Hero Maker Discussion Questions

Open

Tell a story about a time when asking the wrong question got you into trouble. Extra points if it's a humorous situation.

Dig

Read Acts 1:6, where the disciples asked the wrong question. John Calvin said that there are as many errors in that question as there are words in it! What are some of the ways their

assumptions behind that question had to change in order for them to understand the response Jesus gave them in Acts 1:7 and Acts 1:8?

Reflect

- What disillusionment about church, ministry, or leadership, if any, has caused you to think, *There has to be more than this?*
- What in this chapter has given you hope?

¹ Bill Simmons, *The Complete Book of Basketball* (New York: Ballantine, 2009).

² Ibid., 39. The following narrative is adapted from pages 38–41.

³ Ibid., 38–39.

⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵ Ibid., 54.

⁶ Exponential has compiled lists of specific characteristics for each multiplication culture. To learn more, download a free copy of *Becoming a Level 5 Multiplying Church* at exponential.org.

⁷ Michael Slaughter with Warren Bird, *Real Followers: Beyond Virtual Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999),