

DEATH OF THE CHURCH GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

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for Percept*

Death of the Church Group Discussion Guide

February 12, 1997

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Death of the Church, by Mike Regele with Mark Schulz, is published by Zondervan Publishing House, a Division of Harper Collins Publishers. For copies of *Death of the Church*, please call Zondervan Direct Source at 1-800-727-3480 or Percept at 1-800-442-6277

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Printed in the United States of America.

97 98 99 00 - 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN: 0-926850-12-1

DEATH OF THE CHURCH GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE 5 SESSIONS

A Word to Leaders

The institutional church in America is rapidly moving toward a defining moment, when we will choose to die in order to live, or we will die anyway because of our hidebound resistance to change. Choosing to die in order to live will require six individual and collective commitments, which serve as the framework for the following discussions. As you meet with fellow believers who share a concern for the church today, choose those questions which enable you to focus on what you as a group are most concerned about and which fit the time you have set apart. We also suggest that you open each session with a brief prayer, keep in the foreground the Gospel's call to die in order to live (see the opening "reflections" in each session), and close with a time for listening for what God might be saying to you about your ministry through the group discussion.

SESSION 1

Part One: Change Chapters 1-5

We must understand the dynamics of change that are at work today in our culture.

Introduce yourself by giving your name and church affiliation and briefly explaining why you first picked up the book *Death of the Church* and/or what you hope to gain from group discussion.

© *Death. It's not a topic we talk much about, but Christ didn't hesitate to address the issue. In fact, the Gospel calls us—individually and, we believe, collectively as the church—to die in order to live. Read Matthew 16:24-26. In what ways have you denied yourself in order to follow Jesus? Give one example. Now consider in what ways the church in America today might have to deny itself in order to follow Jesus. This issue is foundational to our study and we'll be touching on it at the beginning of each session. After all, having wrapped many of our thoughts and actions in "God talk," we the church have developed elaborate self-made systems and we consume enormous amounts of personal and institutional energy to sustain them. But are those systems of God? Are they what we need to be a vital body of believers in America today?*



With the words of Jesus in mind, let's move to our discussion of the text.

Q1 What has contributed to your personal realization that the church is "not in Kansas anymore"? Refer to the chart on page 16 of the text and be specific about the areas of uncertainty you've found yourself facing.

 **We must understand change itself—global change that happens at supersonic speed—as a force that is reshaping our world.**

Q2 Why is that so difficult for the church and its leaders? As a corollary, why do you think our strategies for dealing with changes haven't worked?

Q3 What do you appreciate about generational change (chapter 4) as a grid for looking at history? Looking toward the future through this grid of generational change, what do you find discouraging? What do you find hopeful? What lessons from the discussion of generational change seem especially relevant to the life of the church?

Q5 Were you raised in an experiencing faith or doing faith part of the generational cycle? How has that impacted your perspective on and involvement in church leadership today? What does that fact that we are nearing the end of an inner-directed, experiential era suggest to you about a viable path for the church? See the questions listed on pages 44-45 for possible scenarios for the future. Which question(s) are you most concerned about?

Q5 What chaos and social uncertainty do you see being generated by the transformational change from an industrial society to an information-based society? Be specific. In light of this tidal wave, why is maintaining the status quo not a wise option for the institutional church?

SESSION 2

Part Two: Focal Points of Change *Chapters 6-9*

We must understand the various faces of change emerging as we prepare to step into the twenty-first century.

© Before we begin, look again at Matthew 16:24-26. At the core of Jesus' message is his insistence that unless there is first a death, there can be no life. Unless, for instance, we say no to our self-will, we cannot know the depth of God's will. When have you seen this truth in your life? Where is the church in America or your church in particular needing to say no to its self-will so that it can know the depth of God's will?



Changing Reality

Q1 Explain why the quest for absolute certainty—the quest of the modern era—has been replaced by a radical relativism and a postmodern reality for every occasion. Give a few examples of this relativism from today's culture and identify any evidence of such relativism you find in the church today.

Q2 How can Christianity speak to the post-modern world and the possibility that knowledge and truth cannot (and must not) be limited to “unassailable” empirical proofs and reason?

Q3 Why is the freedom to choose from a “reality for every occasion” both a threat and an opportunity for the church? Why does this issue of choice compel the church to face its own death?

Changing Structures

Q4 What is America's "grand story"? How has the loss of the grand story impacted public schools, the church, and the family? Refer to your own experience and observation in answering this question. What troubles you most about what you've seen? Why?

 **The morality, leaders, and institutions of our nation have been weakened by the demise of the grand story.**

Q5 What evidence have you personally seen that our morality, leaders, and institutions are languishing?

Q6 If a new American story is indeed beginning to emerge, what kind of threat and/or opportunity would that story be to the church? Why does this emerging story compel the church to face its own death?

SESSION 3

Part Two: Focal Points of Change *Chapters 10-14*

We must understand the various faces of change emerging as we prepare to step into the twenty-first century.

© *Another aspect of dying so that we might know life in Christ involves dying to our own plans for ourselves or “OUR OWN METHODS”. Unless we turn away from following our own way, we cannot know God’s way. When have you seen this truth in your life? Where is the church in America or your church in particular needing to turn from following its own way so that it can know God’s way?*



Changing Players

Q1 Why are the increase in cultural diversity and the graying of America a call to the church to die? How is your church responding to this change?



As the decade draws to a close, the builders and the silents are the passing actors.

Q2 How has the church in America been impacted and/or regarded by the builders (see pages 116-117)? By the silents (see 119-122)? Ideally, how would a revitalized church of Christ respond to today’s aging builders? To the squeezed silents?

 **As the twenty-first century opens, the boomers and the survivors are the emerging leaders.**

Q3 How has the church in America been impacted and/or regarded by the boomers (128-131)? By the survivors (134-139)? Ideally, how would a revitalized church of Christ respond to today's idealistic builders? To the young survivors?

Changing Faith

Traditional religious faith is dying in America, and this section puts a face on that death.

Q4 Where do you see yourself in the profiles of the insiders—the loyalists, the switchers, and the newcomers? Where do you see most of your Christian friends? What has this grid helped you consider about your home church?

Q5 What is most alarming about the profiles of the outsiders—the floaters, the disillusioned, and the indifferent? Why would most of the population quite naturally head in this direction if the church remains alive in its current state? Put differently, how are these profiles a call to the church to die to itself?

SESSION 4

Part Three: The Church in a Defining Moment *Chapters 15-17*

We must accept that the traditional place of the institutional church in American society is dying, and with it the institutional church itself. We must be willing to let our traditional forms and structures that are the foundation of the institutional church die.

☉ *We die to ourselves when we acknowledge and repent of our sin. Put differently, unless we confess our sin, we cannot know God's forgiveness and his gift of righteousness. When have you seen this truth in your life? Where is the church in America or your church in particular needing to confess its sin so that it can know God's forgiveness and the new life which comes with that gift of grace?*

 Look again at the overview of “The Christendom Paradigm” (pages 188-189).

Q1 What message do you see for the church in America today? For your church in particular?

 We find ourselves not knowing how to be the church because we don't quite know how we are supposed to live in the world. We face an ever-widening gap between social need and our ability to respond to that need (see chart p. 197), and one reason is that we the church have enculturated the Gospel and our traditions.

Q2 Be specific about how we have done so and about why this fact makes us—the institution as it is today—reluctant to die.

 **Dying is a metaphor for the “letting go” or abandoning the aspects of our experience and our expectations of what the church is and should be.**

Q3 Review the list of ten things we—the institutional church today—need to let go of (pages 202-211). Which items were you surprised or shocked to see on the list? Which will be hardest for you personally and/or your home church to let go of?

Q4 What would the death of those items you just identified look like in your local church or church ministry? Be prayerful as you consider this question.

 **We can die as a result of our hide-bound resistance to change, or we can die in order to live. But how do we choose to die if we don't want to die by default? The first step is confession. Close this session with a time of prayer: acknowledge where we the church have sinned by loving death more than life... by loving our traditions more than God... and by loving our institutions more than people.... Then ask for God's forgiveness... and for his guidance you as you turn your back on those things and seek to move ahead in his will.**

SESSION 5

Part Three: The Church in a Defining Moment *Chapters 18-20*

We must wrestle to forge new ways to proclaim the Gospel in this changing world.... We must do the work of revisioning the church for the twenty-first century—from the local congregation to the national denominational office.

© *Authentic Christianity knows that unless there is first a death, there can be no life. Unless we are willing to die to self, we cannot know our true selves; unless we die, we cannot discover the life of God. When have you seen this truth in your life? Where is the church in America or your church in particular needing to die to itself so that it can discover the life God intends for it to have?*

 **Once the church as we know it dies, life on the other side will be marked, first, by our ability to share the unsurpassable story of Jesus Christ in a way that they will hear it.**

Q1 What questions are people today asking? What questions are the people you come in contact with asking? What aspects of the Gospel will answer those questions and what words will you use to communicate those answers? What traditional and cultural trappings do you need to lose as you share God's truth in love?

 **Second, the resurrected life of the church will be characterized by a reordering of institutional priorities and an emphasis on local congregations as the new horizon of mission.**

Q2 Describe the mission field on your doorstep. Be as specific as possible—or consider how to learn those specifics. What might you do to empower the individual members of your congregation to be the primary agents of mission God calls all of us to be?

 **Third, the church of the twenty-first century must shift its focus from an institutional orientation to a community orientation.**

Q3 At the moment, is your leadership more concerned with “our church” or “our community”? What can be done to move people to serve the community rather than preserve the institutional church?

 **Mission is action directed toward the closing the gap between what is and what ought to be.**

Q4 In a brief statement, describe the “what is” of your community. Then begin to define the hope of the Gospel for that particular mission context and perhaps some ways (i.e., ministries) to make that hope a reality for insiders as well as outsiders.

 **The church in America can choose to become either an empty shell or a revitalized center of life, and that choice comes with the decision to die. Following the example of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, we the church must die in order to find life. So, once again, spend some time in prayer: confront the denial, name the anger, feel the grief, and, in faith, accept the inevitable with hope. Ask God to help you let the old self die and to give you a vision—his vision—for what the resurrected life will be.**

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”

— Matthew 16:24-26 NRSV