

FIVE UNCOVERIES FROM 40 YEARS OF MINISTRY

Unlearning and learning to see differently.

Forty years ago, I entered ministry with plenty of enthusiasm, a head full of ideas, and more assumptions than I realized. Some of those assumptions served me well. Others took decades to recognize, question, and eventually abandon.



For the first 25 years, I served as a worship pastor. Sunday after Sunday, I stood before congregations, led worship, worked alongside pastors, and experienced the joys and frustrations of church life.

Then, fifteen years ago, something happened that I never anticipated:

Lucia and I set out to plant a church.

We'd been assessed, attended church-planting boot camps, and received the training we were told we'd need. Our original vision was to create an oasis for Christians working at Walt Disney World, a place where they could find encouragement, friendship, and a sense of belonging.

None of our training prepared us for where and how Jesus eventually led us.

It wasn't until our lives became intertwined with young Disney Cast Members from around the world, many of whom were critical of religion, conflicted about faith, and confused by Christians, that we realized just how naive we'd been about what Jesus was inviting us into.

The journey from our original vision to where we are now is well documented. But what we've uncovered along the way has been transformational, both for us and for the those Jesus has brought into our lives.

Somewhere in the middle of those relationships, I began seeing things different from how I saw them during my first 25 years of ministry. I wasn't learning a different way to do church. I was beginning to question some of the assumptions that had shaped the way I understood ministry in the first place.

I call these **uncoveries** rather than discoveries because most of what I've come to see isn't new. It has been there all along, hidden beneath layers of assumptions, expectations, and familiar ways of thinking.

The real adventure has been learning to recognize what I couldn't see before.

Forty years. Two very different chapters of life. And five uncoveries that have reshaped the way I see Jesus, His Kingdom, His Church, and His harvest.

UNCOVERY #1

Culture Is Stronger Than Strategy

In an earlier Field Note, *Defying Gravity*, I explored something fascinating about NASA's Artemis rocket. Approximately 85–90% of its launch weight is propellant, much of which is needed to generate enough thrust to overcome Earth's gravitational pull.

I've come to recognize something similar in ministry. Culture has its own gravitational pull, and it's often far stronger than the strategies we introduce to change it.

As a worship pastor, I watched leaders return from conferences excited about a new strategy, program, or pathway. The possibilities seemed endless. But after a few months, the excitement would fade, the strategy would sputter, and everything would gradually return to normal. I watched that cycle repeat itself often enough to understand why congregations eventually became skeptical of the next big idea.

Then I encountered the same gravitational pull from an entirely different direction. Young Christians sometimes arrive at Cast Member Church expecting the kind of Christian community they experienced back home. When they encounter our harvest-forward paradigm, they often want us to adapt to their familiar expectations rather than reconsider their own. When that doesn't happen, they tend to move on.

Different settings. Different expectations. The same gravitational pull. People naturally gravitate toward what feels familiar, safe, and predictable. Introducing something new doesn't necessarily change the way people see.

That's why I've become convinced that lasting change doesn't begin with a new program, strategy, or pathway. It begins with a new paradigm. Before people can move differently, they must begin to see differently.

UNCOVERY #2

Fruitfulness Is Not the Same as Success

Growing attendance. Expanding programs. Increasing participation. Positive responses. These were some of the familiar ways success was recognized and celebrated in the ministry environments where I served. And when those things happened, we celebrated.

But I began to recognize a distinction between being successful at what we were doing and producing the kind of fruit Jesus talked about.

Imagine a gym celebrating record membership, packed exercise classes, and a growing number of locations. By every conventional measure, business is booming. But none of those numbers tell us whether the people walking through its doors are actually becoming healthier.

I've come to recognize a similar distinction in ministry. We can become remarkably successful at attracting people, organizing activities, and building ministries without necessarily seeing lives transformed.

Some of the most significant things I've witnessed with Cast Member Church have happened around dinner tables, over coffee, and through conversations nobody planned. No attendance goals. No performance indicators. No predetermined outcomes. Just relationships, trust, and the unexpected work of Jesus in people's lives.

And sometimes, I didn't recognize the fruit until months or even years later. I've watched young people return to their home countries carrying a newfound curiosity about Jesus. I've seen relationships deepen, assumptions unravel, and faith begin to take root in ways no ministry report could adequately capture.

Jesus talked a great deal about fruitfulness. He described seeds growing in ways the farmer couldn't fully explain. He spoke about branches bearing fruit through their connection to the vine. And He reminded His disciples that lasting fruit comes from abiding in Him.

The problem isn't necessarily that we've been measuring things incorrectly. It's that we may have been measuring the wrong things. Attendance, giving, and participation can be measured with hard numbers. But recognizing fruitfulness requires something different. It requires paying attention to people's lives, listening to their stories, and noticing the small, sometimes almost invisible ways Jesus is transforming them.

We can count everything that's happening in our ministries and still miss what Jesus is doing in people's lives.

UNCOVERY #3

The Harvest Is Not Coming to Church

Imagine a magnificent deep-sea fishing boat. State-of-the-art equipment. An experienced crew. Everything meticulously maintained and ready for the open sea.

There's just one problem. The boat never leaves the dock.

Instead, the crew spends its time improving the boat, upgrading the equipment, and inviting people aboard. By almost every measure, it's an impressive operation. Except for one thing. They're not catching any fish.

For decades, much of our approach to ministry has been built around a similar assumption: If we create the right environment, offer the right programs, and extend the right invitations, people will come. And a few may straggle in.

But something became increasingly obvious as I stepped outside the familiar rhythms of church life. There's an enormous harvest of people who aren't looking for a church to attend. They're not

searching for a worship service, a Bible study, or a Christian program. For many, the thought of walking through the doors of a church never even crosses their minds.

That doesn't mean they're not curious about Jesus. The young people I've come to know through Cast Member Church have challenged that assumption repeatedly. Many have little interest in organized religion. Some have never opened a Bible or seriously considered Christianity. Yet I've encountered an extraordinary openness to exploring who Jesus is, what He taught, and what following Him might mean for their lives. And none of it began with an invitation to attend church.

I think back to the early days of Cast Member Church, when I began realizing that I didn't need to create another gathering to reach these young people. I needed to enter their world, become part of their lives, and discover what Jesus was already doing among them.

When Jesus looked at the crowds, He saw a plentiful harvest. He entered people's homes, shared their tables, listened to their stories, and met them where they were. The harvest doesn't need to find its way into our churches before it can encounter Jesus.

We've spent decades asking how to get the harvest into the Church. Jesus told us to send workers into the harvest.

UNCOVERY #4

Knowing About Jesus Is Not the Same as Knowing Jesus

I've studied the Bible, listened to countless sermons, led thousands of worship songs, and spent decades in conversations about faith. And I'm grateful for all of it. But somewhere along the way, I began recognizing an important distinction between information and intimacy.

Knowing a great deal about Jesus doesn't necessarily mean we know Him very well.

Think about someone whose biography you've read. You might know where they were born, what they've accomplished, the challenges they've faced, and the decisions that shaped their life. You could know more facts about them than some of their closest friends.

Now imagine that person becoming one of your closest friends. They sit at your dinner table. They accompany you to the grocery store. They invite you into their world, introduce you to people they love, and share stories that never made it into the biography. You laugh together, walk through difficult moments together, and discover things about each other that no book could ever reveal.

The person hasn't changed. But your relationship with them has. You no longer simply know about them. You know them.

That realization challenged more than my personal relationship with Jesus. It challenged the way I thought about introducing others to Him.

For years, much of my ministry revolved around gatherings where people came to hear, sing, learn, and participate. I poured my heart into those experiences. But when I began spending more of my life with young people who had little understanding of Christianity, I discovered that introducing someone to Jesus often looked very different.

It wasn't simply about sharing information or answering questions. It meant being present. Walking through disappointments. Celebrating victories. Listening when life became complicated. Allowing people to see what following Jesus looked like in the ordinary moments of my own life.

Jesus didn't simply invite His disciples to learn about Him. He invited them to follow Him. To be with Him. To share life with Him. They watched Him, listened to Him, traveled with Him, ate with Him, and experienced His character in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.

It's personal. Up close and personal. Information can be communicated from a distance. But intimacy requires proximity. We cannot substitute the transfer of information for the sharing of life.

UNCOVERY #5

The Kingdom Is Bigger Than Our Expressions of Church

Something unexpected happened when I immersed myself in the harvest. I began spending my days with young people who weren't Christians, didn't attend church, and often had little interest in organized religion. Yet the more time I spent with them, the more I began to recognize glimpses of Jesus at work in their lives.

I began paying closer attention to things I might previously have overlooked. The anger that concealed disappointment. The questions that revealed a deeper longing. The unexpected vulnerability behind a confident exterior. The compassion someone showed when nobody was watching.

These weren't simply opportunities to introduce a religious conversation. They were invitations to look more closely at what was happening in people's lives. And I began to realize that the Kingdom of God was much closer than I'd imagined.

For years, I had largely understood the Kingdom through the expressions of Church I knew best. Worship services, sermons, programs, gatherings, and organized ministry activities. But the more deeply I entered the harvest, the more I began recognizing that the Kingdom wasn't confined to those familiar expressions.

It's a little like standing before an enormous landscape and looking at it through binoculars. You can see certain things with remarkable clarity, but only within the narrow field of vision the lenses allow. Lower the binoculars, and suddenly you recognize how much of the landscape you've been missing.

The landscape hasn't changed. Your field of vision has.

Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God had come near. And as I revisited the Gospels, I began noticing how often He revealed that reality in the ordinary experiences of people who weren't looking for a religious encounter.

Somewhere along the way, the Holy Spirit began teaching me something I now call Holy Curiosity. To look more closely. Listen more deeply. Pay attention to the people and stories unfolding around me.

I began recognizing glimpses of Jesus in places I hadn't expected, among people who weren't looking for Him, and in conversations I never could have planned.

The Kingdom wasn't suddenly appearing in the harvest. The Holy Spirit was teaching me to recognize what I hadn't been seeing.

STILL UNCOVERING

I could easily list forty uncoveries, one for each year I've spent in ministry. But five seems like a good place to start.

After forty years, I'm more convinced than ever that the Kingdom of God is nearer than we imagine, the harvest is more plentiful than we realize, and Jesus is doing far more than we can see.

I'm grateful for what I've learned. I'm equally grateful for what I've had to unlearn. And I'm excited about what I have yet to uncover.

So here's my encouragement, and my challenge. Don't allow what you've always known to keep you from seeing what Jesus is revealing. Hold your assumptions loosely. Stay curious. Pay attention to the people and possibilities unfolding around you.

Because no matter how long we've been following Jesus, there's always more to uncover.