



## Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

### Time to Get into the Game!

**[Jesus] said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" ... Because of this *many* of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.**

(John 6:59-60, 66 -- NRSV -- italics mine)

Back in my college days I became actively involved in a church-supported student ministry. I recall that we who comprised the lay leadership of that ministry would often fret over the fact that while attendance at sponsored spiritual, outreach, and fellowship events often exceeded 250 persons, only about a quarter of the attendees ever seemed to become truly dedicated to the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.

Many of the other three-quarters, whom we sometimes referred to as our (church) body's "flabby mid-section," participated regularly in various activities, but contributed relatively little in terms of time, treasure and talent.

I thought of this infelicitous phrase, "flabby mid-section," while reading a recent news report in *Christianity Today* (June 2008, p. 13) about Willow Creek Church's "huge shift."

Willow Creek has been one of the most impressive megachurches in America over the past thirty-five years. Founded in 1975 by a young pastor with a dynamic preaching ability and a keen mind for evangelism and church growth, Willow Creek grew to roughly 20,000 members in the 1990s by targeting its entertainment-oriented Sunday programs to "seekers"—i.e., unchurched and often agnostic folk who come to church *seeking* answers to life's troubling questions.

In theory, these "seekers" were supposed to become believers and church members who, by means of faithful attendance at midweek discipleship classes over several years, would then evolve into mature Christians greatly

informed about their faith in Christ as well as deeply committed to the life and ministry of Christ's gospel and Church.

However, recent surveys conducted by the Willow Creek staff indicate that far too many people have remained relatively uncommitted to church life in its deeper dimensions. For this reason, Willow Creek is embarking on a "huge shift" in the tenor of its weekend *and* weekday services by becoming more intentional about developing mature disciples.

While church leaders are hopeful that many of their half-hearted members can be turned into stout-hearted disciples, some pastors of other churches that follow the Willow Creek church growth model are doubtful that this effort will be markedly successful—"especially since more traditional churches wrestle with the same issue."

In fact, Willow Creek actually tried to beef up its theological curriculum about a decade ago by bringing in "teaching pastors," but the result was a drop in attendance!

This sounds eerily like what happened in Jesus' ministry: as his teaching became more challenging and called for deeper expressions of personal commitment, many of his followers simply threw up their hands in disgust and went home.

Perhaps this is the way it will always be. Jesus once likened discipleship to entering through a narrow gate, noting that most prefer the wide gate "that leads to destruction" (Matthew 7.13-14).

You've probably heard it said that the church is like a big-time football game, where out on the playing field you'll find twenty-two hard-working players in desperate need of rest, while sitting up in the stands are thousands and thousands of fans in desperate need of exercise. Sound familiar?

To those of you hardworking "players" who are out on the field of church mission and ministry week after week: I salute you! And may God bless all of your endeavors!

And to the rest who sit idly in the stands (pews) each week, watching the drama unfold but not yet truly involved in the way you should be, I say:

Your number has just been called by Coach Jesus—  
lace up those playing shoes of yours and stretch a little,  
for it's time to get into the game!

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