



RESOURCES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Four Key Pivots for Today's Church

The Pivot Podcast is back with an episode on faithful responses to cultural shifts

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Does it feel like doing church is harder than it used to be? That there are fewer people available to volunteer, that your congregation is less connected to its surrounding community, to God, and to one another? How do we understand what's going on, and how do we respond? This is what Dr. Dwight Zscheile and Dr. Dee Stokes explore in the [latest episode](#) of the Pivot podcast, guiding you to take a closer

look at a key shift happening in the church today, and discussing four pivots that you and your faith community can make in order to faithfully respond.

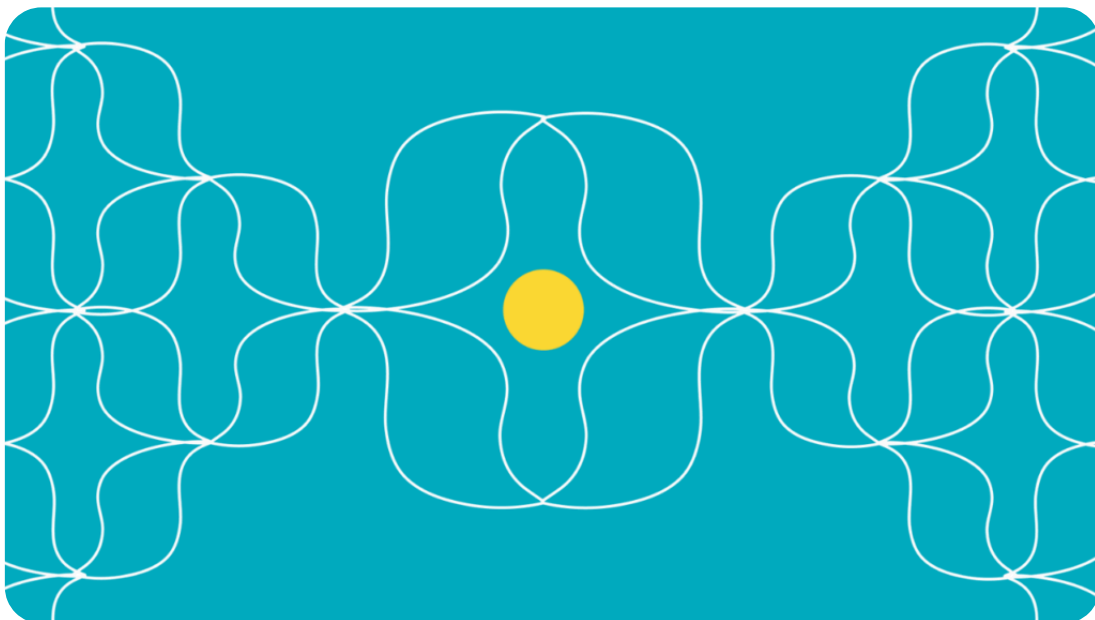
Included with this episode is a free download that will give you an even deeper dive into understanding this cultural moment, the pivots you can make today and pitfalls to avoid in the process. If you're a pastor, a lay leader, a regional church or denominational leader, or if you'd just like to learn more about cultural shifts and the ways congregations can faithfully respond, you've come to the right place.

We begin by thinking about the shift that's taking place. Christianity in America has primarily been organized for the last two centuries around a particular institutional model—voluntary association—which is rapidly breaking down. People are dis-embedding from voluntary associations and institutions of all sorts in order to pursue individual self-expression.

This can lead to a great deal of grief for those of us who find those voluntary association institutions meaningful, as places of service, connection, belonging, and of meaning making. In the episode, Dwight reminds us that this is a legitimate reaction, and that lament can be helpful in this process, but to keep in mind that these institutions are “also complicated ... they have been exclusive in many ways. They've been vehicles for a lot of good in the world, but also for harm.”

Wondering *what if* instead of longing for *what was*

Dwight also notes that “There's a generational dimension to the shift where Baby Boomers in particular, grew up in a culture that was highly institutionalized and fought against institutions. But still, the default was to engage and serve those voluntary institutions, whereas Gen X and younger have grown up with a very different relationship, where those relationships to institutions are treated with much more skepticism, with a kind of detachment or even in some ways a hostility.” **There are more ways to be and do church than the voluntary association model of denominational church.** Rather than getting stuck on that, we can think in broad imaginative strokes, more wondering *what if* than longing for *what was*. This brings us to the first of our four pivots.



Pivot #1: Pivot in Posture: *From Fixing to Listening, Discerning, and Experimenting*

The temptation is to try to “fix” the voluntary association form of the institutional church. Yet in trying to fix that old form of church, “we can very easily miss what God is actually up to in the present moment.” The opportunity here is to shift our focus to discerning and joining the triune God’s presence and movement in people’s personal lives, and in the life of the church, specifically the local church, and the neighborhoods they are situated in.

Dr. Dee adds that **“the whole point of the Pivot is that we must follow and discern the Lord’s leading, not just in a church, not just in the four walls of an institution, but everywhere: at work, at home, in our communities, and our neighborhoods. Wherever we go.”**

We live in a culture that tends to seek the good without God. Since we think we can do it on our own, we try to come up with managerial solutions. More programs, better techniques, maybe a better website to lure people? One of those things will have to work. Right? We often get so caught up in this frantic activity that we don’t stop long enough to pay attention to how God might be moving in times of transition. We think if we can just get more people in the door, through our own ingenuity, our problems will be solved. This idea leads us to our second pivot.

Pivot #2: Pivot in Focus: *From Membership to Discipleship*

Dr. Dee reminds us that **“Jesus called us, assigned us, and commanded us to make disciples, not members.”** Discipleship is being transformed into Christ’s likeness, which isn’t something that will happen only during Sunday services. Thriving churches will orient their communal culture around practices and relationships that connect faith and daily life. This means learning God’s story in Scripture and embracing and embodying a holistic gospel. Not just getting people to join, asking for institutional support, and maybe having them pledge to serve on a committee. Which is what many people have felt their experience of church essentially adds up to. Instead, it has to be transformative, and respond to questions people are actually struggling with, like **“How do I actually live faithfully as a follower of Jesus, as a parent, as a child, as a neighbor, as a citizen, as a colleague at work, in all the spheres of my life?”** How discipleship ends up looking in your context may differ from other faith communities in your area, and that’s okay, we need variety, which brings us to Pivot #3.

Pivot #3: Pivot in Structure: *From One Shape Fits All to a Mixed Ecology*

For most people, the term “church” conjures up a kind of a particular institutional expression: the building, the staff, programming on Sundays. Which can feel too narrow for today’s context. Most of the time people are coming to church to experience intimate relationships, which doesn’t always happen in larger groups, but could happen in smaller groups. How do we get people to be part of those groups? **How do we get them to experience that kind of intimacy with other people and with God?** We need the inherited church, but we also need things branching off from the inherited church. We must go to where the people are instead of holding signs and having people come to us.

The model for church has been that the vision comes from the pastor and then everybody else kind of grabs hold of that vision and runs with it and volunteers. But what has also always been prevalent is that the folks in the pews have ideas too, they have vision and they hear from God too. How do we hear from everyday disciples, how do we give them space to explore the ideas they feel God is calling them to try? That is something our final pivot also attempts to address.

Pivot #4: Pivot in Leadership: *From Clergy-Led/Lay-Supported to Lay-Led/Clergy-Supported Ministry*

There are increasing numbers of local churches who are already lay-led (by choice or necessity) due to the shrinking number of clergy. As the professionalized model continues to erode, or at least change, the future of the church will become largely lay-led and clergy-supported rather than clergy-led and lay-supported. This is a huge opportunity for us to reimagine leadership and to decentralize leadership in ways that faithfully mobilize all the gifts of the body of Christ. After all, Dr. Dee says, **“God has given gifts to all of us, to everyone in the church, and we need to utilize those gifts together for the maturity of the church, for the work of the ministry.”** This is a shift with a great sense of urgency around it. It is already happening, and it’s going to necessarily happen even more. It’s a radical shift, though, and one that can cause a certain amount of anxiety in thinking about and trying to implement.

Dwight asks us to think about this, not from a position of fear, but from one of **curiosity** about what the Holy Spirit is doing, as this shift is happening in many places throughout the world where the church is growing. Local evangelists and catechists are functionally leading local expressions of church, while a pastor oversees maybe a dozen local churches but can’t be in every one of them, every week. “It’s a leadership multiplication model, a grassroots empowerment model.” The professionalized model of ministry is just one way to organize ministry. But perhaps a more biblical model would actually be one where the whole gifts of the body of Christ are empowered and set loose. A pastor can hear this and think it’s a great idea, but also have a nagging worry about, *well, what do I do then? How does my job shift?* In the **micro-community movement**, the leadership is lay-led, and there are pastors who oversee, who equip, who connect and encourage and mentor and coach/raise up those leaders. **Fresh expressions** are mostly lay-led.” It’s a job of the utmost importance, a role for clergy to equip, discern, and coach, to be a vision caster, a trainer, and an educator, rather than being someone who does all the ministry on their own.

Pivot will be back with a new episode every week this fall. To make sure you don’t miss an episode, please subscribe on the podcast listening platform of your choice.

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Shift Ministry Models