

THE TWO DANGEROUS ASSUMPTIONS OF POPULAR CHURCH MODELS

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In the chapter in **Future Church** called “Funnel In,” we describe the assimilation funnel, the reigning ministry paradigm to emerge from the new permission era. In this essay we want to dig deeper into how the model was built and promoted in the 1990s and 2000s. We want to go back to what many of us eagerly received and look at it again with more experienced eyes wearing Upper Room lenses.

To this end, we do well to reexamine two important books of the new permission era. Let us make this emphatically clear: we do **not** analyze these books to put their authors or ministries under the microscope. We do it to help **all** churches grow in self-awareness and advance the mission of Jesus better for themselves, because many leaders and churches have been strongly influenced by these ministry models, often indirectly. (On a further note I, Will, know the authors of these books personally and consider them friends who lead with the utmost integrity.)

We'll make our point up front. **There are dangerous assumptions built into every manifestation of the assimilation funnel for a generation or more**, unseen by its practitioners and promoters. The first assumption is that moving a participant into the next ministry environment **by that very fact** increases that person's spiritual maturity. The second, related assumption is that moving a person into service in the church **by that very fact** engages that person in the mission to make disciples of all nations.

We suspect that if these assumptions were stated outright as they are here, most pastors would dismiss them at once. Of course just going to a small group, for example, does not automatically notch up a person's maturity. We all know plenty of examples to the contrary in our churches, and we know that growth requires the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. And of course just serving in the church does not automatically make someone a disciple-maker.

But that's why we call these **assumptions**. If they were stated, they would be rejected. But when they are merely **assumed** and then bundled into brilliant thinking, and when the thinking is lacquered with glossy ministry success, they become exceedingly easy to swallow and digest without realizing

it. And as we describe in **Future Church**, once they make it into the church's bloodstream, the effects are profound.

RETURN TO THE PURPOSE-DRIVEN CHURCH

If you are a church leader of a certain age, it is very likely that you have Rick Warren's **The Purpose-Driven Church**¹ on your shelf. Over a million people do, a large portion of them residing outside North America.

Returning to this blockbuster book twenty-five years after it was published (at the time of this writing), the first thing one notices is the endorsements—**fifty of them**—from a Who's Who of evangelical ministry figures of that period, many of them giants in their field. Given the endorsers' stature, their praise is truly astonishing. Frequently appearing phrases include “a classic,” “required reading,” “best book I've read,” and “I wish I could start ministry all over again.” Some even projected that it would be read by seminary students throughout the twenty-first century.

Twenty years into this century, that judgment seems to have been premature. Yet part of the reason that **The Purpose-Driven Church** is not the go-to resource for church growth today is that its ideas are found in so many other books. Saddleback Community Church was by no means the only new permission model, but it was by far the best-presented to the ministry-reading public, and its foundational principles largely underpinned other successful, new churches of its era. It is only a small stretch to say that church growth literature since 1995 consists of sequels to **The Purpose-Driven Church**.

Nevertheless, the original is still worth reading, probably more than its many successors, because it contains timeless truths of organized disciple-making. For example:

- “Healthy, lasting church growth is multidimensional” (chap. 2).
- “Quality refers to the kind of disciples a church is producing. . . . Quality produces quantity” (chap. 2).
- “Many churches can be explained away in terms of a standard Sunday school, an efficient organization, and a balanced budget. Nothing supernatural ever happens in these churches, and few lives are genuinely changed. All of our plans, programs, and procedures are worthless without God's anointing” (chap. 2).

- “The definition of fruitfulness for a local church must include growth by the conversion of unbelievers. . . . I define being successful as fulfilling the Great Commission. . . . Success is not being larger than some other church; it is bearing as much fruit as possible given your gifts, opportunities, and potential” (chap. 2).
- “You won’t be able to transfer our context” (chap. 2).
- “The old cliché says, ‘Methods are many, principles are few; methods change often, principles never do.’ . . . God has a custom ministry for every church. Your church has a unique thumbprint that God has given it” (chap. 2).
- “[People] habitually confuse the means with the end. . . . We must never become so enamored with methods that we lose sight of our mission and forget our message” (chap. 2).
- “There is absolutely no correlation between the size and the strength of a church” (chap. 4).
- “Saddleback’s purpose statement . . . is stated in terms of results rather than in terms of activity” (chap. 5).
- “Our church is in the ‘disciple development’ business, and our product is changed lives—Christlike people” (chap. 5).
- “Instead of trying to grow a church with programs, focus on growing people with a process” (chap. 5).
- “We want to produce doers of the Word, not hearers only—to transform, not merely to inform” (chap. 8).
- “Some churches develop their evangelism strategy beginning with their target, without laying the foundation of God’s eternal purposes. The result is an unstable and unbiblical church driven by market forces rather than the Word of God. The message must never be compromised” (chap. 9).
- “We do not have to make the Bible relevant—it already is! But just as Jesus did, we have to show the Bible’s relevance by applying its message personally to people’s lives” (chap. 12).
- “If you want your church to produce effective Christians, you must teach the necessary skills for Christian living and ministry” (chap. 18).
- “We can discover God’s will for our lives—the unique way he intends for each of us to serve him. When it comes to ministry, your function flows out of the way God formed you. God has been molding and shaping you for ministry since . . . before you were born” (chap. 19).
- “I told the whole congregation, ‘I release all of you to visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the poor, and shelter the homeless—and you don’t even have to tell me. Just do it! Represent the church in Jesus’ name.’ This ministry didn’t require any staff supervision. Help people realize that they are the church” (chap. 19).

Principles like these are a genuine part of **The Purpose-Driven Church**. However, they sit very close to the book's description of Saddleback Church's assimilation funnel—so close that at the time it was difficult to recognize the tension and sometimes disharmony between the two.

SADDLEBACK'S ASSIMILATION PROCESS

It is important to remember that the first problem Rick Warren set out to solve in 1980 was reaching unchurched people. Today, “unchurched” is often distinguished from “dechurched”; “dechurched” means “used to be in church” and “unchurched” means “never was,” because we are now living in a different generation and grappling with the so-called “rise of the nones.”² But in the 1980s and 1990s, “unchurched” meant what “dechurched” means today. Warren was trying to reach Baby Boomers who for the most part had been raised in the most churched period of American history, the Wartime Revival. Few in his target group had never been “churched.” The vast majority had some prior experience with organized religion and a built-in assumption that if God is your thing, a weekend worship service is where you go to get your fix. Warren inherited that; he did not create it. It was an important parameter of his particular mission context that he responded to by remaking church so that attending would be appealing yet also transformative.³

Because of the assumptions of the people in Saddleback's evangelism target (not to mention his own assumptions), Warren's ministry model was attendance-centered from the bottom up, even at the level of defining who the target was. Geographically, the target first encompassed the radius of a fifteen-to-twenty-minute car ride and eventually included people from over an hour away. Yet as Saddleback grew and more people began checking it out, the church “narrowed our definition of the community to refer to people we call ‘unchurched, occasional attenders.’” In 1995, those who registered their attendance at least four times a year were regarded as “our hottest evangelistic prospects.” Ironically, then, Saddleback's prime target became “unchurched” people who **already attended church at Saddleback**.⁴

But Warren had a second problem too: by the grace of God (which Warren is swift to credit), Saddleback's solutions to the first problem **worked**. Unchurched

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people flocked to Saddleback and placed their trust in Christ as Savior in large numbers. Warren was then faced with the challenge of how to raise a large brood of baby Christians to maturity in Christ. He determined that “our sanity and survival depended upon developing a workable process to turn seekers into saints, turn consumers into contributors, turn members into ministers, and turn an audience into an army.”⁵ This insight that organized disciple-making requires “a workable process” is probably the greatest ministry breakthrough of the new permission era, ultimately far more significant than adult contemporary music and casual dress on the platform.

Warren had conceived the assimilation funnel (not under that name) as a youth pastor in the mid-1970s, but it was truly born at Saddleback in response to a tide of conversions.⁶ Warren described his disciple-making strategy as a “sequential process” involving progressive levels of personal commitment: “We bring them in as **members** [which required repentance, saving faith, and baptism], we build them up to **maturity** [which Warren termed ‘discipleship’], we train them for **ministry**, and we send them out on **mission, magnifying** the Lord in the process.” He also called these levels, respectively, knowing Christ, growing in Christ, serving Christ, and sharing Christ. The process entailed sequential levels of basic training—four classes corresponding to the levels of commitment. Warren called these four levels plus “magnifying” (that is, worship) the five purposes of the church, and he related them to the two Great Commandments and the three clauses of the Great Commission (table 1).⁷

Table 1 – Saddleback Community Church’s Assimilation Process, 1995

Purpose	Command	Commitment	Process	Level		Main Program
Worship	Love the Lord your God	Magnify	(continuous)	Crowd	Regular attenders	Seeker service
Fellowship	Baptize	Membership	Know Christ	Congregation	Members	Small group
Discipleship	Teach them to obey	Maturity	Grow in Christ	Committed	Maturing members	Life Development Institute
Ministry	Love your neighbor	Ministry	Serve Christ	Core	Ministers	Saddleback Advanced Leadership Training (SALT)
Evangelism	Go and make disciples	Mission(s)	Share Christ	Community (target)	Unchurched (target)	Bridge event

Saddleback’s assimilation process was so beautifully clean and well-aligned that it seemed almost self-evidently right. But the process masked strategic inconsistencies that can be found embedded in **The Purpose-Driven Church** itself.

MEASURES: OUTPUT OR THROUGHPUT?

Warren never claimed that a person who attended Saddleback’s four basic training classes had completed the journey of the Christian life. To the contrary, the intention of the classes was to get people started on the way of Christlikeness as they put the teachings they learned into practice over a lifetime.⁸

Also, as quoted above, Warren distinguished between quality and quantity as measures of ministry fruitfulness. While the quantity of disciples could be measured by numbers of participants, the quality of disciples could be measured by questions like “Are people being genuinely transformed into the likeness of Christ? Are believers grounded in the Word? . . . Are they using their talents in service and ministry? Are they sharing their faith regularly with others?”⁹ According to the terms we introduced in chapter 2, these questions represent output results.

Yet Saddleback’s leaders did not actually measure fruitfulness that way in 1995. Despite Warren’s concern for output results, the staff’s scorecard consisted of throughput results—the numbers of people passing through church programs. Their monthly “Snapshot . . . shows how many people are currently in each Circle of Commitment,” primarily indicated by which of the four classes they had completed, not the behaviors and character they exhibited.¹⁰ This is precisely the dangerous assumption we stated at the outset—that moving a participant into the next ministry environment **by that very fact** increases that person’s spiritual maturity. This confusion of output with throughput confused quality with quantity and functionally subordinated the former to the latter.

MOVEMENT: GOING OR COMING?

“We do not need to choose between ‘go’ and ‘come,’” Warren declared; “both are valid forms of evangelism. . . . We say ‘Come and see!’ to our community, but to our core we say, ‘Go and tell!’” Also: “What happens when people finally get to the core? We move them back out into the community for ministry!”¹¹

As the system was constructed, however, “going” and “moving into the community,” were not evangelism in the traditional sense of telling the gospel to unbelievers (though this was desired). Instead, “mission” and “outreach”—the responsibility of the relatively few who made it to the core—were defined in two other ways. The first way consisted of “mission projects”—short-term local or international missions trips, mostly of a hands-on nature (though the book does not go into detail).

The other way was inviting unbelievers to a weekend seeker service. Warren makes clear that “the purpose of the seeker service is to assist personal evangelism, not replace it.”¹² But if a person followed the assimilation process all the way through—if they got acquainted with the church at a bridge event, were saved through the influence of a seeker service, became a member, attended a small group, and served in a church ministry—then their functional training in leading someone to Christ was actually leading someone to be assimilated into the church. The natural thing was to reproduce what they had experienced themselves, and their experience was concentrated inside the walls of the church.

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This is not to say that no one at Saddleback then or now shares their faith with unbelievers—that would be preposterous. It is to say, however, that the model’s design put the weight on “coming” despite the stated desire for “going,” because it produced disciples who were conditioned to extend an invitation to “come.” The confusion could not be seen for what it was, because in the mission field of Orange County, California, in the 1990s, it worked.

There is a similar mixed message with respect to “ministry.” In Saddleback’s schema, ministry corresponds to the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. But functionally, ministry meant serving in the church. Of course the idea is that such service ultimately benefits one’s neighbor, but the immediate call to action was not to help one’s neighbor in one’s neighborhood but to find a suitable place to volunteer in the organization. Warren’s preaching could say (as quoted above), “I release all of you to visit those in prison. . . . Help people realize that they are the church.” But the model said to lead and serve in the various ministries of the church institution. Warren even made the breathtaking claim that “I make no apology for telling people that the most important thing they may do with their lives is to join Saddleback Church, get involved in a ministry, and serve Christ by serving others.”¹³ Here is the second assumption we stated at the beginning—that moving a

person into service in the church **by that very fact** engages that person in the mission to make disciples of all nations.

MODEL: PRINCIPLES OR METHODS?

Warren insisted that it was a bad idea for a church to copy Saddleback’s ministry methods, because it could not copy Saddleback’s ministry context or personnel. He maintained that each church is unique and must customize its ministry model for its own setting. In the foreword to **The Purpose-Driven Church**, his mentor W. A. Criswell wrote, “To his credit, Rick discourages other churches from trying to become ‘photocopies’ of Saddleback.” Warren wrote his book only to disseminate universal, biblical principles of ministry. He claimed to present Saddleback only as a model that others might learn from and adapt to their own ministry situation; the principles that Saddleback exemplifies were the important thing.¹⁴

Those disclaimers aside, an awful lot of words in **The Purpose-Driven Church** detail Saddleback’s model and methods. Saddleback welcomed thousands of pastors to its conferences to learn more about its model and methods. It continues to produce and sell out-of-the-box resources that support its model and methods. And even if Saddleback had not done so, its model and methods would still likely have been the main things that many pastors took away from **The Purpose-Driven Church** to import into their own churches.

MASTER PLAN: PROCESS OR PROGRAMS?

Warren taught that Saddleback’s discipleship pathway worked to grow people in Christ because it was a sequential process, not an unrelated assortment of programs. Saddleback tied individual steps in the process to specific programs so that people had clear next steps to become more committed to Christ and assimilated into the church. Warren also advised, “A bloated church calendar diffuses the energy of your church.” Saddleback periodically cut programs that no longer served the church’s purposes well, and it “didn’t attempt to be a full-service church” like churches of the Golden Era of Denominationalism.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Warren also wrote that “it takes a variety of programs to minister to the five levels of commitment and fulfill the five different purposes of the church.”¹⁶ That was an understatement—

according to **The Purpose-Driven Church**, in 1995 Saddleback had a profusion of programs at every level of its process (table 2). It is difficult to imagine how much time a member of Saddleback’s core spent in the church and at off-campus church activities in a typical week.

Despite the incalculable influence of **The Purpose-Driven Church**, there was still room for its new permission model to be refined. In particular, pastors needed a way to put it into practice that did not require as many resources, especially of people’s time. In a word, they needed something “simple.”

RETURN TO SIMPLE CHURCH

Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger’s 2006 bestseller **Simple Church** may have been the most influential book in the field of church growth systems to appear after **The Purpose-Driven Church**. Although it was published during the period we have termed the Missional Reorientation, it may be considered the capstone of new permission era literature (though by no means the last publication) because it distilled that era’s model to its pure essence. (As a matter of full disclosure, I, Will, worked closely with Eric from 2012 to 2017 when he was leading LifeWay Christian Resources with Thom. They had decided to utilize and promote Auxano’s Vision Framing process as their preferred consulting methodology.)

Table 2 – Saddleback Church Adult Program Menu, 1995

Commitment Level	Program Category	Program Options
Community	Bridge events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seasonal community events • Christmas and Easter events • Concerts • Productions
Crowd	Seeker services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekend worship services • Seeker groups • Class 101 (level transition)
Congregation	Small groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support groups • Fellowship events • Class 201 (level transition)
Committed	Life Development Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bible study courses • Life Skills Seminars • Workshops • Growth groups • Mentoring opportunities • Independent study programs • Midweek worship service • Class 301 (level transition)
Core	Saddleback Advanced Leadership Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly rally (SALT) • Ministry-specific training courses • Service groups • Class 401

Rainer and Geiger summed up the philosophy of simplicity as follows:

A simple church is designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth. The leadership and the church are clear about the process (clarity) and are committed to executing it. The process flows logically (movement) and is implemented in each area of the church (alignment). The church abandons everything that is not in the process (focus).¹⁷

Simple Church backed up its prescriptions with results of a nationwide survey that revealed that churches that had embraced a new permission model were growing faster than the rest.

Without mentioning **The Purpose-Driven Church** by name, Rainer and Geiger essentially adopted its principles but condensed its assimilation process and eliminated its inconsistencies.

First, as to **MODEL**, **Simple Church** debranded Purpose-Driven and Saddleback. In fact, Rainer and Geiger were sparing in their illustrations from any actual churches whose methods could be copied. Instead, they invented “Cross Church,” a fictional model “simple church” and a generic amalgamation of leading new permission churches of the time.

The upshot was that readers were much freer to customize their assimilation funnel according to simple church principles without adopting another organization’s labels. On the other hand, as with Saddleback in **The Purpose-Driven Church**, Cross Church probably exerted more influence on readers than the principles it represented. Churches that followed its example did not look more unique but more alike.

Second, **Simple Church** simplified **MASTER PLAN** by adopting a philosophy of “less is more.” It decreased the number of steps in the assimilation process and stripped programs out of each step:

- **Simple Church** counseled that only one program be assigned to each step in the assimilation/disciple-making process: “Multiple programs for each phase of the process divide attention and energy.”
- **Simple Church** discouraged special events—essentially anything that varied from the routine calendar of the simple process and its programs. If special events could not be sacrificed, Rainer and Geiger advised how to use them to move people into programs of the process. (They did, however, endorse transitional, short-run, low-commitment versions of programs.)

- With few or no special events for outsiders at the “community” level like the ones Saddleback put on, “community” and “crowd” were effectively combined into one level of discipleship that was serviced by worship services.
- Cross Church (and real-life example churches) combined Saddleback’s “congregation” and “committed” levels into a single step; it was serviced by small groups that combined fellowship and teaching.
- In **Simple Church** examples, the activity of the “core” level was limited to serving in a volunteer role. The book did not discuss leadership development, either because it did not exist in example churches or because it did not “count” as part of assimilation or disciple-making in their models.
- **The Purpose-Driven Church** described its process only in terms of adult participants. **Simple Church** instructed readers to organize ministry to each age and life-stage group according to the same sequential process.
- **Simple Church** encouraged a membership class akin to Saddleback’s Class 101, but oddly (given the authors’ zeal for sequential movement), they gave no guidance as to where it fit in the assimilation process. The class seemed to float independent from the steps. Rainer and Geiger did not recommend an introductory class at the transition zone to each next level.

Third, simplifying the process led directly to simplifying **MOVEMENT**. Rick Warren spoke highly of personal evangelism, but his model was built to put weight on unbelievers “coming” over missional disciples “going.” Rainer and Geiger resolved the contradiction by ignoring personal evangelism altogether as a part of their disciple-making process.

The closest **Simple Church** came to addressing the topic was a description of the process at Geiger’s Christ Fellowship, where the step after serving in the church was “a relational lifestyle [in which] people are challenged to invite friends and families **to church**” (emphasis ours).¹⁸ Cross Church’s “serve the world” step implies that at least some hands-on church ministries would have taken place in the community, but in the **Simple Church** model in general, evangelism happens inside the church walls, presumably performed by the professionals.

Lastly, **Simple Church** simplified **MEASURES** by merging output results with input and throughput results. “Love God, love others, serve the world” was Cross Church’s purpose **and** process **and** definition of a mature disciple. This implies that the number of people at worship in a given week

was the number that loved God, the number at small group was the number that loved others, and the number of volunteers was the number that served the world.¹⁹

With these simplifications of the Purpose-Driven model, **Simple Church** delineated the new permission ideal in its purest form. A few churches, especially new plants, adopted the model outright; other leaders attempted to make their established churches “simpler” to varying extents. The outcome was that those churches that have a defined, program-aligned discipleship pathway today typically describe it in three words like these: “attend, connect, serve”—the assimilation funnel.

Table 3 – Assimilation Process Comparison, Saddleback Community Church (1995) and “Cross Church” (2006)

Saddleback Purpose	Saddleback Commitment Level	Saddleback Main Program	Cross Church Purpose	Cross Church Program
Evangelism	Community (target)	Bridge event	Love God	Worship service
Worship	Crowd	Seeker service		
Fellowship	Congregation	Small group	Love others	Small group
Discipleship	Committed	Life Development Institute		
Ministry	Core	Saddleback Advanced Leadership Training (SALT)	Serve the world	Service team

In the decade and a half since **Simple Church** was published, the model has continued to evolve. Today, Church of the Highlands in Alabama promotes an increasingly popular four-step assimilation process of “attend, connect, grow, serve.” Of course, rather than use bland assimilation terms, the church uses words that powerfully evoke purpose. For example, in the “Growth Track,” participants explore their personal calling and how it plugs into service opportunities in the church. Similarly, the

“serve” step is participation in what the church calls its “Dream Team.”²⁰ Nevertheless, this new wave of ministry strategy is only the latest edition of the pattern set a generation ago (table 4²¹). In the words of **Simple Church**’s subtitle, many now presuppose that this pattern is “God’s process for making disciples.”

Table 4 – Assimilation Process Comparison, 1995–present

Saddleback Church, 1995		“Cross Church,” 2006		Church of the Highlands, 2019	
Purpose	Program	Purpose	Program	Purpose	Program
Evangelism	Bridge event	Love God	Worship service	Know God	Weekend service
Worship	Seeker service				
Fellowship	Small group	Love others	Small group	Find freedom	Small group
Discipleship	Life Development Institute				
Ministry	Saddleback Advanced Leadership Training (SALT)	Serve the world	Service team	Discover purpose	Growth Track
				Make a difference	Dream Team

But notice that the two dangerous assumptions remain intact twenty-five years later. The models have not stopped assuming that a person’s move to a new ministry environment means they have grown in maturity and that serving in the church is the essence of living out one’s mission for God. Recall the crucial observation we made at the beginning of **Future Church**: every church agrees with Jesus’ mandate for his church to make disciples, but many fundamentally fail to do so even while they become more adept at articulating disciple-making outcomes as their core reason for being. A better Lower Room is still a Lower Room; a more efficient Program Church is still a Program Church. In the quest for simple assimilation, we can still eclipse spiritual formation and missional mobilization.

NOTES

¹ Rick Warren, **The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission** (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), NOOK.

² James Emery White, **The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

³ Warren, **Purpose-Driven Church**, chap. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, chap. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, chaps. 1, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chaps. 5, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chaps. 7–8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chaps. 7, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, chap. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, chaps. 7, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, foreword, chap. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, chap. 8.

¹⁷ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, **Simple Church: Returning to God's Process of Making Disciples** (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 67–68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38–40, 122–23.

²⁰ “About,” Church of the Highlands, <https://www.churchofthehighlands.com/about> (accessed May 30, 2020).

²¹ The date of 2019 for Church of the Highlands in table 4 corresponds to the publication of Senior Pastor Chris Hodges’ book **What’s Next?: The Journey to Know God, Find Freedom, Discover Purpose, and Make a Difference** (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).