



From Observation to Participation: Finding an Invitation to Discipleship for Today's Culture

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Earlier this year, I found myself at a ministry retreat. It was a strange sort of retreat for me, because while I had been watching and listening to videos about the topic for years, I had never taken part in the actual experience. In fact, my daughters had lent me the materials that I was asked to bring, because I didn't own any of them. As I looked around at the other participants, it was also clear to me that I only knew one other person in the room, and I had only spoken to that person once before, over Zoom. Over the course of the next two days, I (an introvert) would need to make new friends and work closely with these people. So what was this retreat? It was Dungeons and Dragons, a role-playing fantasy game. All of the participants were ministry leaders of one sort or another, and all of us had wondered what it would take for the people around us to move from watching to actively participating, not only in the game at hand but, more importantly, in the ministry that we all care so deeply about.

In a world of shifting paradigms, the question arises about how people associate themselves into groups, and what attracts them to groups. One model is that of role-playing or gaming, which has a great attraction in some areas and among some people. What might churches learn from the experience of such groups?

While there has been debate about whether role-playing games can or should be enjoyed by Christians,¹ there is definitely much to be gained by exploring how play and holy imagination might be stirred to develop the practices of discipleship. In simplified terms, the game master begins by designing a simple map and inviting the participants to explore the map and engage in both benign and dangerous experiences as a party. The players must learn their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of their teammates, in order to survive and advance in the game. Now stay with me for a second; the way I see this is not unlike how Jesus invited disciples with all of their various identities, taught them what the kingdom of God looked and felt like, and sent them out into the world to learn how to live into that reality. It is very different, however, from the way we most often work with our congregational members today.

Before the pandemic, our church pews were filled with people on Sunday mornings, many of whom rarely read Scripture at home or knew how to talk about faith outside of the church building. They were observers of the faith. They came each week to listen to the preaching, to perhaps join their voices in singing, to see friends, catch up on the news of the week, and have a cup of coffee together. Some of them would sign up for the various volunteer opportunities that the church laid out for them, so that they could serve the church in their spare time.

Now that we are returning to in-person worship, many of these observers have not come back, having found other ways to spend their time and engage in meaning-making. In my experiences both as a pastor and as a church member, I'm not convinced that most people come to church in order to be prepared for or equipped for participation in the mission of God. And if attending church doesn't prepare us for mission work, simply being an observer is no longer fulfilling.

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What has changed? In the past few decades, our North American context has been shifting from an Age of Association, where people joined institutions and churches in order to become connected to a group of people gathered for service, work, and worship, to an Age of Authenticity, where people seek to find their

¹ See Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland: California University Press, 2015). See also the Andrew Wall, director, *Satanic Panic* (documentary), 2022, <https://tubitv.com/movies/689004/satanic-panic>.

own sense of identity, purpose, and belonging.² In the case of mainline Protestant churches, where our main purpose of gathering on Sunday is often interpreted as coming to observe and connect, it is difficult for people to feel individually shaped and sent from that format. As ministry leaders, we know that the gospel and a life with Jesus have deep meaning and purpose for disciples of today's culture, and we have to find new ways to interact with, gather, and send our people in order to help them discover and live into that purpose.

In helping people live into God's calling for them in their work in the world, the role of the ministry leader is less about giving people tasks to fulfill in order to run the functions of the church, and more about recognizing and witnessing the gifts that God has given to people and helping them to understand that call upon their lives. Being in a true community requires that we learn our own gifts and those of the people around us so that we can engage in holy work together. Someone who has gifts for working with children should be encouraged to reflect on how these gifts have been given to create healthy people and communities (God's mission to neighbor) rather than only to be seen as a potential Sunday school teacher. By limiting congregants to roles mostly concerned with observation or maintenance of the church system—whether that was our pastoral intent or not—we have also taken away their great privilege of experiencing what it means to join our gifts together and engage together in the mission and collaboration of bringing God's vision to light and life for the world to see.

Sabrina Müller, managing director of the University Research Priority Program in Digital Religion and researcher and lecturer in practical theology at the University of Zurich, recently explored this topic in her book *Lived Theology*. Although her research context is Europe, it resonates with what I have experienced in mainline churches in North America. Our way of asking for people to volunteer for church tasks has allowed the institutional church to function, but it has also diminished the understanding of the giftedness of people as important and valuable to the wider community. She identifies a shift in the work of ministry leaders: "If communication of the gospel is the core of the church's mission, the primary duty of ordained ministry is to facilitate this by supporting the common priests in their daily service to the gospel. This is all the more necessary as there is always a 3.temptation to assign the responsibility for communicating the gospel to ordained persons."³ Along with Müller's observation I would add the following: Not only have we given the responsibility for communicating the gospel to ordained persons; we have also assigned ministry leaders the responsibility of identifying and organizing people to do separated "church work" rather than giving them permission and responsibility to gather and equip their people to engage

² These are greatly simplified definitions of these two ages that were originally described by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2007). If you are interested in learning more as it specifically relates to ministry and the life of the church, I recommend the *Ministry in a Secular Age* series (5 vols.), by Andrew Root (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017–2022).

³ 3. Sabrina Müller, *Lived Theology: Impulses for a Pastoral Theology of Empowerment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 17.

in God’s work throughout their daily life. How might we begin to shift this work from the shoulders of ordained ministers to the hearts of the people God has gathered around us?

Not only have we given the responsibility for communicating the gospel to ordained persons; we have also assigned ministry leaders the responsibility of identifying and organizing people to do separated “church work” rather than giving them permission and responsibility to gather and equip their people to engage in God’s work throughout their daily life.

One of our teams at Luther Seminary’s Faith+Lead, a mission-program at Luther Seminary to reach and equip new and nontraditional Christian leaders, has been engaging in work we call Faithful Innovation.⁴ This work invites a team of non-ordained people to engage in a framework of practices to become closer to God, each other, and neighbor. This team, along with their pastor (who is tasked with sharing theological or spiritual insights) and a coach (who asks questions and provides framework boundaries to assist in the perspective shift), engages in individual, team, and community spiritual practices in order to experience and process those questions of identity, purpose, and belonging.

The first task is *Listen*. The team is invited to engage in practices of listening in three distinct ways: listening to God, each other, and neighbor. The participants begin with listening to God by reading Scripture together in order to share their own insights and hear the insights of others. This simple task engages three core needs:

- People are reading Scripture. The biblical text can be overwhelming and difficult to understand on an individual level. Taking the text in small passages and reading alongside others provides a starting point and an accountability factor.
- People are reading Scripture together. In this process, each person is encouraged to share what they are hearing and experiencing through the text, and what they share is respected by the group. This may be different from traditional models of Bible study, where an ordained (or trained) leader brought predetermined questions or study points to the table for participants to learn. This practice allows the participant to explore their own agency in reading God’s word, hearing how that word might connect with their personal life, and experiencing God’s speaking

⁴ To learn more about the Faithful Innovation process, see the following text: Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder, and Tessa Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2023).

into their personal life, as well as hearing how others may experience that word differently.

- People are reading Scripture together for discernment. One of the questions that comes out of this reading is “What might God be bringing up for all of us today?”—asking participants to listen for group themes arising from the individual sharing. They will have the opportunity in the next task to put that discernment into action.

Another phase of listening asks the team to listen to each other. In addition to reading Scripture together, the team is invited to listen to each other to learn more about each other's lives and concerns. The purpose of sharing these stories is to honor the experiences, fears, and hopes each person brings to the team or community and to teach team members to ask questions that allow them to learn more. The questions brought up by Scripture and sharing stories move people beyond surface topics such as weather or sports; these questions allow the team to be curious about what gifts and awarenesses the Holy Spirit has brought to the table and to begin thinking about how those awarenesses might be addressed by putting gifts into action together.

This leads directly into the third type of listening: to the neighbor. Especially in our Lutheran tradition, but in many others as well, our personal gifts are not given for our own pleasure and use; they are meant to be in service of the neighbor. In order to understand what the neighbor is experiencing and needing, there must be a time of listening to them. In the Faithful Innovation framework, the neighbor isn't an unrelated “other” person. Neighbors could be people you go to school with, work with, live near, or see on your daily bus commute. They are the people you encounter in your daily life. Honoring their experiences, fears, and hopes helps the team understand any differences and similarities that exist between the team and the community.

The second task is *Act*. The team is invited to take what they have learned from the listening process, put it together with the gifts they know exist in the team (and perhaps in the wider congregation or community), and prayerfully consider how God might be inviting them to act to learn more or engage with the stories they have heard. This is a different type of action than churches typically take. Often faith communities will decide which partners they wish to support, how much they would like to give, or perhaps how many hours they would like people to volunteer, and then they will act upon that decision by raising or distributing funds or sending people who have signed up. This acting is clearly taking into account personal conversations with others, identified needs within the sphere of influence of the group (neighbor), and gifts of the gathered people (actual skills and talents rather than only time to give). The act gives voice to the community's needs and draws upon the actual, gathered talents or resources of the faith community. This shift provides identity, purpose, and meaning in a way that simple volunteer hours do not.

The third task is *Share*. In this part of the process, participants come together to share their stories of experience, including what they learned through the process about God, each other, and neighbor. Although it isn't a stated goal, participants often also learn quite a bit about themselves: their own individual identity, purpose, and meaning becomes clearer through the spiritual and external interactions.

The team at Luther Seminary has seen success and growth through this particular framework over the past few years as they have worked with congregations. For people who are already acquainted with the Christian story and life, the practices make sense, and the God language is expected. I am not sure, however, that this process is easy enough to invite people who have merely been observers into a participation that encourages them to engage in a life of discipleship. This is where I have been intrigued by colleagues engaging in *Dungeons and Dragons*, or other gaming frameworks, in order to explore and invite actual participation.⁵

The *Dungeons and Dragons* gameplay that we utilized in the retreat was based on the West Marches format, which focuses on player agency even with a large group of people involved. This format lends itself particularly well to imagining ways to utilize functions of gameplay in ministry and discipleship development.

The game opens with a very rough map of an imagined context that has story hooks connected to various areas such as "There is a rumor of bandits in this area that are making the roads dangerous" or "A pair of explorers went into the mountains seeking a cure for a disease, but they haven't returned." The players then take time to ask themselves which story they would like to follow, find fellow journeyers to travel with, and organize themselves into mission parties to take that trip by sharing their unique identities and gifts. It quickly becomes clear that most adventures turn out best if they include people with a mix of gifts—fighters, healers, makers (inventors), and scholars. Some parties find they don't have the right mix of people or resources after the first encounter, so they return to home base, recruit new or additional party members, change out resources, and go back out.

The rest of the gameplay is more detailed than an article allows, but as participants we found it intriguing to think about ministry like this game setup. For instance, community ministry begins with a context that could easily be expressed in a real map containing real story questions. Where are we located? Who is around us? What do these people need? What is God already doing? When people are asked to find out more from the locations they already inhabit, they will bring back the story hooks they discover, such as "Many children at the school need access to food during the school week and over breaks" or "The senior center in the neighborhood doesn't have enough staff to provide a safe space for our elders."

Having a story hook rather than a volunteer signup changes how people interact with the invitation. Now rather than asking for people to volunteer if they

⁵ I want to expressly thank Rory Philstrom (The Dungeon Master Pastor at <https://dungeonmasterpastor.com/about/>) and Derek White (The Geek Preacher – www.geekpreacher.org) for their conversations during the retreat. Along with many other participants, they helped me flesh out and experience how theologies, gaming techniques, and church life might interact and support discipleship.

have free time, the ministry leader can ask who might be interested and have the resources, skills, or knowledge to engage this dilemma, help the interested parties meet one another, and encourage them to make their own plan of engagement. The theological leader works alongside the team much as Jesus worked alongside the disciples, describing who God is and how God acts, and claiming God's love and hopes for the individual as well as the world. The pastoral presence becomes more like a coach than a project manager, preparing the team for their work, sending them out, and gathering them back in for a debrief.

This simple shift has the potential to introduce and put into practice key discipleship skills in a way that isn't possible in a Sunday morning worship service. People are invited to explore places they already inhabit in their daily lives in order to learn more about the people around them. By paying attention and talking to people, they begin to understand more deeply the context that may often be invisible. Through conversations about giftedness, people in the mission party discern how God might be calling their particular gifts and presence into action, as well as gaining a new appreciation or understanding of the gifts of others. There is a new awareness of how different gifts work together. In today's digital world, opportunities to practice meaningful conversation, exploration of self-identity, participation in a mission larger than the individual, and realization of the possibilities brought to life when working as a team are incredibly important, especially to people who are searching for meaning in life rather than for association with a church.

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You will note that this approach holds some similarities to the *Listen, Act, Share* process above, but it introduces some elements that may make it more accessible to people outside of the congregational community. This format has more space to invite people who are outside of the church to share their gifts with the mission party. It could be that the mission party realizes they need more information about something they encounter when they visit their location, and they decide that the best way to get that information is to talk with city officials. Or they may need to talk with local store owners to see how food supplies might be purchased or donated. Some members of the mission party will have clarity on how their faith calls them into this work; some will not. Some will join for the entirety of the adventure, and others will join for a short time and move on to other endeavors. Part of the theological understanding of this format is trusting that God will provide the people and resources needed to do the ministry that God is calling your community to do, rather than creating artificial boundaries of task-force terms.

This format of ministry tends to bring out the cooperative nature of missional work rather than a zero-sum competition for resources. In the game, if something happens to endanger one member of the team, it will often put the entire team at risk in some way. When entering into a conversation, a battle, or a dangerous situation, the mission party takes time to think about the skills they each bring to the table and how they might uniquely take part in the action.

This format also focuses the attention of the party outside of the church building rather than inside. While it would certainly be possible to create a map of the church building and the needs contained therein, the use of this format for discipleship is far better served by asking people to venture outside of the known and often insulated spaces of our buildings. By focusing our attention on the neighbor, it may become possible to reshape and experience worship services as spaces to debrief, regroup, and be prepared to go back out.

This article has brought together elements of gameplay, imagination, and ministry. However, by doing so, I want to be clear that the strength of this ministry format lies in its ability to form discipleship skills in new ways. Without careful consideration and guidance, this format could also diminish the identities or needs of the people we encounter. In gameplay, there are people you meet along the way who are called “non-player characters” or NPCs. In a game, because there are a limited number of participants, these NPCs are often voiced by the gamemaster and are considered holders of information or able to do some small tasks, but they aren’t a real part of the mission party or necessarily a part of the mission at all. In addition, some types of characters (such as bandits, dragons, or monsters) may be immediately labeled “enemy” and create an automatic action of battle or conflict. In thinking about this format for ministry, the people we encounter are real, and the story hooks that may be developed and followed involve real people, real lives, and real issues—the world that God loves. The playfulness needs to be expressed in a sense of curiosity and wonder, with the understanding that the mission parties are not there to “save” other people, but rather to engage in real relationship-building and to explore how their gifts might enter into the equation for resolution. Unlike offering one hour of volunteerism somewhere to alleviate pain or a pinch point of people power, this work is meant to engage the issues and people at hand to bring about a transformation of the challenge itself.

Finally, this article is not arguing for all work of a congregation to shift to a mission-party format. This format will not work for some people—perhaps many people—who are currently engaged in congregations. We are learning that congregations, much like mission parties, are able to better encourage discipleship practices when they are open to what God is already doing in and around them and to joining in. It may, in fact, be important for different congregations in a certain locale to work together in a mixed ecology of formats in order to become the larger version of a mission party in a particular location.

Despite the cautions along the way, the Scriptures do not point us to a view of discipleship as being observers sitting in pews. Jesus does not drag the disciples from one location to another purely for the opportunity of listening to his words

in a new place. He invites them to imagine God's work in a variety of ways, teaches them to tell stories and engage with the people, and challenges them to actually go out to listen and heal. Perhaps these role-playing cooperative games are a way for us to enter into the very real mission that God needs us to engage. ⊕

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