

Growing at East Lincoln (Various Scriptures)

The past two weeks we've seen the biblical foundation behind the elders' vision for East Lincoln. We looked at Ephesians 4:11-16 to see the goal that Jesus has given churches to aim for, which is that we would all attain to maturity in Christ so that we would become like him in every way and be him to the world around us. We also saw how he established churches to function in order to reach that goal, which includes elders shepherding and teaching in the local church to equip the saints to do the work of ministry so that everyone in the church is growing and involved in making mature disciples.

Today we are going to talk about what that looks like here at East Lincoln Alliance Church. Though the goal and function of local churches is outlined in Scripture, the vision for what that will look like can vary from church to church depending on a number of different factors. There isn't a "one size fits all" blueprint in the Bible for what kind of ministries churches should have. It depends on the context of the church and how the Holy Spirit is leading them. So this is something church elders need to pray about and listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

I want to describe what the elders think ministry should look like right now at East Lincoln in order for us to effectively reach our goal. But before I do, I first want to look at an underlying biblical concept that applies to everyone in the church that influences what we think we should do here at East Lincoln. I did a sermon series on this a few years ago and it has to do with the process of growth that every believer needs to go through.

Scripture shows us that the Holy Spirit leads disciples through a process of growth that involves different stages of spiritual maturity. So when you become a Christian, you haven't "arrived" at the goal of Christlike maturity! You've only just begun. Our aim isn't making Christian converts, it's making mature disciples, and it generally takes years to get to the point that Scripture defines you as being mature. If you think about Jesus' disciples for example, they had the perfect teacher and a very intense and intentional growth environment, and it still took about 3 years to get to the point of Christlike maturity.

So it takes time, and the amount of time depends a lot on us. The Holy Spirit ultimately guides the process, but we either cooperate with or hinder his leading. And there's always a mix of both. So we have an important role to play as

individuals, and the church family does as well. We've already seen that the elders are to equip the saints for the work of ministry, and then, as more and more saints are equipped and become mature, they too engage in disciple making ministry that helps others to grow. It's an ongoing process in a healthy church.

To understand what this looks like, the bible identifies stages of spiritual growth that correspond with stages of normal human development. As you're reading the New Testament, you run across terms that indicate where people are spiritually.

- Colossians 2:13 says *"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses."* This is where everyone begins – spiritually dead, or unborn. The life of Christ has not yet entered their spirit and they need to be made alive by God.
- 1 Peter 2:2 says *"Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation."* When a person is born again by the Holy Spirit and made alive to God through faith in Jesus Christ, they are a spiritual infant – a brand new, baby believer, no matter what their age or education level. They need to learn the basics of the Christian life because everything is new to them.
- 1 Peter 1:14-15 says, *"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct."* Spiritual infants become spiritual children where a lot of growth and development needs to happen because living for Christ influences everything in our lives and we need to experience total transformation as the old way of life is set aside and the new life in Christ is put on.
- 1 John 2:12-14 mentions spiritual children but speaks of two more stages: *"I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.¹³ I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father.¹⁴ I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."* So after the spiritual child stage is young adulthood (or the teenage years) – a stage where much growth has already taken place but then the focus turns toward others – toward serving and ministry in the church family –

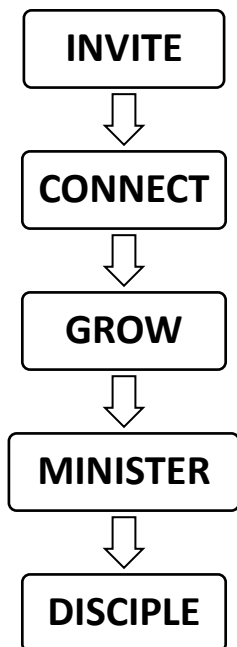
embracing God's calling and gifting to be involved in carrying out his mission on earth.

- And finally, we see in these same verses that there is the final stage of spiritual parents – men and women who have grown to the point where they are ready to invest in the spiritual growth of others, giving of themselves to help other disciples move forward in the process of spiritual growth no matter where they're at.

So there are 5 general stages evident in Scripture: Unborn – Infant – Child – Young Adult – Parent. And the process of growth through these stages is going to look a little different for each person – we don't all grow at the same pace and we're going to be at different stages, and that's just fine. The main thing is that we keep seeking to grow and cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives so that we become mature. That's our goal. Please notice: We haven't reached the goal when we put our faith in Christ and become a Christian. There's more to it than that! We also haven't reached the goal when we know a lot of things about the Bible. We haven't even reached the goal when we're involved in ministry in the church. Christ wants us to continue to grow so that we become like him in every way and are engaged in helping others grow, like he did, and continue to do so throughout the rest of our lives.

To help people move forward in this growth process we have developed a summary of what the general goal is for each stage. This can help you know what you're aiming for in your own spiritual growth, or what you need to help others aim for, and it is also what the elders will be using to help us know what to aim for in the ministries of the church.

- For the spiritually unborn, the general goal is to invite them into a relationship with God and the church family.
- For spiritual infants, we need to help them connect and build relationships within the church family and with Jesus from which they can begin to learn the basics of the Christian life.
- For spiritual children, we need to help them get plugged into relational environments, like church services, small groups, or one-on-one mentoring where they can intentionally grow.
- For spiritual young adults, we need to help them understand their gifts and calling and get plugged into ministry.
- And for spiritual parents, we need to encourage, train, and provide opportunities for them to disciple others by engaging in mentoring or leading a small group.



Invite – Connect – Grow – Minister – Disciple. There are many details behind each of these goals and within each part of the growth process, and it's going to look different for everyone, but this gives us a general summary of the goals and overall direction for each stage.

Coming to a fuller realization of these things was a significant revelation for us as elders that has reshaped the way we look at ministry in the church and the role we have in encouraging and equipping people to grow. Not everyone is at the same place spiritually and we need to take that into account so that we provide opportunities for people to grow at all the different stages. We don't want to neglect any of these or do things in a way that people reach a certain point and never move forward. That would be a failure for us as a church. We want to develop ministries, resources, and an environment for growth to happen at every level. That's how we can reach our goal.

When it comes to East Lincoln, we are taking these things into account. So right now, when it comes to ministries, we believe God wants us to focus on a few Core Ministries through which we can encourage people to grow. These include Worship Services, Small Groups, Recharge, and Discovery Land. We also want to develop Men's Ministry, Women's Ministry, and a Spiritual Mentoring Ministry in the near future. These things can change, but for right now, we believe this is where God is leading us. In each of these Core Ministries, we need to ask: What are we doing to encourage and equip disciples to grow at each stage of spiritual maturity? This is the mindset that will guide what we end up doing. It's not that every core ministry has to have something for every stage of growth, but as a whole our core ministries should provide substantial opportunities for everyone to grow wherever they're at.

If we take the Worship Service, for example, we need to ask these questions:

- What can we do on Sunday mornings so that the spiritually unborn are invited into relationship with God and the church family?
- What can we do to help spiritual infants get connected with God and other believers?
- What can we do to help spiritual children grow and experience transformation in every area of their lives?
- What can we do to help spiritual young adults get plugged into ministry?
- What can we do to encourage spiritual parents to get involved in discipleship?

These are the kinds of questions we want to ask for every core ministry of the church, so that in everything we're doing, we're moving forward together toward the shared goal of maturity in Christ.

Our vision is to see every person at East Lincoln plugged into and growing through our Core Ministries – participating in Worship Services, Small Groups, Recharge, and Discovery Land, and potentially other ministries we hope to develop. The way you grow and get plugged in will depend on where you're at spiritually and what you need to do to grow. Generally speaking, you will move from student to teacher – infant to adult – receiving to giving. This doesn't mean that you attend every gathering or event that's going on – no one can do that. It means that you're aware of where you're at spiritually and what you need to do to keep growing so you don't become a stagnant consumer or spectator.

Our goal is that everyone should find encouragement and opportunities to grow as you get plugged into these things, no matter where you're at spiritually. So we are continuing to develop them and ways of communicating them to you.

We also want to provide resources that will be helpful for growth at each stage. If you're a brand new Christian, it's not going to be helpful for you to dive into a study about how to be a spiritual mentor or small group leader. Likewise, if you're at the point where you're ready to disciple others, you need something more than just a Bible Study about the basics of the Christian faith. So we want to develop a library of stage-appropriate resources for every stage of spiritual growth – resources you can use for your own growth or to help others. Right now we have a few available at the brown bookshelf in the front lobby, across from the regular library shelves. I have a lot more in my office. And we will be looking to provide more in the future.

No matter where you're at spiritually, we want there to be encouragement, opportunities, and resources to grow, and a clear understanding of steps you can take to move ahead. We are working on developing these things, and I encourage you to learn, grow, and be involved.