

Discipleship in Relationship with the Local Church



The local church is the body of Christ in our world. The “body of Christ” is too often used as a mere figure of speech, yet that phrase expresses the reality that Christ lives through his people. God’s people, as disciples, extend the life of Jesus to the world through the local church. Consider the following excerpts from *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2012*:

- ¶120 Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.
- ¶ 201 Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.
- ¶1218 Growth in Faithful Discipleship – Faithful membership in the local church is essential for personal growth and for developing a deeper commitment to the will and grace of God. As members involve themselves in private and public prayer, worship, the sacraments, study, Christian action, systematic giving, and holy discipline, they grow in their appreciation of Christ, understanding of God at work in history and the natural order, and understanding of themselves.
- ¶1216.a Using the services of the baptismal covenant, youth will profess their faith, commit themselves to a life of discipleship, and be confirmed. Confirmation is both a human act of commitment and the gracious action of the Holy Spirit strengthening and empowering discipleship.

DISCUSSION

Discuss how you see your local church reflected in the Book of Discipline references above.

Specific attributes are common in churches focused on discipleship for adults and youth. Do you recognize these attributes in your church?

- The pastor is an irreplaceable discipleship advocate.
- Church leaders stand with the pastor on the necessity of discipleship and support the process.
- Membership is focused on commitment to a process of spiritual growth in Jesus Christ.
- All teaching and ministry programs are tied to discipleship outcomes.
- Significant resources are devoted to discipling youth.
- The Holy Spirit has room to work. You cannot be a self-made disciple. Lean on God.

One requisite question for every church that establishes a discipleship process is, “What does a committed disciple of Jesus Christ look like?” Has your church asked this question?

Opening

Together, pray Psalm 33:1-5, lifting up your voices with a variety of Bible versions.

Scripture:

Read Ephesians 3:7-10 from *The Message*.

This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise, God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God’s way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.

And so here I am, preaching and writing about things that are way over my head, the inexhaustible riches and generosity of Christ. My task is to bring out in the open and make plain what God, who created all this in the first place, has been doing in secret and behind the scenes all along. Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!

Activities



Examine the table below. Ask the essential questions about your church and relate your answers to the responses found in the table. Do you find your church is mostly running programs, making members, or growing disciples? It is likely your church is doing some mixture of each. List the ways and means that your church could move toward “Growing Disciples.”

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The church is...	RUNNING PROGRAMS	MAKING MEMBERS	GROWING DISCIPLES
<i>What is the main goal of the church?</i>	Offer popular and sustainable programs	Cultivate more good church members	Become more like Jesus
<i>What is the role of the church?</i>	Organize and run the programs well	Keep the members satisfied with church	Educate, encourage, and support spiritual growth
<i>Who has primary responsibility?</i>	Pastor, staff, and other church leaders	Pastor, staff, and other church leaders	Every disciple with the support of church leaders
<i>What do leaders encourage members to do?</i>	Be involved in church activities	Serve and give to the church	Grow in obedience to Jesus and service to others

“The way Jesus invites us to walk is a narrow way, so against the stream, so uncommon that anything less than intentional, careful, Christian formation will not do. From all that we know of Jesus and his demands upon us, being a disciple of his is a good deal more demanding than the completion of a pledge card and the right hand of fellowship. Discipleship requires a lifetime of commitment, trial and error, struggle, correction, prayer, and a host of virtues which cannot be had simply by wanting them.” – William H. Willimon in Why I Am A United Methodist, 1990

The most powerful tool for a disciple is prayer. Together, pray Psalm 86:1-4, 11-12.

RESOURCES:

If you are looking for more about discipleship, check out these books and websites:

- *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2012*
- *Deepening Your Effectiveness – Restructuring the Local Church for Life Transformation* by Dan Glover & Claudia Lavy
- *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry* by Aubrey Malphurs
- *Why I Am a Methodist* by William H. Willimon
- Missouri Annual Conference Discipleship Resources: www.moumethodist.org/growingdeeper

