

“A Plan for Discipleship”

Date: October 22, 2017 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Discipleship Plan announcement
Theme: Discipleship **Texts:** Luke 10:25-28; John 1:43-51

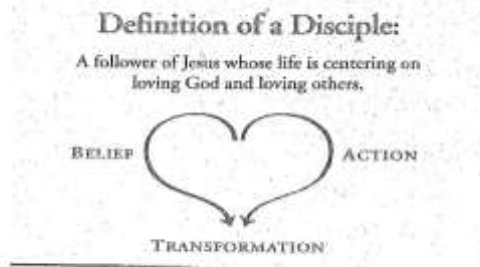
In the Great Commission, before he ascended to Heaven, Jesus tells his disciples: “Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” *That* is our Great Commission.

The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The problem that has befallen the church of the 21st century is that for too long we have been pre-occupied with making *church members* instead of disciples.

And for many of us, we’re not even sure what it means to be a disciple, let alone know how to make other disciples. We have been challenged to change that scenario. Several pastors in our denomination have developed very intentional plans for making disciples and they’re seeing tremendous, positive changes in their churches.

One such pastor is James Harnish, who has written a book that we’ve been using for our new member classes for a couple of years now. It’s called “*A Disciple’s Path: Deepening Your Relationship with Christ and the Church.*” I have decided to adopt his plan, and use it for our purposes here at Lakewood.

I mean, if someone has already created a workable plan, why should we reinvent the wheel? I’d like to share that plan with you this morning as we are all challenged to take more seriously our own walk with Jesus. We can start by simply defining what is a disciple. Refer to slide one:



First slide.

I like the definition Rev. Harnish gives us: “A disciple is a follower of Jesus whose life is centering on loving God and loving others.” His definition is based on the Great Commandment, to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.

As you can see by the diagram, this definition combines belief and action, which results in a life that is transformed into the likeness of Christ. A transformed heart emerges as belief and action deepen. I also appreciate that he uses the verb *centering*, which implies that disciple-making is an on-going process and not a state in which we can say that we have arrived. We are on a path of following Jesus.

Church's and Family's Roles

Opportunities to Experience God in Christian Community

<p style="text-align: center;">Small-group Community</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Gather with other Christians in a small group to pray, learn, and grow together.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Corporate Worship</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Celebrate God's presence in worship with a faith community.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Gifts-based Service</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Discover your spiritual gifts and participate in God's work through the ministry of the church.</p>
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As we can see from this diagram, we can look at our journey with Christ through the model of a friendship. Some people who walk through our doors are strangers to Jesus. They don't even know if they believe in God, and they're not sure they want or need a faith community. We could say they are strangers to Jesus.

Others who come through our doors are mere acquaintances with the Lord Jesus. They come with a lot of questions. We might say they're in the exploring stage of discipleship. They have a vague idea of God, but aren't really convinced about Jesus yet, nor are they sold on the church. Faith is not yet a significant part of their lives.

The next stage may well represent where a lot of people who sit in the pews are in their relationship with Jesus. They believe in Jesus and they're working on what it means to follow him. They would call themselves "friends of Jesus." They participate in the life of the church, maybe serving on a committee, or helping to serve as a greeter. They're getting started in their relationship. Sadly, many people stay at this stage, sometimes for decades, and don't go any further down the path of discipleship.

For some other people, their relationship with Jesus makes a real difference in their lives. They are good friends with the Lord Jesus, and are seeking to discover ways in which their life can make God's love real in the world. They're putting their faith into practice in many areas of their life.

And some other people are *deeply* centering their lives on what it means to be like Jesus. We might call them intimate friends. For them, following Jesus is the most important thing in their life. And they see how their life is being used by God for the transformation of the world.

Please understand, by looking at our discipleship through the lens of a relationship analogy, we are not trying to create a hierarchy of better Christians than others. We are simply trying to describe how a person progresses along the discipleship path. Is it possible to look at a person's life and tell whether they are just beginning the journey, or if they are intimate friends with Jesus? We think we can demonstrate a growth in faith

Relationship Stages

As we grow in relationship with Jesus, different stages might look like this:

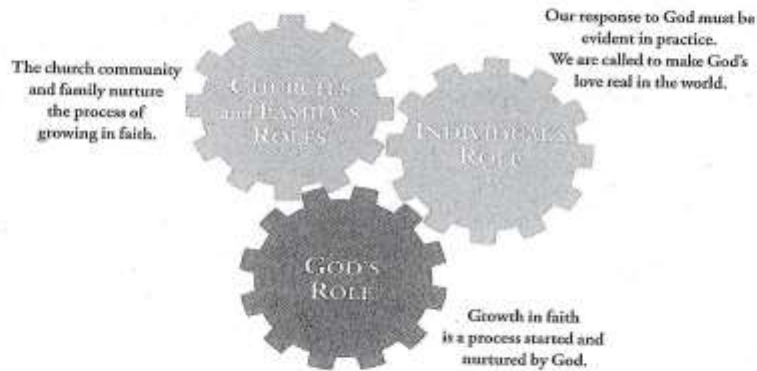
Ignoring	Exploring	Getting Started	Going Deeper	Centering
(Strangers)	(Acquaintances)	(Friends)	(Good Friends)	(Intimate Friends)
"I don't know if I believe in God."	"I believe in God, but I'm not sure about Jesus or the church."	"I believe in Jesus, and I am working on what it means to follow him."	"My relationship with Jesus makes a difference in how I live my life. I am discovering how my life can make God's love real in the world."	"Following Jesus is the most important thing in my life."
"I believe in God, but I don't need a faith community."	"My faith is not a significant part of my life."	"I am participating in the life of the church."		"My life is part of God's transformation of the world."

Prevenient Justifying Sanctifying

We experience God's grace in new ways as we grow in relationship with Jesus.

Now, there are various influences that help us to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. God initiates our faith process and God nurtures us all along the way. The church community and the families of which we are a part also help to nurture the process of growing in faith. Most importantly, we each must take responsibility for our walk with Christ.

Roles and Responsibilities



In the church, we have the opportunity to be a part of small groups for study and nurture. When we gather together in corporate worship, we celebrate God's presence among us. For many people this is their primary means of growing in faith – coming to church on Sundays. That's important, but it's not the only place where we can deepen our walk with Christ. The church also provides many and varied different experiences for people to discover their spiritual gifts and use them in service. As we grow in our faith, our experiences will change and lead us into a deeper intimacy with Christ.

Spiritual Practices Change as We Grow

	Exploring	Getting Started	Going Deeper	Centering
PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES – to do on my own				
PRAYER and SCRIPTURE MEDITATION	Formal prayers Grace before meals Lord's Prayer	Informal prayers Develop regular time/place Pray with a small group	Conversational prayer Learn different types of prayer	Contemplative prayer Silent prayer Fasting
FINANCIAL GENEROSITY	Bible reading for knowledge and understanding	Follow daily Bible readings Read Bible for comfort and inspiration	Bible reading and reflection for transformation	Bible reading (daily) Bible reflection (daily) Lectio Divina
INVITATIONAL EVANGELISM	Occasional giving	Regular giving	Tithing	Sacrificial generosity beyond the tithe
SMALL-GROUP COMMUNITY	Explore questions about Jesus Christ	Get to know the gospel story and your story	Find opportunities to share your witness	Help others share their witness
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY – to do with others				
CORPORATE WORSHIP	Newcomer class Low-commitment group Exploring faith class	Short-term class Bible study group Sunday school	Relationship-focused group (for accountability, fellowship, Bible study, service, and prayer) Long-term Bible study	Guided by spiritual mentor Lead others in small-group covenant group Discipleship accountability group
GIFTS-BASED SERVICE	Occasional participation in worship and Communion	Familiarity with elements of corporate worship and Communion	Transformative participation in worship and Communion	Experience the significance and power of corporate worship and Communion
	Serve where needed	Discover your spiritual gifts and serve out of giftedness	Discern God's call	Live out God's call and equip others to serve

Here is the chart where I want to spend the most time – looking at the different spiritual disciplines, both the ones we do by ourselves **and** the ones we do as part of the faith community. I know you may not be able to see the slide on the screen, so look at your handout.

On the left-hand side are the different spiritual practices we do, on the path of discipleship. We do all of them, in varying degrees and intensity on our faith journey. You'll notice there is prayer and scripture reading, financial generosity, inviting evangelism, small groups, corporate worship and gift-based service. These are the tools we use for centering our lives on following Jesus as we love God and love others.

Look at the first line, the discipline is prayer. When we're still exploring our relationship with Jesus we may use formal, already written prayers, we may say grace before meals and we learn the Lord's Prayer. As we become friends with Jesus we may be able to say some informal prayers of our own, we begin to have a regular time and place to pray, and we may be a part of a small group which meets to pray.

As we go deeper, as we develop a more intimate relationship with Jesus, we learn different styles of prayer. And when we've been on the journey for a while, words become less necessary and we spend more time in silent prayer; we may take on fasting as a spiritual discipline.

Let me ask, where do you see yourself in your current prayer life? Are you still exploring, just getting started, maybe going deeper, or perhaps you are centering your life on God and others, going even deeper?

The second line has to do with reading scripture. When we're just getting started in our relationship with Christ, we read the Bible simply for knowledge and understanding. What does it say and what does it mean? When we become friends with Jesus, when we're working on what it means to follow him, we may use a daily Bible reading schedule; we may read the Bible for comfort and inspiration.

When we're seeking a deeper relationship with God and Jesus, we begin to read and reflect on the Bible for transformation. What does God ask of me in this passage? Who is God wanting me to become? When our lives are centering on a deeper intimacy, we most certainly are doing daily Bible reflection, for the purpose of discovering God's will for our life. We may be practicing a technique called *Lectio Divina*.

Where are you in your reading of scripture? Are you just exploring, getting started, going deeper, or centering?

The next spiritual discipline is financial generosity. For a person who is just getting used to the idea of Jesus and the church, their giving to the church is only occasional. There is no plan. When we become friends of Jesus and have a committed relationship, we develop a regular plan for giving; if not a tithe, then certainly a percentage of our income.

When we become more intimate with Christ, and trust him ever deeper with our lives, we become committed tithers. As our trust and intimacy grows, we become willing to give

sacrificially, even beyond the tithe. So, let me ask, where do you see yourself on this grid? Are you an occasional giver, a regular giver, a tither, or a sacrificial giver? It usually says something about our friendship with Christ. Again, no judgements, just a question.

Next is invitational evangelism – all of us are called upon by God to share our faith with others, but we're all at different levels of readiness and willingness. When we're just getting started, we're still learning about the gospel of Jesus Christ and what it means. As we grow, we begin to understand the gospel story and how it relates to our own story.

When we go deeper, we begin to look for opportunities to share our faith story. And when our lives have been on the discipleship path for a good while, and we're centering our lives in Christ, we help others to share their witness. Again, let me ask – where do you see yourself on this grid?

And let me say this – you may be farther along in your prayer life than you are in your willingness to share your faith story. We grow in different ways at different speeds with each of these spiritual disciplines.

Next we look at those spiritual practices that we do with other Christians, the ones we do as part of the faith community. First on the list is being a part of a small group. The type of class you attend or the type of group you are a part of changes as you move along your journey.

In the beginning, you might attend a low-commitment group, like a Sunday School class where you drop in when it's convenient for you, or an introduction to the faith class. As we grow, we might decide to be a part of short-term class or Bible study or Sunday School class that expects us to be there regularly. Along the journey, we might be a member of an accountability group, or a long-term study group, like the Bethel series or the Disciple Bible Study. Later, we ourselves are teaching and leading others, we find a spiritual director, or we're a part of a discipleship accountability group. So, where do you see yourself in this area?

When it comes to worship, we all have varying levels of interest, experience and commitment. As a person exploring the Christian faith, I might come once in a while, when it's convenient. As I grow in my faith, I become more familiar with the different elements of corporate worship and communion. I understand what the various things mean.

When my relationship with Christ deepens, worship becomes a transformative experience. I worship not out of duty, but because it connects me with God in a way that changes who I am. A

life that is centering on loving God and others will experience tremendous significance and power by being in worship. Where do you see yourself in this area of discipleship?

Finally, as Christians, we are called to use our spiritual gifts in service to God and others. In the beginning, we just help out where we're needed. As our friendship with Jesus gets started, we begin to ask and then learn what our unique spiritual gifts are, and start to serve out of our giftedness.

As we go deeper, we begin to discern God's call on our life. At all times and in all places we are asking, "God, what do you want me to do?" A life centered in God's love tries to live out a life of faithful obedience, and helps others to discover their gifts and use them.

Friends, this is an ambitious plan for discipleship. But if we don't have one, we leave it all to chance. May God guide each of us in our walk with Christ..