

# Northview Community Church

## Discipleship Plan

### Introduction

At Northview we are not simply concerned with people being Christians, we are particularly concerned with people being disciples. The difference between the two terms is that being a Christian has come to be a static term which indicates someone's religion. Whereas, being a disciple is a dynamic term. For this reason we want to have a discipleship plan that gives people direction and resources to be disciples of Jesus.

In addition, we recognize that discipleship is not binary, but rather a spectrum. Discipleship begins prior to knowing Jesus and ends by being thoroughly self-abandoned to him, with stages of development along the way. For this reason our discipleship plan seeks to move through four stages of deepening commitment.

### Describing Discipleship

But, what is discipleship? How do we define it or describe it? *The New Bible Dictionary* defines a disciple as "basically the pupil of a teacher."<sup>1</sup> This definition lines up with a popular understanding of discipleship as "following Jesus."<sup>2</sup> But, what does that look like in light of the ascension of Jesus? Dallas Willard defines it this way:

Discipleship is the relationship I stand into Jesus Christ in order that I might take on his character. As his disciple, I am learning from him how to live my life in the Kingdom as he would if he were I. The natural outcome is that my behaviour is transformed. Increasingly, I routinely and easily do the things he said and did.<sup>3</sup>

What is helpful in Willard's definition is that it focuses on the Christian disciple having their life conformed to the pattern of Christ. However, there is more to be said.

Many works around the topic of discipleship focus on spiritual formation. In his book, *Invitation to a journey*, M. Robert Mulholland Jr. defines spiritual formation, "as (1) a process (2) of being conformed (3) to the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others."<sup>4</sup> This is helpful because it adds to Willard's definition in a couple of important ways. First, there is a process, an intentionality to

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<sup>1</sup> I.H. Marshall, "Disciple," in *The New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. J.D. Douglas et al (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1982), 285.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:17

<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, quoted in Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2006), 16.

<sup>4</sup> M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 15.

this being conformed to the image of Christ — it does not occur accidentally. Second, it has mission as a key focus — our discipleship is not all about us.

Our own denomination, the Free Methodist Church in Canada (FMCiC), in wrestling with discipleship and formation through a Wesleyan lens sees a more comprehensive term being helpful, “We will use the language of **Christian formation** to refer to those inner and outer practices that aid growth in Christlikeness. ‘Love God and love your neighbour.’”<sup>5</sup> Once more our understanding is enriched. Not only is there a process which leads to Christlikeness, but there are particular practices which aid it. Also, once more we have a picture of discipleship which leads to engagement in mission.

Finally, to add to our picture, John H. Westerhoff, using the term ‘catechesis’, says forming Christlikeness, “comprises three deliberate (intentional), systemic (interrelated), and sustained (lifelong) processes, which I have named formation, education, and instruction.”<sup>6</sup> Again, this highlights the intentionality needed to form disciples and particular practices. What this adds to our understanding is that there are multiple elements, not just practices, that come together to form disciples. As well, it points to the ongoing nature of discipleship, rather than a short-term focus; discipleship is lifelong. I do not like his titles for the three processes. I prefer experience (activities and disciplines), learning (information), and reflection (integrating experience with learning and allowing new insights lead to more faithful life).

Taken all together we can say discipleship is the call placed on every Christian, it is an intentional lifelong process where we become students of Jesus for the purposes of becoming conformed to his image for the sake of others. The ingredients for this process are engaging in particular experiences, pursuing particular learning, and practicing regular reflection.

## Tension

Clearly we have been charged with making disciples, “Therefore go and 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.”<sup>7</sup> At base, the Christian community called the Church has this as its mandate.

However, there is a tension when it comes to making disciples. What I mean is that the formation into the image of Christ is a work of the Spirit. The apostle Paul recognizes this when he says, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.”<sup>8</sup>

This confession that we do not have the ability to cause a person to grow into Christlikeness is balanced by the call for us to pursue Christlikeness in our lives:

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<sup>5</sup> The Free Methodist Church in Canada, *The Wesleyan Way: Making Disciples for Missional Living*, 14. Emphasis original.

<sup>6</sup> Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, ed., *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 242.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:19-20, NIV

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, NIV

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.<sup>9</sup>

This demonstrates that God does not work apart from our own work. We have been called to actively pursue Christlikeness which is done through the work of God. This is the tension.

So, when we put our plan in place we are, like Paul and Apollos, caring for soil, planting seeds, and watering but, it is God who is causing growth. In short, our discipleship plan is a garden bed that we work conscientiously while eagerly expecting God to produce the fruit of Christlikeness.

## **Convictions**

Behind our discipleship plan there are some key convictions that are important to intentionally ‘spell out’. The first conviction has already been said — the Spirit is essential. We want to intentionally open ourselves to the work of God. Second, discipleship can only happen in the context of community. Jesus did not create a private religion — he created the community called the church. Therefore, the community is necessary to create disciples. Third, Scripture is essential. To be Christlike is to be shaped by a particular story — the story of Scripture. Every reformation and renewal of the church is birthed out of the church rediscovering the heart of Scripture. Finally, everything the church does should be aimed at discipleship. From the members of the board meeting monthly to two people going for coffee — what we do as Jesus-followers needs to contribute to this formation. This program will not be enough on its own.

## **Assessment and Evaluation**

An important tool for all ministry is the ability to evaluate success of ministry goals, discipleship is no different. The FMCiC has developed a discipleship survey that will function as our assessment tool. We plan to run the discipleship programming from September to May, so every May we will do the discipleship survey to measure how we are progressing. This will also give us an ability to strengthen particular weak spots in this plan.

In addition to tracking where we are as a church when it comes to discipleship, we also need an ongoing picture of our corporate Spiritual gifting. Donna Dynna has led Spiritual gifts assessments in the past and has offered to do so in the present. I would like to also have an annual (perhaps bi-annual if our growth warrants it) Spiritual gifts assessment to understand our gift mix. I would like to be able to hand over much of the non-Christian Education to others in the congregation.

## **The Plan**

We want to have a context for disciple development that meets people at the various places where they are. Following the FMCiC and other resources we recognize that four areas of focus seem to cover the discipleship spectrum. We have called ours: Getting Started, Joining In, Leading Edge, and Driving Change. Following are the details for each level of discipleship context.

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<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:12-13, NIV

One final consideration: Greg Ogden notes that one reason for the failure of churches in developing disciples is that they try to do discipleship through programs, he is worth quoting at length here:

The scriptural context for growing disciples is through relationships. Jesus called the Twelve to be with him, for through personal association their lives would be transformed. Proximity produces disciples. The apostle Paul had his Timothies who were ministry partners, for in this side-by-side ministry, leaders could be trained to carry on after his departure. Disciples are made in “iron sharpens iron” intentional relationships.

In today’s church we have replaced person-centred growth with programs as the means of making disciples. By programs I mean the structured group methods we use to herd large groups of people through systems. Examples of programs are age-graded Sunday schools, adult education classes, small-group ministries, need-based seminars or highly structured discipleship programs.

All of these programs can contribute to discipleship development, but they miss the central ingredient in discipleship. Each disciple is a unique individual who grows at a particular rate peculiar to him or her. Unless disciples receive personal attention so that their particular growth needs are addressed in a way that calls them to die to self and live fully to Christ, a disciple will not be made.<sup>10</sup>

This is a necessary reminder for us as we put our own discipleship plan into place and we continue to utilize all of the elements he mentions. At the heart of all we do must be relationship. This means we need to push beyond a teacher, student, content model. We need the people engaged in discipleship teaching and learning to push towards relationship. This also reminds us why intentional mentoring, accountability, and friendship needs to be going on outside of church programs.

## Final Word

This is not about us being busy, or having a ton of programs. We simply desire to have a plan and process in place which will connect with people at every level. If we do not need something at the time, then we will not run it simply for the sake of running it.

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<sup>10</sup> Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 42-43.

## Getting Started

*Getting Started* is a place for people who are exploring Christianity. At this stage we do not understand ourselves as Christians, but we have important questions that need to be answered as part of our exploring faith.

<p><b>The church's goals are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give the broad brush strokes of the Christian story</li> <li>• Introduce the key elements of the gospel of Jesus</li> <li>• Introduce the person of Jesus</li> <li>• Be a safe place for people to ask questions and explore answers about Jesus and Christianity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Desired outcomes are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversion; a personal faith and confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour</li> <li>• Baptism; a necessary part of conversion by which the new believer enters and declares their faith to the community</li> <li>• Place; Northview as Jesus' community which will build into life of the new believer</li> </ul>	<p><b>Discipleship resources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Following Jesus</li> <li>• Growing in Christ</li> <li>• Catechism</li> </ul>
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## Joining In

*Joining In* is a place for new Christians to begin to grow into the next steps of faith. We have received Jesus as Lord and Saviour, we have declared our commitment through baptism, and we have made Northview our home church; now we need help 'walking the walk'. We need to have a clearer understanding how to live and help living it. This involves addressing our old ways and trusting increasingly in God.

<p><b>The church's goals are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand what Scripture teaches on how to live faithfully</li> <li>• How to engage in disciplines</li> <li>• Safe place to share struggles of sin</li> </ul>	<p><b>Desired outcomes are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rhythms of personal devotional practice</li> <li>• Greater ability to read Scripture well and pray</li> <li>• Success in putting off the 'old life'</li> <li>• Joining small group life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Discipleship resources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discipleship Essentials</li> <li>• 2.7 Series</li> <li>• God's Grace Channels</li> </ul>
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## Leading Edge

*Leading Edge* is a place where disciples can go deep into their faith. We need to move beyond the basics and overviews to deeper understandings and practices. We want to live the life of the Spirit in ourselves, in our church and in our communities. We want the full love and life of God.

<p><b>The church's goals are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sophisticated understanding and practice of faith</li> <li>• Equip believers with substantial teaching and practices</li> <li>• Give opportunities to lead</li> <li>• Give opportunities to create new ministry</li> </ul>	<p><b>Desired outcomes are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercising of gifts</li> <li>• Investing in people</li> <li>• Partnering with the church</li> </ul>	<p><b>Discipleship resources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Christian Education Classes</li> <li>• Leadership Group</li> <li>• Partnership Course</li> <li>• The Tangible Kingdom Primer</li> <li>• Leadership Essentials</li> </ul>
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## Driving Change

*Driving Change* is a place where disciples can step out in adventure with their faith. We are actively seeking opportunities to engage our faith in our communities. We desire to be agents of the kingdom wherever we go.

<p><b>The church's goals are:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a missional framework</li> <li>• Grow in compassion for the community</li> <li>• Step out in faith</li> </ul>	<p><b>Desired outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Missional engagement with community church is located in</li> <li>• Missional engagement with personal community</li> <li>• New discipleship</li> </ul>	<p><b>Resources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The New Parish</li> <li>• The Ministry of the Missional Church</li> <li>• Invitation to a Journey</li> </ul>
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