

DEVELOPING AN ADULT DISCIPLESHIP PLAN IN A LOCAL CHURCH

DISCIPLESHIP BASICS

The following ideas are designed to provide practical help in developing a church strategy for making adult disciples.

DISCIPLESHIP PRINCIPLES

Six general principles can help in designing a discipleship program.

1. Plan with the end in mind.
Determine what characteristics you believe are marks of a maturing disciple.
2. Evaluate current spiritual maturity.
Determine where persons are now in their spiritual journeys.
3. Design a plan.
Develop a process to help persons grow from where they are now toward the characteristics you believe mark a maturing disciple. Overall your goal is to move persons from being nonbelievers to being maturing disciples.
4. Spiritual growth is a life-long journey.
Guide each person to determine the next step he or she should take in his or her spiritual journey. Persons do best when they can see one small step at a time.
5. Discipleship is relational.
Persons learn and grow from more mature believers whom they know and trust. Friendships are the conduit through which discipleship flows.
6. Discipleship is reproducible.
Guide persons to grow in spiritual maturity in such a way that as they grown, they can help others grow.

Plan with the End in Mind

The goal of discipleship is disciples that are maturing in their faith. As you think about what characteristics you believe are marks of a maturing disciple, consider the following characteristics:

1. Spirit-filled Living (Eph 5:18). Christ-centered living evidenced by persons who:
Love God (Matt 22:36-40) – expressed in worship and holy living
Love Others (Matt 22:36-40) – expressed in fellowship and forgiveness
2. Spirit-gifted Serving (Rom. 12:4-6a). Ministry to others
3. Spirit-empowered Witnessing (Acts 1:8). Evangelism
4. Multiplying Disciples (2 Tim 2:2). Making reproducible disciples who can make disciples of others

Evaluate Current Spiritual Maturity

From your own prayerful observation, you can gain much insight about the level of spiritual maturity among believers in your church. The “Spiritual Growth Assessment Process” (downloadable at www.lifeway.com/article/161390/) is a useful tool to help persons evaluate their current spiritual maturity.

Design a Plan and Process

Discipleship is a process. In the big picture, discipleship is a process of moving persons from being nonbelievers to being maturing disciples. Although the steps after conversion are not always taken in order, it is helpful to consider the process in smaller steps.

Steps in Becoming a Maturing Disciple

Step 1: Nonbeliever to Believer

Step 2: Believer to Church Member

Step 3: Church Member to Growing Christian (Spirit-filled Christian)

Step 4: Growing Christian to Serving Christian (Spirit-gifted Service)

Step 5: Serving Christian to Witnessing Christian (Spirit-empowered Witness)

Step 6: Witnessing Christian to Multiplying Christian (Disciple-maker)

Ask yourself, does our church have a plan or process in place to help persons take each of these steps?

DISCIPLESHIP METHODS AND MEANS

INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER'S VIEWPOINT

The following means are the most helpful for spiritual growth:

1. Spiritual Disciplines (2 Tim 2:3-7)
 - Daily Quiet Time
 - Prayer: 1) for self, 2) for others and 3) with fasting
 - Scripture: 1) reading, 2) study and 3) memorization
2. Discipleship Groups (closed, discipleship small groups)
 - Personal growth: include topics such as building a relationship with God, having a quiet time, how to study the Bible, strengthening family life, and personal finances.
 - Training for service: include topics such as discovering spiritual gifts, training for a specific ministry, teacher training, and evangelism training.

CORPORATE (CHURCH) VIEWPOINT

Following are the methods generally used in churches to make disciples. They are listed in increasing levels of involvement and spiritual growth:

1. Pulpit / Preaching

Biblical preaching will help persons take the first steps in spiritual growth and preaching can motivate persons toward spiritual growth. However, preaching does not provide relationships, personalized teaching, or accountability that are necessary for the next steps in discipleship.
2. Sunday School (open, small-group Bible studies)

This is for foundational discipleship through Bible study and relationships with other Christians. If you try to use Sunday School for more in-depth discipleship, the groups become closed and you limit your potential to reach and assimilate new people.
3. Discipleship Groups (closed, discipleship small groups)

Closed, small groups that meet for a set time for a particular study are the most effective way to facilitate spiritual growth through teaching, relationships, and accountability.

4. One-on-one
Mentoring or coaching can provide intense personalized teaching and accountability. One-on-one approaches have the following weaknesses: 1) in growing churches, there are often not enough leaders for one-on-one training, and 2) in small groups, the relational interactions help persons to learn from one another as well as from the teacher.
5. Ministry Involvement
The maximum spiritual growth occurs when persons put into action what they have learned by being involved in ministry or evangelism.

ALIGNING CHURCH PROGRAMS

As you disciple persons, most will move through church programs in the following order of increasing commitment and growth potential:

1. Worship service
2. Sunday School (open, small-group Bible study)
3. Discipleship Group (closed, discipleship small groups)
4. Ministry team (place of service)
5. Witnessing team (evangelism ministry)

DESIGNING A DISCIPLESHIP PLAN USING SMALL GROUPS

Approaches to making disciples through closed, small groups fall into two broad categories: 1) systematic and 2) nonsystematic. A systematic approach provides a clear pathway for persons to follow as they grow in their faith. The CLASS system at Saddleback (101, 201, 301, 401) is a well-known example of a systematic approach. A nonsystematic approach is nonlinear and provides a variety of options for spiritual growth.

SYSTEMATIC PLANS

The following table shows two possible systematic approaches which use materials from LifeWay Christian Resources or the North American Mission Board.

Step in the Process	Individual LifeWay Courses	“Growing Disciples” Series
Believer -> Church Member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Survival Kit for New Christians</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Call to Follow Christ</i>
Church Member -> Growing Christian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Experiencing God</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Abide in Christ</i> • <i>Pray in Faith</i> • <i>Live in the Word</i> • <i>Fellowship with Believers</i>
Growing Christian -> Serving Christian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jesus on Leadership</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Minister to Others</i>
Serving Christian -> Witnessing Christian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Share Jesus without Fear</i> • <i>FAITH Evangelism</i> • <i>The NET Evangelism</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Witness to the World</i>
Witnessing Christian -> Mutipling Christian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>MasterLife</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>MasterLife</i>

Growing Disciples Series

This series of studies is based on the six disciplines of MasterLife. Unlike MasterLife it is divided into number of six week studies and is a less intensive study than MasterLife. The studies do not have to be taken in any order, except that *The Call to Follow Christ*, a seven-week study, is designed to be completed first.

MasterLife and “MasterBuilder”

MasterLife is a systematic approach which focuses on spiritual disciplines. MasterLife seeks to produce growing, ministering, witnessing, and multiplying disciples. It deals with more than one aspect of discipleship at a time.

MasterLife is made up of four six-week studies designed to be studied in order: The Disciple’s Cross, The Disciple’s Personality, The Disciple’s Victory, and The Disciple’s Mission. It is built around six spiritual disciplines: 1) Abide in Christ, 2) Live in the Word, 3) Pray in Faith, 4) Fellowship with Believers, 5) Witness to the Word, and 6) Minister to Others.

“MasterBuilder” provides a systematic approach to make reproducing disciples using *MasterLife*.

NONSYSTEMATIC PLANS

Nonsystematic plans include studying selected areas over time, providing electives, men’s and women’s groups, support groups, and ongoing discipleship groups. Most of these approaches require extra attention to keep the content balanced.

Studying Selected Areas: Provide courses in selected areas such as 1) Spiritual Growth, 2) Prayer, 3) Personal Evangelism, 4) Baptist Doctrine, 4) Stewardship and Personal Finances, 6) Family Life and Parenting, and 7) Leadership. Over time an individual could work through a set course of study to cover all the selected areas.

The following chart provides a sample of how the selected areas could be covered over a two-year period.

	September – November	January – March	April – May
Year One	<i>Experiencing God</i> (12)	<i>The Life-Changing Power of Prayer</i> (6) and <i>Share Jesus without Fear</i> (4)	<i>Soul Shaping</i> * (6)
Year Two	<i>It’s A New Day for Financial Freedom</i> (10)	<i>Parenting by Grace</i> (11)	<i>Jesus on Leadership</i> (5)

Numbers in parenthesis indicate study course length in weeks.

* Annual Baptist doctrine study: 2010 - *Soul Shaping*, 2009 - *Vibrant Church*.

Other study options: *Foundations of the Faith: The Doctrines Baptists Believe* (6), *The Baptist Faith & Message* (6), *Disciples Prayer Life* (13), *On Mission with God* (8), or any of the *Growing Disciples* series.

Electives: Provide a variety of elective courses based on the perceived needs of the participants. This is sometimes called a “Christian Growth University”

Single Gender: Provide Men’s Ministry and Women’s Ministry groups.

Support Groups: There are a number of support and/or recovery studies such as *Recovering from the Losses of Life* or *Search for Significance*.

Ongoing Groups: Use an ongoing curriculum such as *Baptist Adults*.

LIFEWAY’S ADULT DISCIPLESHIP MODEL

LifeWay Christian Resources is now designing adult curriculum around four areas of discipleship: Connect, Grow, Serve, and Go. 1) Connect with an Open Heart; 2) Grow in Body, Mind and Spirit; 3) Serve with Willing Hands; and 2) Go with Ready Feet. Addressing each of these four areas of growth can provide a balanced approach to making disciples.

SCHEDULE AND LOCATION

ANNUAL SCHEDULE

There are two basic times during the year to schedule discipleship groups: 1) in the fall from September through November, and 2) in the winter and spring from January through May. December and the summer months are generally not good times to maintain constant attendance. This gives you about 13 weeks from September up to Thanksgiving and about 20 weeks from January up to Memorial Day. Many churches schedule have a fall and spring “semester.” Some churches have found that a yearly 40 day discipleship adventure is an effective way to involve a large number of your people in discipleship.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND LOCATION OPTIONS

1. Schedule at the church at a set time such as Sunday night or Wednesday night.
Advantages: 1) This is time normally set aside for church. 2) There is something for the children. When you have parents in a class, you need something for the children.
2. Schedule in homes or at the church at other times.
Advantages: 1) This often fit people’s schedules better. 2) There is more flexibility in time; sessions can run longer if needed. 3) A home setting can be more informal and inviting.

RESOURCES

Discipleship: Stepping-Stones to Developing Your Church’s Strategy. Download at www.lifeway.com/article/161390/

King, Claude. *The Call to Follow Christ: Six Disciplines for New and Growing Believers.* Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2006.

Rainer, Thom S. and Eric Geiger. *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples.* Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006.

Rainer, Thom S. and Daniel L. Akin. *Vibrant Church: Becoming a Healthy Church in the 21st Century.* Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2008.

Sneed, Barry and Roy Edgemon. *Transformational Discipleship: Your Church Helping People Be like Jesus.* Nashville: LifeWay Press: 1999

“Spiritual Growth Assessment Process.” Download at www.lifeway.com/article/161390/

Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.

Willis, Avery T., Jr. *MasterLife: A Biblical Process for Growing Disciples.* Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1997.

Wilson, Jim L. *Soul Shaping: Disciples that Conform You to the Image of Christ.* Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2009.