

Christian Discipleship

From Scripture

- 1. Our Mandate.** The risen Christ commanded his closest disciples to continue his ministry of making and equipping disciples.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:18b-20, NIV).

- 2. Christians or Disciples?** To be a Christian is to be a disciple.

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch (Ac 11:26c).

- 3. Pastoral Leadership.** Christian pastors are among those called to the ministry of equipping Christian disciples for Christian service.

It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11-13).

A Disciple of Jesus

- 1. Definition.** A disciple of Jesus is someone who is committed to learning and practicing Jesus’ full course of instruction for mission and ministry.

Christian discipleship comprises new member orientation, adult Christian education, Christian leadership development, fellowship groups, ministry teams, and spiritual direction.

- 2. Commitment.** To become a disciple of Jesus is to commit to his way of life, a life of total surrender to the God of life and love, whose Spirit nurtures compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, hospitality, generosity, and truth telling, extending even to outsiders, even to the enemy, even in the face of violent opposition.

In the Bible, the commitment is at baptism (see Mt 28:18b-20; see also Ro 6:1-4). A free, responsible, adult commitment to Jesus should be acknowledged and celebrated by a congregation even for those who may have been baptized as infants or children. In some church traditions that is the intended significance of confirmation.

- 3. Learning & Practicing.** The learning and practicing take place in the context of life together in the body of Christ, and is guided by seasoned disciples of Jesus—one to one, in small groups of three to twelve, and in larger assemblies. Small groups include learning groups, service groups, therapy groups, administrative groups, and pastoral groups—each offering opportunities for learning and practicing aspects of Jesus’ full course of instruction for mission and ministry.
- 4. Course of Instruction.** As disciples of Jesus, we learn from him how to enjoy direct, open communication with God. We learn how to enjoy life together with God and with people from every nation in a community of grace and gratitude. Coursework includes classwork, homework, and fieldwork. Discipleship requires learning from role models and learning by doing.
- 5. Mission & Ministry.** We become partners with Jesus in God’s work of restoration, of healing, of deliverance, of salvation. More and more, as we partner with God, our lives become lives characterized by joyfulness, openness, harmlessness, a readiness to forgive and to be reconciled, confidence in God, and a stubborn refusal to play God. Christian ministry is not about bending down from a position of superiority to help the less fortunate. It is about receiving a welcome into Christian community and extending that welcome to others.

Stages Prior to Christian Discipleship

- 1. Neighbor** – getting on with life as best as one knows how.
- 2. Seeker** – spiritually dissatisfied; looking for something more.
- 3. Inquirer** – attracted to Jesus; ready to hear about commitment to Jesus.

Stages of Christian Discipleship

- 1. New Disciple** – committed to Jesus in baptism; ready to be equipped for life together in the body of Christ (ready to join a small group); able to call others to commit to Jesus.
- 2. Small-Group Member** – ready to be equipped to lead a small group; able to encourage others to participate in a small group.
- 3. Small-Group Leader** – ready to be equipped for congregational leadership responsibilities (see 1 Tm 3:1-7 & Tt 1:6-11, passages that should be heard in the context of the entire New Testament); able to equip others to lead a small group.
- 4. Congregational Leader** – ready to be equipped to establish a new congregation of Christian disciples (see Ac 13:1-3); able to equip others for congregational leadership.
- 5. Missionary** – ready to establish a new congregation of Christian disciples; able to equip others to establish a new congregation of Christian disciples.

Factors for Success

What is needed if a church is to take seriously Jesus' command to make and to equip disciples, starting with the Senior Pastor and the full Pastoral Team (Pastoral Staff and Elders):

1. **Knowledge of the Scriptures** – especially a working knowledge of the New Testament, and more especially a working knowledge of the instructions of Jesus.
2. **Leadership** – all the men and women in the congregation who are living examples of seasoned, faithful disciples of Jesus.
3. **Vision** – seeing the big picture concerning the importance of making and equipping disciples with respect to the nature and purpose of the church and to Christian faith and practice.
4. **Commitment** – unwavering devotion to Jesus and to his mission and ministry.
5. **Partnership** – full participation (*koinonia*) in the mission and ministry of Jesus through close inter-personal relationships in a network of small groups.
6. **Organization** – all discipleship activities coordinated by a Discipleship Coordinator (Pastor or Director of Discipleship) with clear open lines of communication between all pastors, coordinators, and group leaders.
7. **Administration** – responsible use of church resources (people, calendar, money, facilities, and materials), adequate funds designated in the church budget for Discipleship.
8. **Records** – especially the names of all disciples in the congregation, and the stage of discipleship each has attained.
9. **Focus** – single-minded attention to the work of making and equipping Christian disciples.
10. **Planning** – developing each good idea into a course of action with a clear goal, measureable objectives, and a timeline for meeting the objectives and reaching the goal.
11. **Follow Through** – working the plan.
12. **Evaluation** – reviewing the plan as objectives are scheduled to be met, and revising the plan as necessary.