

Disciple Making Way Presentation for Annual Conference

Tom Greener (Slide 1 -- A Disciple-Making Way)

Some years ago, when I was in my first appointment, the phone rang in the church office. On the other end of the phone was a young man who lived near to the church. He told me some of his story: he had never been to church as a child, his family was not involved in a church, and when he was a teenager, he had begun a life of rebellion. After many years of drugs and alcohol, his life had spiraled out of control. Somewhere along that journey he had met a young woman and they were trying to pull their lives together. Garret went on to tell me that while flipping around the television, he had happened onto a televangelist's program. For some reason he stopped and began to listen. As the testimony of the show continued, he found himself drawn to the faith they were sharing. At the end of the program when the invitation to pray was given, he prayed. "So, now what do I do?" he asked. Indeed, now what do I do.

How would you answer that question? How would your congregation answer that question? There is a famous story of Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama of Tibet. The Dalai Lama asked of Merton, "what do your vows oblige you to do? Are they simply an agreement to stick around for the life of the monastery or do they imply a commitment to a life of progress up certain mystical steps." Shaken to his core, Merton knew there was no better question to be asked. After much reflection, Merton replied, "I believe [my vows] can be interpreted as a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort or another, a commitment to become a completely new man." Whatever else is to be said about the mission of making disciples for the sake of the transformation of the world, it needs to include the making of disciples and that is more than an agreement to stick around for the life of an institution, it is a commitment to a total inner transformation of one sort or another.

When we began to think about a Disciple Making way, one of the first things we grappled with was the question, "Well, what is the foundational framework of becoming a disciple, what is the fountain out of which such framing flows?" So we came to this point: Abundance, a life that flows out of and into abundance. It is the full abundance of God's love, a love that claims God's children and calls them beloved. It is a life that seeks God in all things, that bears the suffering of the other, and experiences the joy and the cross of Christ. The Disciple Making Way is the proclamation and process of such abundant love. (Slide 2 -- Values)

Laura Early

For some, the life of faith begins with a cradle roll enrollment that grows slowly and naturally into the very core of who they are. For others, the life of faith begins as a sudden awareness of a grace that takes hold. For all, that life of faith is not a singular moment of awareness, but a lifetime process of "taking hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me," as Paul describes it in Philippians. And yet, in so many ways, we who declare our mission to be making disciples, have provided only a means to stick around. We need to enable persons to be transformed by the grace of God, and we need to be clear in the way we understand that to happen. The Disciple Making Way is

intended to guide a congregation to answer for themselves the "what do I do now" question of persons seeking to grow in Christ. (Slide 3 -- Values Horizontal)

While the answer each congregation gives will be unique to that congregation, there will be some shared values in this process. Each Disciple Making Way will be:

- clear and unique: the uniqueness will be the outgrowth of the uniqueness of each congregation and its setting. Even so, the disciple making way will offer a clear description of the path for this total transformation.
- intentional: it is our mission to make disciples who reflect changed lives, living in abundance. A process for discipleship will require intentional focus by individuals and congregations. Paul writes in I Corinthians, "we are God's co-workers and you are God's field." As we work together with the spirit of God, disciples are formed and God can renew the face of the whole earth.
- Wesleyan: the disciple making way for a United Methodist congregation will be ground in our tradition as Wesleyan believers. It will reflect a balanced life of scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Our disciple making way will be ground in the things God has been doing among the people called Methodist for over 250 years.
- experiential: the disciple making way will engage disciples with information in the classroom and through transformation by serving in mission ministry. The path will not only shape the mind, it will shape the life of persons and congregations.
- expects growth: the disciple making way will produce the fruit of abundant living to the disciple and disciplined to build up the Kingdom of God.
- looks For and Celebrates Fruit: the disciple making way will trust God for the fruit bearing work of faithful disciples. (Slide 4 -- Elements of Discipleship)

Disciple making is the process of seeing people come to faith in Christ, grow in Him, and then being equipped to go back and help others repeat this process. Disciple making is more than discipleship, which usually defines how to help believers grow. Disciple making is a life-long process of becoming more like Christ and helping others do the same. We believe there are three key elements to this process of becoming like Christ: deepening, equipping and engaging.

Regina Henderson

Jeffery Jones, in *Traveling Together*, describes these elements of discipleship as ever present realities within discipleship. They are not steps in a recipe nor magic beads that guarantee perfection, they are elements of a well-rounded life of a disciple. (Slide 5 -- Deepening)

- Deepening is about relationships -- with God, with self, with others. Like any relationship, it has its ebbs and flows, times of excitement and calm, times of intensity and dullness. Like any relationship, our relationship with God withers when it is not attended, and dies when it becomes stagnant. Faithful disciples attend to their relationship with Christ, with self, with others, continually deepening, becoming richer, shaping their lives. (Slide 6 -- Equipping)
- Equipping is about knowing the Word and understanding our gifts that we may live as disciples and discipling members of the faith community. Many of the spiritual

leaders and teachers in our congregations today rate their disciple-formation alarmingly low, indicating that they are at an “exploring” level. Philip mentored the Ethiopian eunuch, and many of our growing disciples need mentoring, as well, as opposed to large classes that offer head knowledge alone. (Slide 7 -- Engaging)

- Engaging the poor, the marginalized, the disengaged, the culturally different, is a matter of evangelism AND mission. A disciple is a true follower of Jesus Christ, and like Jesus, s/he becomes fully engaged in God’s work in creation. Serving, collaborating, and advocating for a better life for some, for healing for the ill, for hope for the broken, is the work of the disciple. This is not about ministry to or for the community, but ministry *with* the community.

Tom Greener

Three key questions remain about this Disciple-Making Way:

- How does this process relate to the huddles and other things we are doing as a conference?
- What are the next steps for the conference?
- How does my congregation take part in this Disciple Making Way.

First, the Connectional Table sees this process as both a complement to the huddles and other programs within the conference and a unique opportunity for the life of our conference. The huddles which our new cabinet will begin in the coming weeks will focus on the discipleship formation of pastor’s and the discipleship of our pastoral leaders. The Disciple-Making Way will focus on the communal life of our congregations and the discipleship of congregations. As such, they fit together neatly as we together seek to become both effective leaders and healthy congregations.

That having been said, this process of the Disciple-Making Way is unique in what it will offer to the life of our conference. The emphasis on a leadership team and congregational formation is a different way of understanding disciple making. In addition, the on-going support of coaches and the conference as a whole will enable our congregations to reach for the new dreams of God. Finally, by deepening, equipping and engaging laity in the process of disciple making, we will multiply the work of God exponentially. Robert Coleman once stated, “Better to give one year or so to one or two men who learn what it means to conquer for Christ than to spend a lifetime with a congregation just keeping the program going.” Laity need to shift from merely operating programs to making disciples relationally through all that they do and serve in diverse ways depending on how they are gifted. (Slide 8 -- sprouting, growing, mature)

As churches assess where they are and where God might be leading them, they may find themselves in one of three places: Sprouting, Growing or Spreading in their discipleship. And wherever they may be, this process allows us to meet them where they are. This process also allows churches to honestly identify where they are in their quest for making disciples without shame or condemnation. With the resources of our conference library, denominational training events and webinars, coaching tools and practices, district huddle groups, missions and Christian education, the process will equip pastors and congregations to imagine and understand the possibilities of growing and maturing are endless. For example if you will look to the left: As we engage with a

church struggling to begin the disciple-making process, we might lead them on a journey to start small with a day-long retreat so they may encounter God as they deepen in their relationships with one another. With that retreat encounter, they may leave yearning for more, so they decide to equip themselves with short-term bible studies for all ages. And as the relationships grow and the Spirit moves, they find their heart's desire as the body of Christ in service to the world. And, of course, the same can be said for congregations that are well on their way in making-disciples and those who are seasoned in disciple-making. (Slide 9 -- Full Cycle)

So what are the next steps for our conference? Over the coming conference year, a pilot group of 16 congregations, two from each of the new districts will engage in the process for developing their own unique disciple making way. (Slide 10 -- Starting Point) These 16 congregations will gather for a time of sharing in September. Together we will look at the whole process, the assumptions that undergird our work together, and the adaptive work that is ahead. (Slide 11 -- Basic Framework) The congregations will have a chance to reflect on where we are as well as where God is calling us and to build connections to other congregations moving through the process. (Slide 12 -- New Eyes) Following that intensive time, each congregation will work with a coach through the process of developing their own unique plan. (Slide 12 -- Values) Our expectation is that the teams will gather again to share these plans and learn from one another at the end of the process in preparation for a congregation wide presentation in the fall of 2013. (Slide 13 -- Reassessment)

The process will take each congregation through a time of reflection, a time of dreaming, and a time of implementation. (Slide 14 -- Letting go) But, it will not be a process completed in a single year, and no congregation will graduate into perfection. Instead, they will continually be moving through the process of making disciples and assessing disciple making. (Slide 15 -- Determine degree. . .)

While we will work initially with a small group of congregations, we anticipate being able to offer some form of a self-directed process in early 2013 for congregations not participating in this pilot program. Our hope is to provide an opportunity for every congregation to form a unique disciple making way, however, we need time to fine tune the process. We need time to learn from God and one another as we move in this exciting new way.

This process invites pastors and congregations to stop fearing the deep; to boldly stop and courageously cease fruitless ministries/programs; and to step into God's new day for the North Carolina Annual Conference. This disciple-making process invites pastors and congregations to stop living from low expectations and start living from the abundance of Christ. We will invite coaches, pastors and congregations to follow in the praying footsteps of our founder and his treasured covenant prayer, particularly, the part which calls us to "freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal." (Slide 16 -- Wesley Prayer) We invite you to join us in this prayer.