



Making Disciples

A Discipleship Policy

Jesus...said,

*'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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.'*

Matthew 28:18-20

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jesus' last recorded words challenge us to 'go and make disciples of all nations..' (Matthew 28:19), not simply converts, but men and women mature in the faith, worthy to be called his followers.

In our natural desire to spread the good news of the Gospel and bring people to faith in Christ, this biblical imperative may be easily overlooked. The mandate to preach the good news and the need to nurture and establish new Christians should not, however, be held in tension but should complement one another within the life of the church. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul establishes an important principle of church growth:



2 Timothy 2:2

...the things you have heard me say...entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

If our efforts to reach into the community stop at the point of bringing people to faith in Christ, God's kingdom will be half-built at best; if, on the other hand, we raise up disciples to whom we may pass on the baton, the burden of our task will be shared and our effectiveness as a church significantly increased.

Discipleship therefore fulfils the following needs within the life of the church:

- the establishment of mature Christians, fully equipped to deal with life's challenges
- the raising up of leaders for tomorrow's church
- the winning of people for Christ through evangelism and the quality of our Christian lives

As such, discipleship is not portrayed in the Bible as a choice but rather as an obligation, one that is integral to a lifestyle of evangelism and testimony.

2. DEFINITION

Discipleship describes the process by which we are affirmed in our faith and grounded in our understanding of God's Word so that we...



Ephesians 4:14

'..will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching...Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Although discipleship is notoriously difficult to define, the Bible abounds with vibrant examples of discipleship in action. The relationship between Paul and Timothy warrants special attention since it highlights some of the factors which contribute to a successful pattern of discipleship and which are, therefore, worthy of our emulation:

- Encouragement and Prayer:



2 Timothy 1:3ff

I thank God ... as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers ...I have been reminded of your sincere faith ...

- Spiritual Guidance:



2 Timothy 2:22

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace ...

- Practical Advice:



1 Timothy 5:23

Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach ...

- Instruction:



1 Timothy 3:14

...I am writing you these instructions so that...you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household ...

- Admonition:



2 Timothy 1:6-7

.. I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity ..

- Opportunities for Service:



1 Timothy 4:13

.. devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching ..

In the light of this biblical precedent, it might be expected that the following would provide evidence of an individual's commitment to his or her growth as a Christian and ongoing discipleship:

- an active prayer life
- regular study of the scriptures
- some level of commitment to a pastoral group
- regular fellowship with believers beyond the confines of our normal Sunday meetings
- some form of active service within the body of Christ to exercise the gifts with which God has blessed each one of us

3. MAKING DISCIPLES

A. The Context of Community

Whereas an individual's response to the Gospel is necessarily a personal one, effective discipleship cannot occur in isolation. Instead, a sense of community is instrumental to the nurturing and establishment of true disciples since it is only within this context that the elements of discipleship, outlined above, assume any kind of meaning. This principle of community is found articulated throughout both old and new testaments:



Proverbs 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.



Hebrews 10:24-25

... let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another ...

A community of believers, committed to following Jesus, provides ideal conditions of support and encouragement for the spiritual growth of its constituent members. Even the fruit and gifts of the Spirit - the marks of a mature disciple - were intended for expression within the body of Christ, not for the benefit of the individual, but for the building up of all believers.

B. The Changing Face of Society

Although discipleship flourishes quite naturally within a community setting, a number of ongoing changes in society have significantly altered our work patterns and the ways in which we relate to one another. These changes are not confined to the secular world but have impinged on the life of urban churches in various ways, of which the following are arguably the most significant:

- The demise of a local community spirit and the advent of globalisation has begun to impact on the life of the church, weakening the very environment in which effective discipleship thrives. The geographic dispersal of church members from the

vicinity of local churches, has further undermined the natural bonds of fellowship within a congregation, decreasing the sense of commitment, unity and common purpose.

- The sometimes excessive demands placed on individuals by employers and the financial imperative for both husbands and wives to pursue a career, has created a chronic shortage of time, from which Christians are far from immune. For an increasing proportion of a congregation, involvement in the many facets of church life is becoming progressively harder, providing ever-fewer opportunities for effective discipleship.
- Against the increasing clamour for accountability from all quarters of society, the costs of discipleship can appear uncompromising. Jesus' insistence that 'if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' [Mat 16:24] is a stark reminder that, for the true disciple of Christ, there can be no half-measures. For some, however, the fear of commitment at a level they cannot sustain dissuades them for anything more than the most superficial involvement.

It is the conviction of the leadership at Magdalen Road, that to ignore such changes in society would be to the detriment of the church. Rather than denying their existence, these pressures must, therefore, be acknowledged and taken into account within our programme of discipleship.

4. DISCIPLESHIP AT MAGDALEN ROAD

It is evident that a biblical pattern of discipleship is already practised within the church at Magdalen Road, albeit in a relatively informal manner. It is just such a pattern that this policy attempts to strengthen, firstly by promoting an environment conducive to discipleship and secondly by building an infrastructure in which such nurturing may occur, both naturally and spontaneously.

A. Promoting a sense of community

Every effort will be made to strengthen the existing sense of community within our congregation in the following ways:

- We shall attempt to draw a balance between the provision of pastoral groups and social events, which foster interaction between church members, and our desire not to over-burden the church diary, for fear of impeding spontaneous and informal gatherings
- We shall consider the introduction of ‘prayer cells’ to enable two or three within the congregation to meet regularly to share prayer requests. Those who are unable to commit themselves in such a way, will be encouraged to identify one or two others within the congregation for whom they may covenant to pray.
- The church will continue to recognise and encourage the gifts, given to some members of the congregation, which equip them to disciple others. If required, formal training or opportunities for discussion of issues relating to discipleship will be provided so as to help supplement the ministry of those involved in discipling others.
- In recognition of the way in which God often uses personal difficulties and traumatic experiences in life as catalysts for spiritual growth, every effort will be made to provide confidential counselling, from a Christian perspective, for anyone who may be aware of God prompting them to work through unresolved issues in their lives.

B. Providing an effective forum for discipleship

While Sunday services provide unparalleled opportunities for teaching and grounding in God’s Word, it is appreciated that such occasions may not provide the most effective forum for discipleship. This limitation

will be addressed in the following ways:

- It is recognised that the majority of discipleship and spiritual growth occurs within less-formal pastoral groups. Although these naturally include the established fellowship groups, other smaller gatherings, performing a similar function, may also be considered under this heading. Whatever their remit, however, all such groups will involve the regular meeting of members for the purpose of:
 - fellowship
 - the study of scripture
 - the sharing of one another's burdens
 - intercessory prayer for one another
- In order to build on the sense of unity and common purpose shared by pastoral groups, we shall encourage the use of common bible study materials and topics for discussion at certain times during the year.
- In appreciation of the varied work patterns and pressures on time experienced by members of the congregation, a variety of groups may be offered, according to demand, some of which may meet at less conventional times of the week. Furthermore, we shall encourage creative ways of maintaining contact such as the use of email to disseminate prayer requests and discuss issues among members. In this way, it is hoped that pastoral groups may be made accessible to all who attend the church.
- Although pastoral groups provide an effective forum for many aspects of discipleship, it is appreciated that much spiritual growth occurs through the daily challenges with which we are confronted. In order to develop this principle, the leadership proposes to continue implementing its policy of devolving as much responsibility as possible to teams and individuals within the congregation. It is hoped that such a policy will provide ample opportunities for service to allow the gifts to flourish, with which God has equipped each one of us.

5. CONCLUSION

It is recognised by the leadership that it is not possible to promote discipleship by legislation since the most effective spiritual growth occurs through natural interactions between Christians at different stages of their walk with Christ. Our policy of discipleship is, therefore, intentionally non-prescriptive. Instead of formalising much of the discipleship that already occurs within our midst, our focus is on creating an effective community in which discipleship is further encouraged and opportunities for personal growth abound.

Although the cost of discipleship may occasionally appear uncompromising, it is the conviction of the leadership at Magdalen Road that, God empowers his people to attain the fullness of a relationship with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Only by reliance on God's grace and strength may we echo the words of the Apostle Paul:



Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

6. RECOMMENDED READING

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| Discipleship | David Watson (Hodder & Stoughton, 1981) |
| One to One | Stephen Gaukroger & David Warren (Crossway, 1987) |