The Congregation as a Discipleship System

Mission-Based Ministry in The United Methodist Church

Don Greer, Coordinator of Circuit Ministries
Dan R. Dick, Director of Connection Ministries
Wisconsin Conference
3 Biblical Terms for Congregation

- **ecclesia** (pronounced ek-LEE’-zee-ah) – a gathering together of believers, a congregation

- **koinonia** (pronounced coy-no-NEE’-ah) – communion by intimate participation; community defined by shared beliefs and commitments

- **oikos** – (pronounced OY’-kose) -- household, place of belonging, acceptance & responsibility
Perspectives
Resident in Every Church

Self-focused, self-centered
What’s in it for me?
Self-interest higher value than the common good.

Group/Tribe-focused
Us/Them mentality
Congregational
Good of group meets self-interest

Leadership

Personal Development/
Spiritual Formation
Competitive
“My church…”

Cultivation of Community
“We” more important than “me”
Connectional
Church exists to serve world

Provincial

Individual

Group

Global
Reflections on Perspectives

• Each “color” brings value to the congregation.
• Each “color” has both “virtue” and “shadow” sides.
• Each is what it is; be careful not to use value judgments.
• Perspectives are progressive and inclusive; relate to maturing in faith.
• Help each “color” be best it can be.
Questions for Discussion

• In your experience, which of the four perspectives is dominant in your congregation?

• What percentage/portion (estimate) of your congregation falls into each of the four perspectives?

• How might each perspective react/respond to a major change in your congregation?
8 Levels of Congregational Participation

**Passive Engagement** – those who come and receive and regularly seek to be fed, nurtured, comforted, cared for, and included. People at this level may attend many activities, but they do not fully participate or engage. They connect in a variety of ways, but as observers. They enjoy the community and fellowship that the faith provides.

**Active Connection** – those who join and attend on a regular basis, who place a moderate value on church as a necessary aspect of the Christian faith. At this level, the church is an organization to join or a place to go, but is not deeply integrated into the person’s sense of identity.

**Passive Connection** – those who join and keep a nominal relationship with the church, though they may not actively attend, give, or engage in more than the most basic spiritual practices (e.g., grace before meals, Bible on the bookshelf). Consider themselves “members,” but generally in name only.

**Belief** – the initial level of participation, where individuals make an affirmation that they believe in God, believe in Jesus Christ as God’s Son. May or may not ever connect with a formal body of believers at any level.
8 Levels of Congregational Participation

**Diakonia** – the Greek term from which our understanding of servant ministry springs. At this level, a person gives his/her entire life to Christian pursuits – engaging in prayer, study of scripture, service to those in need, teaching, and worship. This is the life that radical discipleship prepares the servant leader for.

**Radical Discipleship** – at this level, a person devotes his/her life to Christian service, generally accepting a vocation within a church, spiritual movement, or religious order. We view most pastors, priests, and church professionals in this category.

**Initial Discipleship** – those who make their faith a guiding priority in their daily living, engaging in developmental spiritual practices, and committing a significant amount of personal time, energy, and resources into spiritual growth and faith formation, and service to others. These are the people who assume leadership responsibility.

**Active Engagement** – those who actively pursue personal growth and development through formation activities, small groups, study, regular worship, and support of ministries and services to others. People at this level are in “sponge-mode” soaking up as much as they can to grow in their faith, preparing them for discipleship.
8 Levels of Congregational Participation

- Belief
- Passive Connection
- Active Connection
- Passive Engagement
- Active Engagement
- Initial Discipleship
- Radical Discipleship
- Diakonia
8 Levels of Congregational Participation – Downward Flow

Belief

Passive Connection

Active Connection

Passive Engagement

Active Engagement

Initial Discipleship

Radical Discipleship

Diakonia

Energy, Time, Resources from top to bottom

The more mature care for the less mature

The majority come as long as their needs are met

Very little incentive or energy for growth or change
8 Levels of Congregational Participation – Upward Flow

Energy, Time, Resources from bottom to top

Diakonia
Radical Discipleship
Initial Discipleship
Active Engagement
Passive Engagement
Active Connection
Passive Connection
Belief

Nurture and development happens at every level

The majority come for spiritual growth and personal development

High incentive for growth and change
Questions for Discussion

• Which direction is the energy flowing in your congregation?

• How might people at each of the eight levels answer the question “Why do you come to church?”

• What are the challenges/considerations to creating a congregational environment that reaches, connects and engages all eight levels of participation?
Discipleship

• Discipleship is a process of development and growth to become a Christian disciple.
• John Wesley believed that this process required works of personal piety as well as the practice of the means of grace – spiritual practices of the whole community of faith.
• Discipleship is a phase or stage of Christian development, not the goal.
Engaging the Concept

• Every congregation should discuss:
  1. What is a “disciple”?
  2. What is a disciple “for”?
  3. How is a disciple formed/made?
  4. Who makes a disciple?
  5. How do you know when a disciple is “finished”?
  6. What do you do with a disciple once you have one?
  7. What comes next?
Questions for Discussion

Think about having this discipleship discussion in your church. Some important questions to consider:

• How does a Christian “disciple” differ from a Christian “believer”?
• What are some core characteristics of a Christian disciple?
• What is the purpose of discipleship?
• What is your congregation’s process for “making disciples”?
Systems & Processes

• A system is a set of interacting sub-systems, processes, resources and parts that combine and align to produce **specific outcomes**.

• A process is a series of inputs, actions and outputs that allow a system to function.

• A system is designed for the results it gets; if you want different results, you need to change the system.
Sample Systems

• Laundry
• Human Body

Generally, we don’t think much about systems until they don’t work, which is often too late.

Think about the congregation as a system...
Questions for Discussion

• Name some of the sub-systems, processes, resources and parts that comprise a congregational system?
• What “outcomes” are we trying to produce through the system we call church?
• How do our sub-systems, processes, resources and parts align to produce these outcomes?
• What are some sub-systems/processes/resources/parts in your congregation that are not aligned or connected to these outcomes?
Biblical Reflection: I Cor. 12:12-26

- 12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.
Biblical Reflection: I Cor. 12:12-26

• 15 If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?
18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’
• 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this.
Biblical Reflection: I Cor. 12:12-26

• But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, \(^{25}\) that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. \(^{26}\) If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

NRSV
Biblical Reflection: Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16

• ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.
11The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.
Biblical Reflection:
Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16

- 14 We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. 15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
Biblical Reflection: Ephesians 4:4-7, 11-16

• 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.
Questions for Discussion

• What are the key processes and activities necessary to build and strengthen the body of Christ?
• How does your congregation help people discern and discover their place in the body of Christ?
• How does your congregation help people develop and strengthen their gifts and abilities for ministry?
The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”
Questions for Discussion

• Do you believe that the majority of people who show up at our churches are seeking to become disciples of Jesus Christ so that they can transform the world?
  • If no, why DO they come?
  • If yes, in what ways are their expectations met? Left unmet?

• What are the implications (positive and negative) for your congregation if you align your whole congregational system to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?”
The Process for Living Our Mission

• ¶ 122. The Process for Carrying Out Our Mission—
  We make disciples as we:
  —proclaim the gospel, seek, welcome and gather persons into the body of Christ;
  —lead persons to commit their lives to God through baptism by water and the spirit and profession of faith in Jesus Christ;
  —nurture persons in Christian living through worship, the sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace, such as Wesley’s Christian conferencing;
The Process for Living Our Mission

—send persons into the world to live lovingly and justly as servants of Christ by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, caring for the stranger, freeing the oppressed, being and becoming a compassionate, caring presence, and working to develop social structures that are consistent with the gospel; and

—continue the mission of seeking, welcoming and gathering persons into the community of the body of Christ.
The Process for Living Our Mission

UM Formational Process

Connect

Send

Engage

Equip
Questions for Discussion

• What is your response/reaction to ¶¶120/122 of the Book of Discipline?
• How would people at the eight levels of congregational participation respond to ¶¶120/122?
• What changes would your congregation face to align with this vision of the congregation as a discipleship system?
• What challenges would your congregation need to overcome? What kind of resources and support would you need to lead such a change?
Reframing the Congregation

Clarity
Focus
Alignment
Movement

Simple Church by Thomas Rainer and Eric Geiger
(B&H Publishing, 2006)
## Reframing the Congregation

### Disciple-Making Silos

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<td>Missions</td>
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<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>Bible Study</td>
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<td>Classes</td>
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Reframing the Congregation

Integrated Discipleship System

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The key question to ask of each ministry focus is, “How are we connecting, engaging, equipping, and sending?” There should be some aspect of the entire process at work in everything we do.
UMC Core Values

Excerpts from ¶ 121. Rationale for Our Mission—The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world... As we make disciples, we respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons...
UMC Core Values

God’s grace is active everywhere, at all times, carrying out this purpose as revealed in the Bible... It is experienced in the ongoing creation of a new people by the Holy Spirit. Whenever United Methodism has had a clear sense of mission, God has used our Church to save persons, heal relationships, transform social structures, and spread scriptural holiness, thereby changing the world. In order to be truly alive, we embrace Jesus’ mandate to love God and to love our neighbor and to make disciples of all peoples.
The three major traditions of The United Methodist Church -- The Methodist Church, The Evangelical Association, and the United Brethren in Jesus Christ -- share three core value focus areas:

- Evangelism
- Missions
- Social Justice

Our Christian Witness
UMC Heritage

• Other shared beliefs of our 3 traditions:
  – We do not hold our faith as a personal or private matter – United Methodists witness to our faith in the world.
  – We do not focus solely on our own needs, but we intentionally seek to meet the needs in the world.
  – We do not spend the majority of our time within our own fellowship, but serving and sharing in the world.

  *The church exists to BE Christ in the world.*
An excerpt from ¶124 of the Book of Discipline reminds us: We are called together for worship and fellowship and for the upbuilding of the Christian community. We advocate and work for the unity of the Christian church. We call all persons into discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As servants of Christ we are sent into the world to engage in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. We seek to reveal the love of God for men, women, and children of all ethnic, racial, cultural, and national backgrounds and to demonstrate the healing power of the gospel with those who suffer.
Questions for Discussion

• What other values are implicit in our denominational mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?
• What, if anything, do you believe our mission ignores or excludes?
• What are the dominant governing, guiding values in your congregation?
• What are some of the values/commitments listed in ¶¶122/124 that need more exploration and consideration in your congregation?
A Way Forward: Form Follows Function

• Summary –
  - A United Methodist congregation is a system designed to produce faithful disciples able to live their faith in the world to bring about positive change. (Outcome = disciples changing the world)
  - Discipleship does not happen accidentally. If our congregational system is not designed to make disciples and equip them to transform the world, we have the wrong system.
A Way Forward: Form Follows Function

• An effective discipleship system demands –
  1. A clear understanding of the purpose (mission) of the congregation.
  2. A clear understanding of the “make-up” of the congregation – who is seeking what, why do they come?
  3. A clear, shared definition of “discipleship”.
  4. Comprehension and understanding of the mission, vision and values of The United Methodist Church.
A Way Forward: Form Follows Function

• An effective discipleship system demands –
  5. Clearly defined, specific goals (outcomes) we seek to produce as a congregation.
  6. Careful and intentional alignment of our sub-systems, processes, resources and parts to produce Christian disciples and equip them to live a transforming faith in the world.
  7. A plan and process to help every person grow and develop spiritually at every level of participation and Christian maturity.
General Reflection

• Why is it important for congregations and circuits to continue this conversation and explore these questions?
Next Step Resources

1. Exploration and study of the 100 level paragraphs of the 2012 Book of Discipline.
2. Small Groups for Transformation training
3. Exploration of Wesleyan spiritual practices – both personal and corporate
4. Read and study *Simple Church*
5. Read and study *Vital Signs*
6. Develop a laity leadership cultivation plan
Questions for Discussion

• What have you found most helpful in today’s conversations and presentations?
• What have you found most challenging?
• What (be specific) will you take home and work on, share, discuss or explore in the next few days?
• What would you like your circuit to do with what we have explored today? What will you put on the next circuit meeting agenda? (If you are from a local church, what would you like your congregation’s leadership to talk about?)