

Fifty Characteristics of Disciple-Making Congregations

by Dean McIntyre

At The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, we invest a lot of time and energy in thinking and talking about what it means to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We also study congregations that we think are successfully engaged in that primary task. We recognize that disciples are not made at General Conference, in any general agency office, or in any bishop's cabinet meeting. Disciples are made in the local church, and the rest of us assist in that primary task in a variety of ways. Through offering training events and developing resources for use across the denomination, the General Board of Discipleship works with local church and annual conference leaders to help congregations in their disciple-making efforts.

In a recent e-mail message, I asked the entire staff of our agency, "What are the characteristics or activities of a local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?" I asked my colleagues not to respond with explanations, philosophy, theology, or theories. I really wanted short, specific, and practical answers to the question. There were nearly 100 responses with some duplicates. I have eliminated the duplicate responses and ordered the replies under different areas: Worship and Hospitality, Ministry of the Laity, Mission-Outreach-Evangelism, Nurture, Christian Faith and Life, Education and Training, and Small Groups. Similar responses with slightly different content have been grouped together under one response.

I invite you to consider your own congregation in light of these characteristics. I also invite you to send additional characteristics that don't appear on this list to music@gbod.org.

Worship and Hospitality

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

1. Engages in vital worship that helps worshipers encounter the presence, love, grace, call, forgiveness, comfort, power, and peace of God.
2. Welcomes visitors.
 - a. Visitors become active members.
 - b. There is an open door policy. The congregation sees itself as a hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints.
 - c. Empty seat and open door.
3. Worships with eyes open to needs and circumstances around the church (with the intent of being the embodiment of Christ wherever needed).
4. Keeps the light of Christ out front like a beacon.
5. Offers numerous points of entry into congregational life.
6. Loves and affirms those whose lives don't measure up to conventional standards of intelligence, beauty, success, or morality.
7. Encourages and affirms diversity.
8. Shares Communion every time it meets in worship.
9. Is small enough to welcome and large enough to serve others.

Ministry of the Laity

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

10. Emphasizes that all are called to ministry through baptism.
11. Stresses impact awareness. Leaders within the congregation have a plan for growth and development, and they qualitatively measure the impact (value) of what they do in faith formation.
12. Has an outward focus. People do not exist to serve the institutional church; rather, the institution exists to equip, train, and support people to be the church in the world.
13. Ensures that empowerment isn't just a buzzword, but central to a truly "gifts-based" ministry where the clergy's gifts are counted equally with those of laity to provide a foundation for leadership based in gifts rather than structure.
 - a. Equips people to discover and use their spiritual gifts in ministry.
 - b. Assists people in identifying spiritual gifts.
14. Delegates ministry responsibility to visit members who are sick, hospitalized, in nursing homes, or convalescing at home.

Mission-Outreach-Evangelism

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

15. Helps members see that their primary place of ministry is beyond the church walls.
 - a. Ensures that the church is involved in the community in which it resides.
 - b. Serves the community in practical ways to convince people of God's love for the world.
 - c. Values community.
 - d. Gets out in the community and REALLY reaches and accepts people where they are.
 - e. Reaches out to others in the community.
 - f. Leans into the hope of God that God's mission is bigger than our own limited sight/plan.
 - g. Believes that community matters.
 - h. Ushers each person into a safe place within community to grow faithfully.
 - i. Involves people in service and outreach (works of mercy).
16. Lives what it proclaims; extends its worship and witness to the community(ies) outside its walls.
17. Engages members in local and global mission outreach.
18. Does more for others than for itself.
19. Reaches the lost
20. Witnesses

Nurture

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

21. Nurtures and equips people through vital worship, active small groups, and challenging outreach opportunities.
22. Cares for one another.
23. Respects each person for being a child of God (not outward signs of power or position).
24. Has leaders who know the names and faces of all members.

Christian Faith and Life

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

25. Provides opportunities for personal growth and spiritual formation of its members' progressive journey.
There is a clear, mentored structure that moves people to ever deeper, broader experiences of living and learning the Christian faith.
26. Helps people develop language for talking about God in their lives
27. Engages people "where they live" and starts the journey from that point; Welcomes folks as they are.
28. Prays often (corporately and privately).
29. Helps people study the Bible and apply its truths to daily life.
30. Teaches people how to pray and encourages prayer;
Teaches formative spiritual practices, such as prayer and devotional study.
31. Practices spiritual disciplines, intentionally and corporately.
 - a. Practices the means of grace.
 - b. Equips and encourages people to practice spiritual disciplines (works of piety).
32. Regularly makes clear, specific, and consistent assertions of beliefs.
33. Guides new converts into a personal relationship with God that creates holy, righteous living.
34. Is authentic; walks the talk.
35. Practices good stewardship for all ages.
36. Encounters and is empowered by God in worship, in study and in action, and in all the means of grace.
The church is more concerned with relating people to God in supporting Christian community than it is with comparative statistics, profits, and safety margins.
37. Attends to justice and advocacy issues as well as mercy and compassion.
38. Exhibits the ability to think and act theologically.
39. Connects with God in everything it does.
40. Gathers as a community of faith and scatters as a community of hope.
41. Believes in asking questions and discerning answers together.
42. Makes certain that people know and experience God.
43. Believes that discipleship means more than membership.
44. Preaches, follows, and introduces Christ to others in a changing way.
45. Knows the theory behind faith development and human development (Kohlberg, Paiget, etc.) and plans a systematic way of congregational life that moves people along the progressions of faith and human development.
46. Clearly understands the fruits of the spirit, the importance of practicing faithful disciplines, and holds people accountable for growth in and practice of faith.

Education and Training

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

47. Offers appropriate and effective age-level Christian education and spiritual formation.
 - a. Offers Bible-based Sunday school classes.
 - b. Offers Bible study; isn't past-time; it's shared praxis.
 - c. Teaches the faith.
 - d. Offers Bible study that is both deep and wide.
48. Engages conversations among children, youth, and adults in order to discuss (and dive deeply) into lively conversation about faith, theology, ethics, moral behavior, and so on.

Small Groups

A local United Methodist congregation that is actively and successfully engaged in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world . . .

49. Offers small groups.
 - a. Offers content-oriented small groups.
 - b. Has class meetings or Covenant Discipleship groups.
 - c. Offers spiritual formation small groups.
 - d. Provides small-group settings for accountable discipleship.
 - e. Has small groups dedicated to study: Bible, church history, current affairs.
 - f. Expects participation in small groups that includes mutual accountability and support for growing in love of God and neighbor.
50. Offers high commitment intimacy groups. *(I'm avoiding using the term "small group" as much as I can. Faith formation happens best in dialogic settings. Worship is important, especially when it is focused on God [and not merely a tool for evangelism or education], but discipling is an interactive process best handled in smaller settings.)*

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Posted 6-2-04