

CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY

DISCIPLESHIP

by Chris Wilterdink



UMCyoungpeople.org



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, “*Hope you don’t crash!*” as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:

UMCyoungpeople.org/CrashCourses

Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries’ store at: store.UMCdiscipleship.org/product-category/elearning

INTRODUCTION

I REMEMBER THE INTERVIEW PROCESS FOR MY FIRST YOUTH DIRECTOR JOB SO CLEARLY.

The church had a clear job-description that listed all sorts of programming responsibilities, followed by a lengthy interview process. Round one included a written application; round two was an in-person interview with the search committee that included youth representatives. Round three was a full-blown, in-person sample youth group activity that included question-and-answer time afterward with any interested parents; then round 4 (yes, finally!) was a sit-down interview with the pastoral team and other church staff with whom I would interact regularly.

Needless to say, the process was exhausting. Reflecting on the many steps that church took to find a quality youth worker who was the “right fit,” I was asked so many questions...“What kind of a leader are you? How will you make sure my child feels welcome at youth group? What kinds of activities are you most comfortable leading? What scares or concerns you about taking on this role? Would you tell us about your theology? Can you do any great impressions?” (At the time, I had a solid Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*. I’m sure that’s what put me over the top in receiving the



job offer.) However, one thing I was never asked in that whole process (and honestly, I don't think many of us are ever asked) was, "How do you help make disciples?"

The concept of discipleship can feel as difficult as nailing Jell-o to a tree because we may not have a shared understanding of what it means to be a disciple, let alone how to help make one. Yet, so many of our churches use Matthew 28:19 (Go and make disciples...) as part of a mission or vision statement. Knowing how you (and your church) define discipleship, why faith formation is important in your context, and how spiritual growth is recognized and celebrated should be an integral part of ministry plans with young people.

This crash course will help you to define discipleship and create systems to encourage spiritual growth so that Matthew 28:19 becomes something you can really do, as opposed to just printing it out and hanging it on the wall like a really out-of-place motivational poster. Discipleship can't be an afterthought in your youth ministry planning. It needs to be part of your ministry's "why" and influence the plans that you create on behalf of young people and their families.

01 DEFINING DISCIPLESHIP

WHY TAKE THE TIME TO DEFINE DISCIPLESHIP IN YOUR CONTEXT AND IN YOUR YOUTH MINISTRY?

Well, just like God has many names throughout scripture that highlight different aspects of God's nature, discipleship has many expressions. Why and how disciples live out their faith will vary from congregation to congregation. What aspects of discipleship you introduce and encourage young people to act on will also shape the impact your youth ministry has in the lives of young people and their families. If you are uncertain how your church defines "discipleship" or how your church believes a disciple should live their faith...start asking! Ask the pastor, other church staff, and church leaders what discipleship means to them and how they are already supporting church members and the community to grow in a life of faith.

If you ask these questions and get confused stares (which you are used to getting as a youth leader!) or responses like, "That's a great question, let's explore that together," consider pulling these definitions and examples out to wow others and keep that conversation moving. (Condensed and refined from an earlier book of mine, *Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship with Youth*)



8 Ways to Understand Discipleship

- Jesus' earliest followers accepted his invitation to "Follow me" (Matt. 4:18-22 and John 1:35-43). This invitation to discipleship meant setting aside one way of "doing life" in order to follow the life and teachings of Christ.
- Jesus gets called "Rabbi" (which means teacher) a lot. (Matt. 23, Mark 9:5, 11:21, 14:45, and John 1:49, 4:31, 6:25, 9:2 and 11:8) The disciples learned by going where their teacher went, so discipleship means being willing to learn more and be humble in the pursuit of a Christ-like life.
- Jesus sends his disciples out to engage in ministry (Matt. 10 and Luke 10) — and he doesn't send them alone. John Wesley (Sermon 24, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Discourse 4") says, "Christianity is essentially a social religion and to turn it into a solitary one is to destroy it." We could interpret that quote several ways, but for discipleship, let's focus on two takes: (1) Disciples enjoy fellowship and do God's work with one another's support; (2) Discipleship means getting out into the world to do social good.
- Jesus spends time with people on the margins of the society of his time (Luke 15:2, Mark 2:15-16, Matt 25:40). Discipleship means getting outside of the walls of a church building and lifting up the vulnerable, the voiceless, and the poor.

- Years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Philippians 2:5 asks for disciples to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Discipleship involves becoming familiar with Jesus' teachings and life.
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 uses the metaphor of disciples each living as part of the body of Christ, so discipleship means being part of a community.
- Disciples are Christ's ambassadors to the world (2 Cor. 5:20), so discipleship means that the world learns about Christ's love and God's grace through our words and actions.
- Disciples recognize themselves as members of God's family (Eph. 1:3-14; 2:19-22; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:4-7) so discipleship involves recognizing spiritual growth in others and inviting those outside the church into God's family.

Discipleship, as a noun, can have many different definitions and expressions. Learn how your church already defines discipleship by asking questions of others in the community. Discipleship always begins with what God has done for us and longs to do in and through us. So, discipleship always calls us to action. Exploring how disciples act and grow because of their experiences in your youth ministry will guide you in creating more frequent and meaningful opportunities across your plans.

How youth act (and react) because of the formation opportunities that you provide in your youth ministry is

important. How can your approach to making disciples in a Methodist or Wesleyan context be theologically rooted in John Wesley's observations? The short answer is that our faith is about *believing and doing*, and our [***Crash Courses in Youth Ministry: United Methodist Heritage & Beliefs***](#) dives deeper into what exactly that means.

02 INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESHIP SYSTEMS

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES OFTEN SHARE COMMON LANGUAGE IN MISSION OR VISION STATEMENTS ABOUT DISCIPLES AND DISCIPLESHIP. IN FACT, THE MISSION OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IS TO “MAKE DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD.”

Many denominations could claim that general idea as their “why” for existing in the first place. Without going too far down the rabbit hole, it will serve you and your youth ministry well to remember that God is the one who makes disciples...we are the ones who get to help form disciples. We can shape discipleship experiences by equipping and empowering youth for their own growth. We can also do everything we can to help the church provide many opportunities for disciples to grow and mature in their faith. Much of what is found in this section is condensed from Developing an Intentional *Discipleship System: A Guide for Youth Ministry* from Discipleship Ministries.

One of the ways to positively affect the personal discipleship journeys of your youth as well as your church’s approach to discipleship is to create and live into an intentional discipleship system. The word



“system” can throw some people off; there are churches that use language like “milestones,” “pathways,” and more. If you’ve heard about a “discipleship pathway,” we’re talking about the same idea. Since this is a crash course, we’re just touching on the basics of this concept. That said, there is plenty to read and learn at www.SeeAllThePeople.org—along with current examples of discipleship systems from real, actual, local churches!

Here is the short, short version on Intentional Discipleship Systems (IDS):

- **Intentional** (*We do things on purpose*)
- **Discipleship** (*We effect change in the way people live out their faith*)
- **System** (*We organize our ministry in a way that maximizes the chances for positive transformation*)

You as a leader operate on limited time, limited energy, and limited funding. Therefore, it makes the most sense for you to put your efforts behind ministry that leads to transformation. By knowing *WHY* every part of your ministry exists, you can organize your ministry in a way that positively transforms youth’s ability to know God and live out their faith.

I like to use the example of coffee to approach the idea of discipleship. I do this because many youth ministers have a (minor) addiction to coffee, and coffee is a nearly universally experienced beverage. First, it is important to know why you’re making the coffee in the first place. You need to get started first thing in

the morning? Afternoon energy? Hosting a gathering and it is expected? Fueling up the fellowship time after a worship service? The answer to that question will inform what kind of coffee you get, how you brew it, and, of course, how it is served. Of course, that is in addition to knowing what kind of coffee you actually like and would drink! Coffee beans, just like people, take on characteristics from where they grow. Those characteristics are enhanced by transformational processes. For coffee beans, that means roasting, grinding, and eventually brewing. For people, the transformation happens through practicing spiritual disciplines, experiencing the warmth of fellowship or of the Holy Spirit, and steeping in the formational discipleship experiences that the church can offer.

Finally, have you ever had a cup of coffee that you didn't like!? I know I have. Have you ever met people who identify themselves as Christian that you don't like!? I know I have. Yet, that coffee has—and those people have—gone through a transformation process to become what and who they are. For me, this reinforces the need to be intentional about transformation opportunities you offer through your church's discipleship system. You want to more frequently be able to help shape disciples who positively transform the world and reflect your church's mission, vision, and values.

If you're interested in organizing an intentional discipleship system and would like to learn more, please explore links listed previously in this section.

03 MISSION, VISION, AND STRATEGY

I FIND MANY PEOPLE USING THE TERMS, "MISSION," "VISION," AND "STRATEGY" INTERCHANGEABLY. THEY ARE ACTUALLY VERY DIFFERENT.

Mission is *WHY* we exist in the first place. *Vision* is *WHAT* we expect to create because of our ministry efforts. *Strategy* is *HOW* we will turn our vision into a reality. As a youth ministry leader, it is important to both understand and easily share the mission, vision, and strategy of your ministry. I also encourage youth ministry leaders to ensure that their mission, vision, and strategies align well with the goals of their church, locally and within a denomination.

Knowing and living out your mission and vision by using effective strategies will increase the odds that you create meaningful and transformational experiences for youth. It also can guide the ongoing formational pieces of ministry that you offer to youth and their families. One of the strengths of the local church is the ability to form ongoing relationships that meet new needs over the course of time. This means that as disciples grow through the intentional discipleship system, they may experience the same activities but understand them in new ways because of their growth.



If you are unsure of where to begin with mission, go ahead and borrow the United Methodist Church's mission: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world." If you are unsure of where to begin with vision, (*WHAT* you expect to produce), consider these three starting places.

Disciples Who Recognize and Celebrate Spiritual Maturity

This is something that the whole church can do better. Spiritual maturity is not tied to age; rather, it is tied to experiences and expressions of faith. Amazing things happen when people can both recognize and celebrate growth in their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Disciples Who Demonstrate the Great Commandment

How frequently and creatively do the youth involved in your ministry demonstrate their love for God and their love for neighbor? In John Wesley's terms, these would be called the "Acts of Piety" (love for God) and "Acts of Mercy" (love for neighbor)—[Chuck Knows Church has a great video short on these!](#)

Disciples Who Practice Their Theology

Video games used to come with instructions; kids would read the instructions and then play the game. Too many churches still use this model with faith. Apps and video games now offer in-game tutorials and social support; learning how to play happens while the game is played.

Faith can work the same way. Offer opportunities to reflect and learn from faith experiences as they take place and encourage youth to put their faith into action.

04 REMEMBER, YOU ARE A DISCIPLE TOO

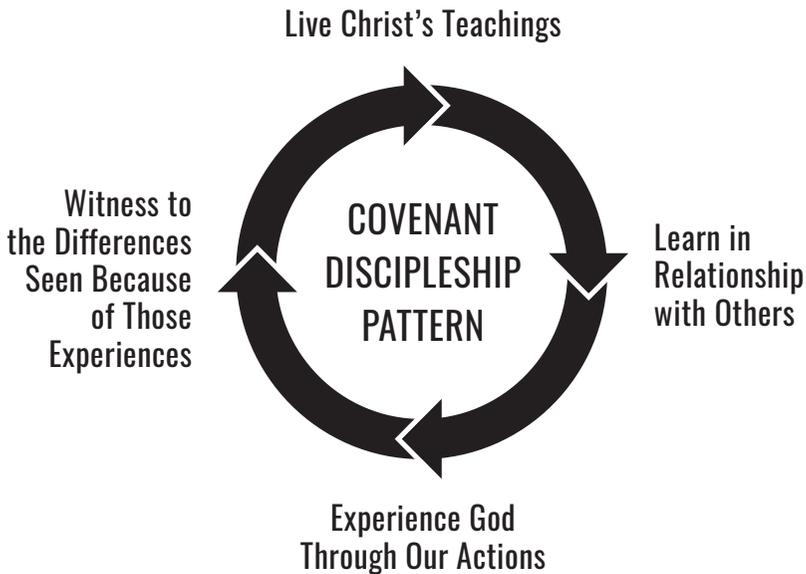
LEADING A YOUTH MINISTRY CAN MAKE IT EASY TO FORGET ABOUT YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT.

I know, tough pill to swallow. You grow and change as you lead, so you'd better go ahead and be intentional about that growth as well. Do some of the same activities that you ask youth and their families to do in your intentional discipleship system. Make sure you're spending time with God and reflecting on the changes in you because of your experiences in ministry. Find times and places where you are not required to lead. I know, that suggestion is a tough one. Do you stay in your own church or have the energy to seek something outside of your local church? Sometimes, peer groups can be a lifesaver on this front. It is important to have a community where you are known by name and celebrated for who you are and find spiritual support, especially when that community doesn't let your label of "youth minister" supersede everything else.

Just like the youth you lead, remember that words are important—but what really makes a difference is seeing someone practice what they preach. A healthy faith is a dynamic and growing faith.



Part of your personal discipleship may include time for [self-care and sabbath; lucky for you, we have a crash course on that as well!](#) If you find yourself pressed for time, and other ministry needs take priority over your own discipleship, consider employing this covenant discipleship pattern:



You can start this process any time and involve it directly in what you already do in ministry. Living Christ's teachings is an essential aspect of discipleship, and this circular and repeating pattern will encourage transformation. Be as intentional with your own discipleship as you are with the young people you care for in ministry.

CONCLUSION

DISCIPLESHIP CAN AND SHOULD LOOK DIFFERENT FROM CHURCH TO CHURCH.

The discipleship pathway or system that you create should be intentionally organized to encourage transformational and formational opportunities for young people. Remember, God makes disciples. We are blessed by the opportunity to help form those disciples. Remember to care for your own discipleship and spiritual growth as you help others walk in the way that leads to life.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [*One Body: Integrating Teenagers into the Life of Your Church*](#) by Sam Halverson (The Youth Cartel, 2014)
- [*Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship with Youth*](#) by Chris Wilterdink
- [PDF Download - “John Wesley’s Question: How Is Your Doing?”](#) by David Werner, 2010

