

Methods of Congregational Discipleship

1st Annual ADC Assembly – Columbus, OH

April 7-8, 2017

Paul A. Miller

This is the second in a series of three addresses on *Congregational Discipleship*, the theme of this first ADC Annual Assembly. We first heard Bill Mullet present *A Vision of For Congregational Discipleship*. Now we will consider *Methods of Congregational Discipleship*, which will be followed by James Yoder's address on *Delivering Congregational Discipleship*.

After gaining a vision for congregational discipleship, the next step is to consider which methods a congregation might choose to effectively disciple one another. To reach the goal of meaningful, personal interaction, members must interact personally. This topic will explore various methods of effective discipleship within a congregation. This is not intended to be a passionate appeal with a call to action like you might deliver to your congregation on a Sunday morning. It is intended to be a more analytical look at various methods of congregational discipleship, like one might present to a gathering of church leaders on a Saturday morning.

The first topic in this series, *A Vision of Congregational Discipleship*, presented conceptual principles regarding discipleship that need some "soak time" for absorption. Perhaps your congregation might not even be ready to hear a sermon like that on a Sunday morning, without laying some groundwork first. This second topic is an effort to transition from the broad picture and break down discipleship principles into digestible bites. How can we establish congregational discipleship?

"The Times, They Are a Changin,'" said a writer describing the cultural revolution in America during the 1960s. By the 21st century, we see that not only is the change continuing, it's occurring more rapidly. As church leaders, we acknowledge that the rapid change in our times is impacting our congregations in new ways. Methods of church administration that served us well for past decades are being rendered obsolete by the digital age in which we now live. As church leaders, we can no longer rely on pre-internet-age methodology of regulating behavior by regulating devices. To prepare our people for life in our times, we must reduce our dependency on structure and regulation, and switch our focus to the development of heartfelt spiritual conviction that arises out of a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ, matched with close discipleship within the church. It is our conviction that this is what it will take for our churches to survive and prosper in these times. We should not think only in terms of survival. These changing times are "opportunity time" for Anabaptists who are leading lifestyles in sharp contrast to the decadence of our culture. This is a time for us to be on the offensive and promote meaningful alternatives through New Testament living in a culture that is getting increasingly godless in their search for meaning in life.

This is why the heartbeat of the ADC affiliation is promoting biblical discipleship. We believe our effectiveness as a Christian witness in our culture will rise or fall based upon this issue. Our survival and effectiveness as a cross-culture witness

will depend on how well we implement congregational discipleship. This goes beyond a focus on a vibrant relationship with the Lord Jesus. We must also relate with one another on such a personal level that we will hold each other accountable, overcoming our tendencies to love other things more than God and ourselves more than our neighbors. To the degree we overcome these tendencies through effective discipleship of each other, we will be an effective witness in this generation and the generations to come. So I repeat, congregational discipleship is the heartbeat of what our affiliation *Anabaptist Disciples of Christ* is about. This topic will address two aspects of congregational discipleship: first some biblical underpinnings of congregational discipleship, then some practical methods that we might use.

Five biblical underpinnings for congregational discipleship

Underpinnings are what tie things together at the foundational level. What are some biblical underpinnings for congregational discipleship?

1. Equipping disciples Ephesians 4:11-12

Is church on Sunday morning for the benefit of those who have never heard the Gospel and will be saved by coming to church? Or is church for those who are saved and will benefit from discipleship? While unbelievers will certainly benefit from attending church services, a primary purpose of regular services is for a congregation to equip its members for Christian service. We must move from our mindset that church ministry is done primarily by the church leaders.

To make this point, we will consider Ephesians 4:11-12 in the King James Version, which hinges on a point of grammar--a misplaced comma. In verse 11 Paul writes, "*And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.*" Note that this verse describes the various teaching types that God gave to the church. Verse 12 explains the purpose of these teachers that were given to the church, "*For the perfecting of the saints (note this comma), for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*" As read in the KJV, this seems to describe a dual role for apostles, prophets, evangelist, pastors, and teachers, who are 1) for the perfecting of the saints, and 2) for the work of the ministry. That is, these individuals are the those who perform the work of ministry.

Other versions such as the ESV, the NIV, and the ASV (American Standard Version--probably the most literal word for word translation), have correctly removed the comma between the two phrases "For the perfecting of the saints(,) for the work of the ministry. What difference does this make? In the ESV, these two verses read, "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry.*" Note that in the correct reading, the ordained brethren are to equip the saints for the work of ministry. That is, the emphasis is that not only the ordained, but all the members of our churches (saints) are to be engaged in the work of ministry, if properly equipped. The misplaced comma in the KJV leads us to shift responsibility for verse 12 to the church leaders, which leads to an uninvolved, idle laity.

In summary, it is your and my responsibility on Sunday mornings to equip the people in our congregation for the work of ministry. When they walk out the doors of our church houses and interact with those who do not know Christ, they must be trained, not only in skills but in heart to minister and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In this sense, people should be saved outside of the church, then brought into the church to be nurtured. I acknowledge that this point is being overstated for effect, but it's to emphasize the biblical pattern. Church leaders are to equip the saints. The saints are to perform works of ministry. The spiritual gifts God gives to the church should not exclude the laity, but include them in ministry.

2. Making disciples

Making disciples of the people in our congregations is a path to sustainability for our system of bi-vocational ministers. In previous generations, ordained leaders preached when it was their turn, "kept house" in the church, and seemingly had sufficient time to earn their living, with minimal church work. In our day, there has been a dramatic escalation in the expectation for pastoral care among the people in our pews, but we have kept the same bi-vocational model. We're seeing more and more casualties, both among our members and our pastors, because there simply isn't enough time to reach around.

Drawing all members into congregational discipleship is the push back against this debilitating pastoral busyness by spreading out the work of ministry among all members. Making disciples is actually the primary objective of the Great Commission. We often emphasize "go ye

into all the world," and while going is certainly a part, the focus of going is "making disciples," through evangelism and post-conversion discipleship.

Discipleship is community based. The point of "church" is not just personal growth, within the context of a group. The individual person is not the focal point. The church is the body of Jesus commissioned to carry out his intentions on earth. The staggering reality is that we cannot actually do the will of Jesus on our own. Jesus does things in His body that he cannot do through a particular member alone.

As Paul explained, no single member of the body does everything. The hand needs the foot. Both need the eyes. If the whole body were an eye, how would it hear? If the whole were hearing, how would it smell? And so on. This is one of the underpinnings of congregational discipleship.

3. Safe discipleship

Another underpinning is safe discipleship. It should come as no surprise that those seated in our congregations are far from perfect and are undergoing chastening from God to perfect their Christian character and to help them grow in Christ. Given this reality, we should expect that there will be times when confessions must be made, forgiveness sought, and restitution made. Our congregations must create an environment where it is safe to confess sins and seek restoration. Is your congregation a safe place? Do your members feel it is safe to confess sin in a Sunday morning service? A safe haven in church is an underpinning of congregational discipleship.

4. Historic Anabaptist discipleship—every member functioning in the church

Peter Hoover, writing about early Anabaptists in *The Secret of Their Strength*, stated, “Tragically, Luther and the other reformers violently denounced Anabaptists for practicing ‘every member functioning in the church.’ The Anabaptists believed it was every member’s right to stand up and speak at a meeting. For them, teaching ministry was not solely the domain of the clergy. Luther was vehemently opposed to this practice. He said it came from the pit of hell, and those that were guilty of it should be put to death.”

Since the time of Luther’s denouncement, there has been a gradual shift in Anabaptist practice to where it is quite common today for the ordained brethren to exercise spiritual gifts while every member sits silently in the pew and is lauded for not causing trouble. Note that congregational discipleship is not a call to abdicate church leadership. It’s not a call for the breakdown of church authority, but it is a call to return to “every member functioning in the church.” Every member should be exercising their gifts within the church.

5. Making disciples like Jesus did

The way Jesus made disciples could be illustrated by concentric circles, with Jesus in the center circle. Jesus had an inner circle of three disciples, Peter, James, and John, illustrated in the second circle. Then He had His 12 disciples, in the third circle. Next were the 70 missionary disciples He sent out. Then 120 early believers, followed by 3000 converts at Pentecost, all in ever-widening circles.

It’s not that Jesus had no alternatives to intense small-group discipleship. Large crowds followed Him constantly, with an

ever-present opportunity for mass discipleship. But His approach was to impact a few, and disciple them deeply, so they were able to impact a few more and effectively disciple others. Effective discipleship creates a ripple effect.

Jesus spent more time with an inner circle of three than with the entire group of 12 disciples, drawing the three into His most intimate events. When Jairus’ daughter was raised from the dead, the inner circle was present. They were present at his transfiguration. He took the inner circle with him to pray in Gethsemane during his time of greatest need and vulnerability.

Notice how Jesus poured himself deeply into the life of Peter, then moved him to do the same, creating the ripple effect that led to one of the inner circle preaching to 3000 converts on Pentecost. This was made possible by Jesus’ deep discipleship of Peter. In our congregational discipleship, we should pay attention to the way Jesus did it. Impact a few, and disciple them deeply, so they are able to impact a few more to effectively disciple others.

Five practical methods of congregational discipleship

We now shift to a more practical discussion of various methods of congregational discipleship. Here this topic becomes more subjective and speculative. Many of you may already be engaging in one or another of these methods, with more experience and anecdotal evidence than I have. We will consider five methods: small congregations, men’s meetings, accountability groups, mentoring, and small groups. We will cover them in that order, ending with small groups because that’s probably one that could go on and on.

1. Small congregations

Intentionally limiting the number of members in a congregation is one method of encouraging congregational discipleship. In small congregations, it is more likely for every member to feel needed and useful, and interact more closely. Congregational size can be limited by transplanting churches, forming sister congregations in or out of the local area. Or churches can be planted by sending a limited number of members into an unchurched area. In either situation, it is important to note the distinction between a church plant and a transplant.

When congregations have outgrown their buildings and are considering adding to their church house, that is a good time to consider limiting their size. Generally when we think about optimum church size, we are thinking about number of members who attend.

Interestingly, optimum congregational size for effective discipleship is not primarily a statistical question. Today most Americans are gravitating toward churches of less than 50 members or over 1000 members. A 2004 Gallup poll on fellowship found that the quality of fellowship and church size are not as closely unrelated as might be assumed. They found the quality of church leadership was more important than the size of the congregation.

It really should come as no surprise that the quality of our fellowship is more related to effective church leadership than to the square footage of the church house. Ironically, members of large megachurches reported more intimate fellowship than small- to mid-sized congregations, probably because congregational discipleship is more

intentional in megachurches. The church members who were surveyed reported that 98% of “church satisfaction” comes from meaningful relationships in church, as measured by the number of intimate Christian friends at any point in time. Note that it was not dynamic preaching or incisive Bible study that created church satisfaction, but Christian friends interacting on an intimate level.

The number two predictor of church satisfaction was the opportunity to minister to others, the opportunity to be something more than a listener. So we may conclude that while limiting congregational size and square footage may impact the church in positive ways, it does not guarantee effective congregational discipleship.

Optimum church size is dictated somewhat by the number of people needed to carry out all its functions, such as ushering, Sunday School teaching, food committee work, etc. We know how many people it takes to fill all our church offices and make our congregations operate smoothly. The point is that when we limit the number of members who are twiddling their thumbs with no active role in the church, they feel more involved. Members with church duties are generally more committed to congregational life, while disengaged members become more peripheral. While keeping congregations small may be helpful, we must not forget that other factors weigh heavily into effective congregational discipleship as well.

2. Men’s meetings

The family is the primary discipleship unit in the church. Fathers are the discipleship leaders in their homes. Men’s meetings might be defined as an effective method to indirectly disciple families through the

fathers. Men's meetings are most effective when held regularly. If they are convened only when there are problems to be discussed, they will tend toward calcification and polarization, rather than discipleship. Conducting regularly scheduled men's meetings even when there are no important issues on the agenda will build a base of relationship capital that makes them more effective when there are serious matters to discuss.

3. Accountability meetings

Accountability meetings came to us primarily as a safeguard against internet misuse. In this sense they are an important method of congregational discipleship, though they can serve a wider purpose as well, so long as their primary use is not disregarded. The acronym S.P.A.C.E. illustrates some important principles for effective accountability meetings. The S stands for "same sex," the P for "prayer," the A for "accountability," the C for "confession," and the E for "equally yoked in passion."

S is for "same sex." There are issues that are easier to tackle among only those of the same gender. This does not mean hiding things from spouses, though it may involve shielding them when it's prudent. Accountability can also extend to overcoming negligence and weakness in spiritual leadership by the father. In this area, same-sex friends can help lift a burden off their marriages and cause the men to grow.

P is for prayer. There is power in pointed prayer for pointed issues when done together.

A is for accountability.

C is for confession. We often see confession as something we do privately between ourselves and God. In the New Testament, confession is couched in the context of fellowship. When we also confess to other people, this transparency makes us come out of the shadows and walk in the light. Such confession requires a tight group of safe and comfortable friends with which you can be brutally honest. Such vulnerability may make us uneasy. It can't be done with just anyone, but requires a trusting relationship with safe, mature friends who can handle honest confession and are committed themselves to being held accountable in the same way.

E is for equally yoked in passion. All members of an accountability group must be committed in order for it to work.

4. Mentoring

Mentoring is another method of congregational discipleship. While it is a more one-on-one process, it should not be overlooked as a method of discipleship. The Apostle Paul constantly mentored younger men in the faith, preparing them for Christian ministry of their own. "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ," he told his followers. Mentors are continually expanding their circle by equipping others to mentor individuals or small groups.

5. Small groups.

There is a wide range of experience among us regarding small groups. One person told me, "Our small group is the main reason we attend this church." Another said, "Our small groups caused our church to split." So it may be safely concluded that small groups in and of themselves are neither a cure-all, nor a culprit. They're merely a means to an end.

The end is intimate interaction within groups of people small enough to disciple one another, organized across the entire congregation. Questions regarding how to start effective small groups are many and varied. How do we go about implementing small groups? How does a congregation prepare for small groups? How small is a small group? How are members selected? How are leaders selected? How do small groups interact with the larger group, the church? All these questions and more must be thought through and properly planned in order for small groups to be effective in discipling their members. While many helpful resources are available, the most important aspect is to ensure that small groups have good leaders who stay in alignment with the vision and mission of the mother church.

We have considered these underpinnings and methods of congregational discipleship. The next topic, "Delivering Congregational Discipleship," by James Yoder, will pick up where this one ends.

Paul A. Miller
Walnut Creek, OH