



Discipleship Tracking & Equipping

Introduction

I recently paid a service to find the top questions people ask about various topics related to my ministry. The #1 question about discipleship was: “How do you define discipleship?” It’s clear that many people are confused about what discipleship is and how to practice it.

This question didn’t surprise me. Since 1997, I’ve been asking the same thing and working with different churches to define and implement discipleship systems. Here’s what I’ve learned: no two churches agree on what discipleship means or how to achieve it. This disparity is puzzling, given the clear command in Matthew 28:18-20 to “make disciples.”

The issue is that “making disciples” is both simple and complex. It involves:

1. Defining who should be disciplined.
2. Identifying who does the discipling.
3. Setting goals for discipleship.
4. Establishing the process.
5. Creating a supporting structure.
6. Measuring success.
7. Ensuring reproducibility.

Discipleship is meant to be a process where followers of Jesus help others come to know Him, support their growth through the Holy Spirit, and guide them to fulfill their God-given purpose. But defining it raises several questions:

1. Is discipleship the responsibility of individual Christians or many Christians together?
2. Is it a relational process or something that can be programmed?
3. Is it a passive or active function?
4. How do we measure spiritual maturity?
5. Is discipleship intellectual, spiritual, or emotional?

Many churches focus on Sunday services and small groups, but often lack structured and intentional discipleship systems. They argue that attendance is proof of success, but attendance alone doesn’t equate to true discipleship.

Effective discipleship should be a life-long process practiced individually, within relationships, and supported by church leadership. The NextSteps program by AssessME.org aims to support this holistic approach.

So, how do I define discipleship? It's everyone's job to both be a disciple and to make disciples. No one is exempt, especially church leaders, who should lead by example. But it is clear that churches require a support system if they are to truly become intentional about inter-personal disciple-making.

Learning from History

Since the mid-80s, churches like Willow Creek have popularized Seeker Sensitive ministry models, leading to the rise of large and mega-churches. While these models attract crowds, they often struggle to make real disciples. In 2005, George Barna highlighted this issue in his letter "New Direction," noting:

“The most discouraging study we ever conducted was one in which we attempted to identify churches in the U.S. that consistently and intelligently evaluate life transformation among the people to whom they minister. We found that very few churches measure anything beyond attendance, donations, square footage, number of programs, and size of staff. None of that necessarily reflects life transformation.” (eShift, David A. Posthuma, CLC Publications 2014, p. 136)

Barna's observation is accurate for many contemporary North American churches. Our focus on building relational church cultures often leads to a lack of effective, interactive disciple-making systems. Many churches hire relational pastors for small groups, but these pastors often struggle with creating and managing organizational systems. This isn't to criticize relational ministries or their leaders—they are crucial. However, for effective discipleship, relational pastors need the support of systems-oriented assistants and tools.

Discipleship should aim to track and support each person's spiritual and emotional development. Over 33 years in ministry and testing discipleship tracking solutions with various churches have shown that only churches focused on "Active Discipleship" can effectively meet their members' needs.

Active Discipleship vs. Passive Discipleship

Passive Discipleship: This method involves general programs like small groups and church services, hoping that discipleship happens through these activities. It's often hands-off and doesn't account for individual needs, leading to a lack of measurable outcomes beyond basic metrics like attendance.

Active Discipleship: This approach responds to each disciple's spiritual and emotional needs, providing targeted support through a structured process. It involves one-on-one relationships and tracking individual progress, similar to early church practices.

While I value one-on-one discipleship, it can be challenging in large churches. However, integrating software systems can help track and support each individual's spiritual growth, ensuring no one falls through the cracks.

John Ortberg's foreword in Follow Me© highlights the importance of tracking spiritual development: “That which matters to us is that which we try to keep track of.” If we don't track spiritual growth, it suggests that it isn't a priority.

Arguments against tracking spiritual development often include its perceived impossibility or the idea that it's a private matter between an individual and God. However, the Bible emphasizes mutual support in spiritual growth (e.g., Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16).

The reliance on Passive Discipleship has led to spiritually illiterate Christians. Traditional methods like Sunday school and catechism, though once common, are now often abandoned without adequate replacements.

The NextSteps program addresses these issues by helping churches identify and meet specific developmental needs, transforming Passive Discipleship into Active Discipleship. To succeed, churches must integrate three essential elements into their ministries:

1. **Biblical Knowledge:** Essential for spiritual defense (Ephesians 6:17).
2. **A Life Surrendered to the Holy Spirit:** Key for character, faith, and purpose.
3. **Relational Nurturing:** Provided by people demonstrating the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26).

Lacking any of these elements can distort a disciple's life in Christ:

Distortion #1: Knowledge and nurturing without surrender may lead to self-focus and neglect of ministry calling.

Distortion #2: Surrender and nurturing without knowledge may lead to spiritual instability and lack of depth.

Distortion #3: Knowledge and mission without nurturing may result in a lack of empathy and love for others.

Active Discipleship, supported by the NextSteps program, offers a way forward, helping churches transform their approach to meeting the true needs of their members.

In my 14 years working with churches on discipleship tracking models, I found a lot of variation in how church leaders define a biblically based discipleship approach. However, most leaders eventually agreed on three core phases: DISCOVER, DEVELOP, and DEPLOY. These phases form the basis of the NextSteps Discipleship Assessment. Each of these main phases includes three sub-phases, which I've labeled with theological terms to help explain what we're assessing. Your leadership team might choose different labels that are easier for everyone to understand. In total, the assessment includes nine key discipleship phases.

It's important to note that these nine phases aren't goals to be completed but are ongoing "Holy Spirit empowered life-practices" that should be integrated into each disciple's daily walk with Jesus. Your people won't see the terms DISCOVER, DEVELOP, or DEPLOY. Also, the default labels for the nine sub-phases can be customized (more on this later).



Special Note:

The NextSteps assessment tool includes nine phases, but it only progresses through these phases based on the user’s responses. If a user scores low in a particular phase, the tool focuses on that phase as their most immediate area for growth. The user then receives a report and recommendations for programs and resources to help with their development. I’ll discuss specific discipleship strategies in a later chapter.

Refer to Graphic 1 to understand the theological framework behind the NextSteps Discipleship Assessment. These phases are not just objectives but ongoing spiritual practices that the Holy Spirit helps integrate into a disciple’s life. For instance, even if I consider myself a mature disciple, the Holy

Spirit might lead me back through phases like Contrition, Sanctification, and Transformation when addressing areas of sin. Temporary setbacks, such as during a personal crisis, are normal, but properly addressing these issues will help a disciple continue their growth through the nine phases.

Understanding Felt Needs and Their Importance to Spiritual Growth

A felt need is a personal experience or emotion that drives someone to seek spiritual growth. These needs can be positive, like a new believer eager to learn about the Bible, or negative, like going through a divorce. Traditionally, Christianity has focused on teaching correct beliefs and thinking according to God's perspective. For instance, Calvin University used the slogan “feed the mind, feed the spirit” to emphasize this approach. While it's important to feed the mind with biblical knowledge, spiritual growth also involves addressing emotional and spiritual needs.

In the Bible, the “mind” is more than just intellect; it includes emotions and the heart. Felt needs are the emotional and spiritual aspects of discipleship that influence our growth or stagnation in faith. The Bible often makes a distinction between the “heart” (emotions) and the “mind” (thoughts). Here are some passages illustrating this:

- Deuteronomy 11:18: “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.”
- 1 Samuel 2:35: “I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind.”
- 1 Chronicles 28:9: “Serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches every heart and understands every desire and thought.”
- Psalm 26:2: “Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind...”
- Jeremiah 11:20: “But you, Lord Almighty, who judge righteously and test the heart and mind...”
- Jeremiah 17:10: “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct...”

- Jeremiah 31:33: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”

God desires a relationship that engages both our emotions and our thoughts. The greatest commandment, as stated in Mark 12:29, calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This means God wants a deep, loving relationship with us, not just correct beliefs.

Since our emotions can be vulnerable to negative influences, the church must address the emotional aspects of discipleship. Ministries that support this include pastoral care, restoration, recovery, and counseling. If your church lacks these, it's crucial to develop them as they are essential for effective discipleship.

Spiritual development involves the whole person—spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Therefore, it's important to track how the Holy Spirit is working to renew our minds and heal our hearts. For many, spiritual attacks often target the heart as much as the mind.

Personal Example:

I have experienced this firsthand. After studying and working in ministry, I faced a severe health crisis in 2006. I developed kidney stones and underwent a procedure that resulted in severe complications, including a severely damaged spine, chronic pain, an inability to walk, and financial difficulties. During this time, I felt abandoned by God and struggled with intense negative emotions. This experience taught me how crucial it is for churches to recognize and address both positive and negative felt needs. Without a system in place to understand and support these needs, many people in our churches might not receive the help they need. This is a key function of the NextSteps program.

Becoming an Equipping Church

If you want your church to shift from Passive Discipleship to Active Discipleship, you need to create relational and interactive environments that address the current needs of each disciple. NextSteps can help you understand where your people are in their spiritual growth, but don't rely solely on Self-Help Solutions. These are just the starting points for building an effective, Active Disciple-Making Church.

Ephesians 4:11-13 emphasizes two key responsibilities for church leaders:

- Equip people for the work of service.
- Build up the Body of Christ.

The Bible doesn't provide a specific method for these tasks, leading to various interpretations and approaches. Over the past twenty years, our business, E-Church Essentials, LLC, has found that few churches focus on building up the Body of Christ, and many neglect equipping people for service. A high-quality Sunday service alone isn't enough to address the diverse needs of your congregation each week.

Many churches today focus primarily on Sunday services and social Small Group Ministries. While these are valuable, they often fail to address the full range of positive and negative Felt Needs present in the congregation. Small group members may not know their role in ministering to others or may not be properly equipped to do so.

Often, churches use a “sink or swim” approach to equipping people for ministry roles. This method, where individuals are just thrown into a role without proper training or support, can lead to failure and disillusionment. This approach is neither loving nor effective and can lead to burnout and frustration.

The problem of inadequate equipping in many churches is why we developed an Equipping Center as part of our Discipleship Tracking Program. It's not enough for church leaders to simply know where people are in their spiritual development or their Felt Needs. They also need to align appropriate support strategies with the right individuals.

Traditional methods often take a broad approach, offering generic classes that don't meet the specific needs of individuals. This can lead to a lack of depth in spiritual growth, as people receive only basic, introductory teaching.

NextSteps offers a structured approach to discipleship. Our model includes nine phases within three main movements: Discover, Develop, and Deploy. For effective discipleship, your leadership team will need to create solutions that help individuals progress through these phases and their sub-phases. This ensures that people receive the appropriate level of support and teaching based on their specific stage of spiritual maturity.