

Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Google+, LinkedIn, and Instagram, etc... these are some of the social media network sites that are increasingly used to keep up with close social ties. Online social networking has become one of the most popular ways to meet people, to grow a business and to get information. Often people take pride in how many friends/followers they have on their social sites and how many their followers like their posted activities. Having this following-culture we are experiencing these days is not new.

People followed a recognized leader or movement in the past also. This involved Jewish adherents to Philosophical schools or to religious and political sects. The Pharisees had their own followers and they too claimed to be followers of Moses. John the Baptist had followers who lived with him. Of course, Jesus had followers.

The Greek term for “follower” or “disciple” in the New Testament is μαθητής (*mathetes*), which means more than just “student” or “learner.” It is someone who adheres to the teachings of another, making them his rule of life and conduct. In the Old Testament, this idea of disciple or follower is used with the term לָמַד (*lamad*) (Isaiah 8:16, 50:4). The concept and practice of personal discipleship exist both in the New Testament and the Old Testament.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus called people to become his disciples, such as Simon and Andrew, and also James and John. At the conclusion of his ministry, Jesus sent his disciples to make disciples of all nations by teaching them to observe all he commanded. In the book of Mark, we find Jesus illustrating the cost of discipleship while predicting his own suffering, death, and resurrection (8:34-35). Jesus’ ministry is formed around the word “disciple” from the beginning to the end. Today’s vocabulary of faith is “Disciple.”

The disciples we are trying to define today is the disciples of Jesus Christ, not disciples of Moses, or John the Baptist, or Pastor Ron, Pastor Luke, Pastor Sunny, or anyone else because we are here together as a church to make disciples of Jesus Christ, not anyone else. A “disciple of Jesus Christ” is someone who has been called first to know Christ, then follow him, and then to make disciples of all nations. In our knowing Christ we become like him—thinking, feeling, and living as he commands.

Having a relationship with Jesus is the beginning of discipleship. Jesus has summoned us to his side, but not simply to put us to work. His summoning is first a call to know him, to have intimate fellowship with him and to enjoy him. If the disciples were to have lost interest in him as a person and friend, they would never have continued to walk with him. We are no different here. It is in the context of deepening intimacy that he commands us to be like him. In short, it is through fellowship with the Master that we begin to look, feel, and act like the Master.

Discipleship is also a call to follow Jesus and this is, at times, no easy matter. He demands exclusive, complete, and unflinching obedience to himself. This is where his call to discipleship is so radically different from other leaders. Plato stressed the freedom of the student from the teacher. Jewish religious leaders focused more on the Torah and steered their disciples away from themselves. Jesus, on the other hand, pointed people to himself and called them to radical commitment to him. Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to Christlikeness.

The idea that Jesus was calling the disciples to himself for a special purpose is evident in his initial command. He summoned his disciples saying, "Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." This initial command about reaching people for discipleship was reasserted when the resurrected Lord stood before his disciples. The Great Commission is not just another good idea. It is the church's marching orders. As far as I know, he never communicated another plan.

Discipleship is a life-long process. We are never "done" with discipleship, as it involves the ongoing formation of our lives into being like Jesus. It is always a journey with others. Jesus called disciples into a community. Although discipleship is always a personal call, it is never a private one. God calls us to be with others, and so being part of a church is following Jesus.

In his book *Discipleship and the People Called Methodists*, Martyn Atkins, the General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Britain, says that Methodism is, at its roots, a disciple-making movement. The heart of being a Methodist Christian is the active seeking and yearning to become a better disciple of Jesus Christ and offering him to others.

I believe that the birth story of any religious movement or grouping provides powerful social and cultural DNA about 'what it is' and 'why it is' that remain influential throughout its life. Whether this particular belief is mere romanticism or not, a rediscovery of a sense of identity and purpose, of who we are and why God puts us here is rarely a bad thing for any organization or person. Due to

institutionalization, Methodism today is somewhat different than it was. I believe, however, that the yearning instincts to be better disciples of Jesus Christ and make disciples of Christ remain deeply rooted in Methodism.

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Our church takes this disciple making mission seriously. A little over two years ago our church began a process to develop a strategy that would drive the direction of our church through the next 3-5 years in this disciple making mission

The premise of our plan is that we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world which is the United Methodist Mission Statement. Towards this goal of making disciples and transforming the world, two task force teams have met and outlined our theological assumptions. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be open, to be welcoming, to translate our generosity into service and to live out our faith in the context of Christian community.

With the foundation of these theological assumptions, a second task force team met to determine how we can best translate them into specific acts of ministry and service. The task force team made the strong recommendation that we view our service to others through the lens of “with” and not, “to.” We are called to walk with and work with each other, and also with those that we serve.

With this theological foundation and the framework, a Strategic Planning Team was formed in late August 2014 to outline the specific details of the ministries that will lead us into our future. The planning team has met since then and identified the seven initiatives with the key action items presented at the Administrative Board last Tuesday, July 21.

The seven initiatives are:

1. Create opportunities for people to connect and belong (under the leadership of Devon Drake).
2. Develop thriving family ministries (Under the leadership of Stephanie Ham and Pastor Luke).
3. Service in everything that we do (Under the leadership of Paul Kuelz).
4. Outreach to and attract key segments of the population (Under the leadership of me- Sunny).
5. Develop & expand ministry through effective use of technology and social media (Under the leadership of Linda Green).

6. Create a worship environment that is engaging, meaningful and memorable (Under the leadership of Pastor Ron).
7. Effectively utilize the facilities and enhance the appearance of the campus (Under the leadership of Jim McKnight).

This planning team has been led by Mark Jewett and Sanjiv More. These compassionate and dedicated leaders put an amazing amount of hours and energy in this planning process. My heartfelt thanks go to them and also to God for their leadership over our church. THANK YOU!

Now is the time for all of us to partake in this planning. There will be three “town hall” meetings: one on Sunday, August 9, at 7pm in the fireside room, and two in September. The meeting dates in September have not been decided yet. It will be announced in the near future. At the “town hall” meetings, all of the background of the plan and recommendation including all planned action items with the possible outcomes will be provided. Several copies of this plan are available in the narthex after this service. Also, there will be a time to ask questions and provide feedback. You may contact one or more of the planning team members if you would like to share your thoughts.

This is a “work-in-progress, living documentation.” Your input is welcome to sharpen this plan of actions. Let us participate in this disciple making mission prayerfully together as a community of faith. I believe that for this mission God has brought us together as God’s dream TEAM—Together Each Achieves More. Amen.