

BRIDGES

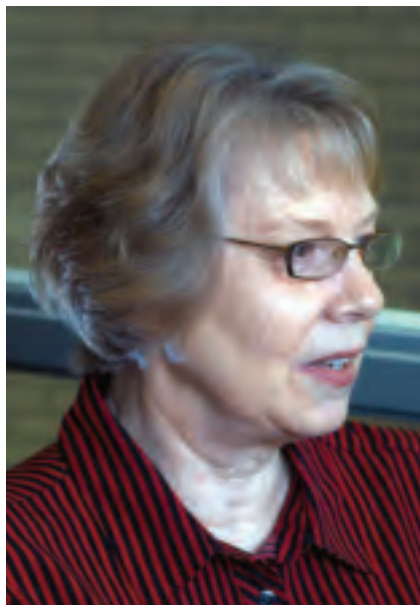
A Teacher and a Pastor Dialogue About Discipleship

Kathleen Beagles, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Discipleship and Religious Education at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Recently, Dr. Beagles sat down with Gavin Anthony, Senior Pastor for the Dublin (Ireland) District of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, who is completing a Ph.D. in Religious Education at Andrews University, to discuss the roles of pastors and teachers in the work of discipleship.

Kathy: Gavin, what does discipling mean to you as a pastor?

Gavin: First, let me say that many definitions of discipleship exist. However, one that I think works well in the church and school contexts is by Michael Wilkins: “Discipleship is becoming like Jesus as we walk with him in the real world.”¹

To answer your question, Paul’s



comments to the Galatians immediately come to mind. He told them that he was “again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19, NIV). As a pastor, this forming, or perhaps more accurately the re-

forming of broken people into the image of God, was Paul’s chief concern. Of course, this was not Paul’s own idea but a reflection of how he described the Father’s own purposes for us—that “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29, NIV). As pastors, we engage in God’s purposes of re-forming. When I look at my members, I long to see them reflect Jesus.

I think it is also important to point out that this reflection of Jesus is not merely about personal nurture. There can be a danger that we see reflecting Christ as a self-improvement course. However, being filled with the Spirit of Jesus will always have the consequence of my drawing others along into fellowship with the Trinity—that together, we may experience Their joy and participate in Their purposes.

Kathy: *Well put.*

Gavin: What does discipling mean to you as a teacher?

Kathy: For me, discipling is taking someone by the hand and sharing my journey with Jesus. That immediately implies that I have a journey of my own, so it requires that I be very intentional about nourishing God's restorative process in my own soul. That's the only way I can be a truly effective tool for the Holy Spirit to use in coming alongside someone else.

I particularly love this passage in the book *Education*: "Not a pause for a moment in His presence, but personal contact with Christ, to sit down in companionship with Him—this is our need. Happy will it be for the children of our homes and the students of our schools when parents and teachers shall learn in their own lives the precious experience pictured in these words from the Song of Songs:

"As the apple tree among the trees of the wood,

So is my Beloved among the sons.

I sat down under His shadow with great delight,

And His fruit was sweet to my taste.

He brought me to the banqueting house,

And His banner over me was love."

Song of Solomon 2:3, 4.²²

Discipling is something I can only do well after I have spent a good bit of time "sitting under the apple tree."

How do you see a pastor going about discipling and teaching his or her congregation?

Gavin: I don't believe discipling can be done with a training course or a curriculum. However, I believe that establishing a knowledge base through curriculum is vital—particularly at the moment. For many years, Adventist pastors have been taught good doctrine and assumed that knowing doctrine was the same as discipleship. However, I don't believe that is the case. Young people today will certainly tell you it is not! Consequently, I believe that curriculum writing needs to be heading into the area of teaching what relationship with God is intended to be, and how to do it.

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Just a few weeks ago, one of my own church leaders was in tears because she did not know how to study the Bible for herself. So we need to teach the "hows" of practical spirituality. Yet at the same time, these "hows" are only tools. Ultimately, the power of a changed life comes through personal contact with God. But at least as local



church educators, we can provide tools to help people create an environment where God can touch their hearts.

So, modeling such an open contact with God is vital, as you alluded to earlier with the apple-tree metaphor. I think when we live out this openness, we begin to change the culture. I regularly face the temptation to start a discipleship department at church. While I think it could be helpful, at the same

time I firmly believe that discipleship should not be stuck in a department. Discipleship is the culture of doing church—it's the air we all should be breathing as we collaborate to live for Jesus.

Kathy: You use ideas and language from the field of education. In my experience, that is not common among pastors.

Gavin: Yes, it was only in the second year of my Ph.D. studies that I realized I was getting a degree in religious education! I had only been focusing on the discipleship side. It was quite a startling realization that I had begun a journey into studying education. Yet, it is something I am continually excited about and challenged by.

Kathy: Even though I believe many pastors disciple others, they usually think of it in the context of ministering or pastoring, not of teaching. Is there a difference?

Gavin: This concept of being an educator for discipleship raises a critical issue. Only in the past couple of years have I realized that during my six years in the seminary, I was taught how to be a theologian, yet my work in the local church is more about being a Christian educator. I was not taught how to educate. It is, therefore, second nature for me to download religious content on people. Indeed, many of our churches are shaped around this concept of downloading important theological information. We need to do something quite radical to change this paradigm, or else pastors will continue to struggle with teaching practical discipleship in our churches. I think this needs to begin with greater intentional dialogue

between theologians and educators to see what both parties can bring to the discipleship process.

Kathy: *That is a great idea! For example, as an educator, I think of a pastor as needing to be intentional about teaching or discipling a small circle, and giving them the tools to then disciple still other circles. I also like to think of a pastor as a dean of a seminary. He or she is there to train ministers—each member of the congregation has a ministry.*

Gavin: Do you think that classroom teachers can come to see themselves as pastors to their classroom “congregations”?

Kathy: *Teachers learn quite a bit about the integration of faith and learning, but I believe that if they saw themselves as pastors and disciplers of their classrooms, not just integrators of concepts, new dimensions of religious education would open, and the spiritual lives of their students would be richly enhanced. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Moses told the Israelites to first make sure they loved God supremely, and let Him write His laws in their hearts. Then they were to enter into the everyday life of their young people, making spiritual connections in all the teachable moments that arose. Although this passage in Deuteronomy is considered to be a mandate to families, I don’t believe it is meant only for the small nuclear families we have today. It is for the entire family of God—parents, pastors, and teachers. And this kind of discipling takes time and extracurricular involvement with students—and their families.*

The motto of the School of Education at Andrews University is “To Educate Is to Redeem.” That sounds a bit like Galatians 4:19 that you were talking about earlier. Christian teachers in formal education settings would benefit from taking Paul’s approach of being in labor until Christ is formed in our students. I imagine the way that would play out would be primarily through modeling, as we talked about earlier, but also through in-

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tercessory prayer and the sharing of one’s own faith walk. Theories of learner-based and cooperative education that are already in place in many classrooms are also certainly avenues that can be used for creating a discipling atmosphere in



Christian schools.

Gavin, *what teaching and learning principles do you think are good to use in creating a discipling atmosphere in the church as well as the school?*

Gavin: I fear I am going to give you better theory than my own practice, as shifting from the traditional role of the pastor to one of discipler is difficult—more difficult for me than I thought it would be. Also more difficult because many of our local churches have been used to doing things the same way for a long time. But let me suggest where I

think changing an atmosphere begins:

The first step is a lot of prayer! God keeps reminding me, as a pastor, that just because I have lots of great ideas doesn’t mean they will work. Paul also reminds us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12, NIV). Satan’s primary mission is to destroy the work of the discipler, so if I only come to church with some of the latest ideas in discipleship, he doesn’t really mind. I know because I have made this mistake. What Satan fears is supernatural power, and so we need to be dependent on God and His power to work in our congregations or our classrooms. So I have to pray, and get others to join in support.

Kathy: *OK. We start with lots of prayer. Then what?*

Gavin: Once an atmosphere of prayer is present, I think one of the greatest beginning teaching tools is that of the pastor modeling transparency in his or her own journey of discipleship, as you alluded to earlier. As Seventh-day Adventists, we have been focused historically on theological correctness and right answers. Not to be correct or right has therefore been seen as a sign of failure, which we are keen to hide. That happens quite often in school settings, too, doesn’t it?

Kathy: *Definitely. Life tends to be measured by grade-point averages.*

Gavin: But discipleship doesn’t focus primarily on correctness, but on

relationship. Indeed, the closer I come to Jesus, the greater I become aware of my profound flaws and weaknesses. The problem in my life is not about the specific sins I might or might not commit, but that by nature my sinful self continually tries to rise up and take control. So I face a continual battle with dying to self so that the nature of Christ may live in me.

This is a battle pastors and teachers are not supposed to fight alone. Reflecting Jesus is designed by Him to be done in the context of the body—the church, and by extension, the church school. As Paul again writes, the different spiritual gifts are given “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12, 13, NIV). So in this context of the body, where the fullness of Christ is matured, we are on a journey together. What one part of the body does or doesn’t do will affect the entire body. I believe that is how Christ’s character becomes fully reproduced in His people. Jesus said they will know you are My disciples when you love one another.

We are broken, bruised, and battered inside, so let’s not try to fake it to one another that we are all doing just fine.

Kathy: *Well, this openness can have its drawbacks, too, can’t it? I imagine some readers of this dialogue bristling, declaring that the blind can’t lead the blind. Perhaps we should stop here and define what we mean by “openness.”*

Gavin: I am not suggesting that pastors and teachers should continually share all their problems. However, when we are honest about our own challenges, it gives our congregations and our students permission to be real as well. And when we are real together, we begin to build genuine community. On the other hand, some church members and students think their pastor or



teacher walks on water! How can a pastor or teacher exhibit openness without sacrificing his or her role as a leader?

Kathy: *It seems to me that the openness toward God that we are talking about is described in Psalm 32:5. David acknowledges his sin and no longer tries to cover it up. James describes openness toward our fellow humans as follows: “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16, NRSV).*

Gavin: Well, perhaps that is the glory of the body of Christ: that in our weakness, God’s power is made clear—to paraphrase Paul (2 Corinthians 12:9). When we learn to be open to each other, we also grow our openness to God. A couple of years ago, I first began to think

intentionally about openness. As a pastor or teacher, how do I teach openness to God, since openness is first and foremost an attitude of the heart? When I first thought about this question, I wasn’t sure of the answer—which rather disturbed me. Yet an open heart is the only heart the Holy Spirit can touch.

When we look at the world around us, let alone those within our own church and school walls, how will their hearts become open? If they don’t, all our efforts at reaching out with the gospel will not travel far. So how do we teach openness? I think that is a question we as discipling pastors and teachers must wrestle with because this is the beginning of the whole process of reflecting Jesus.

Kathy: *Thank you, Gavin. You’ve given us teachers plenty to think, pray, and talk about, as well as opened our minds to how pastors and teachers have much in common in their calling. I believe pastors and teachers could certainly benefit from more open dialogue about our joint mission to educate and redeem others for the kingdom. Those of us involved with the new Department of Discipleship and Religious Education at Andrews University will have to initiate some avenues for this dialogue. ☞*

REFERENCES

1. Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), p. 123.
2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1942), p. 261.

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