



## A MODEL FOR DISCIPLESHIP

Many people are involved in the lives of children, adolescents, and new believers, and thereby—either intentionally or by default—take on the role of a discipler or religious educator. The problem, in many cases, is that these key Christians—parents, friends, teachers, and the local church congregation—are themselves not growing toward “the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13, NASB).<sup>1</sup>

Also, many adult believers do not know how to implement the numerous New Testament commands describing how church members are to care for and support one another<sup>2</sup> because they have never seen this behavior modeled. Today’s “consumer religion” is often empty and ineffectual. As a result, many young people and new believers lack positive models of Christianity and do not know how to develop a vibrant relationship with Jesus.

#### A Growth Model

The *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples (TGFD)*<sup>3</sup> framework is designed to help us think more clearly and deeply about the spiritual growth and maturity

of ourselves and others as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is based on four processes in which all committed Christians should be involved. These processes, while described one by one, are not linear or sequential. Each disciple, regardless of his or her level of maturity, should be growing spirally in each of the processes simultaneously. Although the fourth process involves individuals, it is acted out in community.<sup>4</sup>

Because discipleship happens in the arena of daily life, and within loving relationships in the body of Christ, its processes and content cannot be reduced to statements in a grid. However,

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the *TGFD* framework has been designed to serve as a skeleton of basic characteristics of discipleship that can provide a structure around which individuals, groups, and churches can organize experiences that edify the followers of Christ. Those who disciple others can use the framework to create learning events for many areas of discipling such as parenting, mentoring, teaching, and facilitating small groups.

Within the *TGFD* framework, *commitments* are defined for each of the individual processes, and these are further divided into key aspects of spiritual growth called *indicators*, which describe the characteristics of a vibrant relationship with Jesus.

Thus, the framework of *processes*, *commitments*, and *indicators* helps to define the scope of discipleship and discipling. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both can be evaluated using this framework. Some *commitments* and *indicators* have been adequately addressed in particular contexts in which we do church, while others may have been overlooked. Evaluations based on this framework can help Adventist leaders and educators make informed decisions that will enhance discipleship and discipling in the body of Christ—at church, at school, and at home.

### CONNECTING

This process is relational, and focuses on the disciple's relationship with God, self, and others. Jesus articulated this connection in statements such as, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35), and "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew

22:37-39). This process involves not only the way Christians ought to relate to God, but also the way they should relate to themselves, their families, their fellow believers, and their neighbors. It also involves how Christians function: joined together, as the visible body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22, 23; and 2:16). This kind of connecting has a social and communal dimension (Acts 2:44), which allows the church to function as an organic whole.

Christian discipleship occurs in relationships. It begins with the believer's response to Jesus' call to connect with and abide in Him. Through this transforming connection with Him, we come to know ourselves as Jesus created us to be, we appreciate our infinite value to Him, and we grow into a more balanced view of our strengths and weaknesses. We are then able to connect with those around us in more tangible, healing, and redeeming ways.

A dynamic and deepening relationship with Jesus through His Spirit is the basis for growth in discipleship. Concurrently, believers develop (1) an individual identity complete in Christ, (2) Christ-centered relationships

within their families and within the local and global body of Christ, and (3) positive relationships with people outside the body of Christ with whom He wants to be reconciled. Disciples thus become avenues for administering God's grace in its various forms as they continue to strengthen their connections with God and all of His children.

### UNDERSTANDING

This process is cognitive, but it includes the experiential as well as the intellectual. It was articulated by Jesus in these words: "If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:31), and "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4).

Relationships grow as both parties develop a deepening understanding of the core identity of each person. It's similar in a relationship with Jesus. Through Scripture, humans encounter God and come to understand more clearly Christ's character and mission. Thus, disciples need to learn how to

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study the Bible, find Jesus in its pages, hear Him speak, and follow Him. Reading, contemplating, and obeying the Scriptures and praying are methods by which believers access the teaching and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. In the broadest sense, we learn through the Word what God intends us to be and to do, both individually and corporately. We come to understand how the story of our life fits into the great story of salvation.

For a growing disciple, encountering God through Scripture and learning more of Jesus' invitation to be His disciple are vital commitments. He calls us to "come" and "reason" with Him (Isaiah 1:18), an encounter that must precede a full and heartfelt obedience to His Word. Through a deepening understanding of God's Word, disciples come to realize and embrace these propositional truths: (1) God is the source of life; (2) Humans fell from God's original plan and experience consequences; (3) God supplies everything needed for our redemption; and (4) God has provided everything needed for the restoration of human beings into the image of God. This biblical worldview is foundational to knowing God and to being transformed into His image.<sup>5</sup>

## MINISTERING

This process relates to service and evangelism. Jesus expressed it this way: "The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them*, you did it to Me'" (Matthew 25:40, italics supplied), and, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:19, 20).

In response to God's love, disciples

minister to others. As they connect with Jesus and learn of His unfailing love, they are eager to invite others to share in the joy they experience as His followers. They feel compelled to share the story of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives and of their blessed hope of salvation through faith in Jesus.

Growing disciples will also seek daily opportunities to minister to others. They will recognize and respond to the needs of God's suffering children locally and globally; share the story of Jesus with community members, friends, and co-workers; support the ministries of the local and global church with their personal resources; and embrace the evangelistic mission of the church.

## EQUIPPING

This process combines the social and the communal aspect, and is the responsibility of both individual disciples and the corporate body to which they belong. The Apostle Paul described this process and its accomplishment in the life of the church: "Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:15, 16, NIV).

Paul described the church as Christ's body to illustrate the interdependence of the members in achieving its mission. This metaphor helps disciples to understand their role in supporting, nurturing, and strengthening one another. It is within the church that we are disciplined and then equipped to disciple others.

*Equipping*, as defined in the *TGFD* framework, focuses on Christians help-

ing one another grow through the three processes of *Connecting*, *Understanding*, and *Ministering*. In the New International Version (1994), 72 passages include the phrase "one another," and more than 40 refer to the process of *Equipping*.<sup>6</sup>

Growing Christians have the unique opportunity, through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, to be disciplined by other Christians, and in turn, to invest themselves in helping other members to grow spiritually. *Equipping* commitments reflect the actions of those who are fulfilling the Great Commission to "make disciples" by "teaching them to obey all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:19, 20).

For a growing discipler, helping other disciples learn to connect with Christ through His Word in a transformational devotional life is an essential commitment. Other commitments include helping other disciples to build Christlike relationships; to study and obey God's Word; to live a contagious, holistic Christian life; to discern where God is working in all aspects of one's life; and to use their spiritual gifts in fulfilling a personal call to mission and ministry.

Because the first command of the Gospel Commission is to *Go*, the "going" has often been emphasized apart from the disciple-making and teaching-equipping processes, which are strongly commanded in these verses. This has been dubbed "the Great Omission" because these vital processes are absent from many models of Christian formation/spiritual development. The discipling and teaching aspects of Christian growth, like ministering, involve serving others. But their key role in the Gospel Commission, as well as the frequent biblical references to building up the community of fellow believers in all three other processes, led to designating *Equipping* as a separate item in this model.

The *TGFD* framework asserts that

the individual processes will function fully in the lives of the individual members of the Christian body only to the extent that the corporate process is functioning, and vice versa—a symbiotic relationship. In the case of young people and new believers, the corporate process may affect their individual growth more than their individual processes affect the corporate functioning of the body. However, it is important at every level of spiritual maturity for a growing disciple to be concurrently discipling and being disciplined by others. The positive influence of encouraging, equipping, and challenging one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ should flow most strongly from the corporate church to the young and new believers, helping them develop their connecting relationships, their understanding, and their ministry.

Christian churches implement the fourth process, *Equipping*, in a variety of ways. Although aspects of it appear in the goals of various ministries (pastoral, children and youth, education), the equipping principles are often neglected in these activities. Ministry usually involves a disciple at one level attempting to address the needs of disciples at a different level, or of non-disciples. It tends to be hierarchical instead of reciprocal, and programmatic rather than relational. Because many church ministries function in this way (Sabbath school classes, youth and Bible study groups), their structure tends to obscure the need of those ministering or leading to also be disciplined.

The church's attempt to implement the process of equipping can also be seen in religious education, whether it be formal (denominational schools), non-formal (at church and camps, etc.), or through socialization (home and society). Education clearly occurs in many areas of life. However, within the church, planners must not focus on the cognitive to the exclusion of the relational—favoring information over

the sharing of personal faith and story (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Relational stories of personal faith, although often left untold, can be of profound influence in the discipling process. However, religious educators in the formal, non-formal, and social settings may not recognize that a form of equipping (discipling) also happens through, or can be sabotaged by, the “hidden curriculum” of the lives and attitudes of fellow believers. The actions of members of the body of Christ that others see and imitate can form a “hidden curriculum” that counteracts the goals of discipleship. This is the reason for the order of God's commands given to Israelite adults in the SHEMA ISRAEL (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NKJV). Having ““these words, which I command you today,”” in their hearts preceded God's command to ““teach them diligently”” to their children. Belonging—to a family, a congregation, or a society—influences a person to be like the group. “The regular interaction of church members is a powerful form of education because it influences the perspective by which members interpret the Christian faith.”<sup>7</sup> The “hidden curriculum” can occur in any context in which people are learning.

### Growing God's Kingdom

From these basic concepts of discipleship and discipling, articulated by the ministries departments of the General Conference and religious educators from Andrews University, grew the TGFDF framework that can be used to be intentional and balanced about how we help and guide our fellow believers in preparing for God's kingdom. ✍

*To learn more about the TGFDF Framework, go to <http://www.growingfruitfuldisciples.org>.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible*.
2. For example, Matthew 7:12; John 15:12; Romans 12:10; 14:3; 5:7; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:4; Hebrews 10:24, 25; 1 John 4:11, 12.
3. *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* is the full, legal name of this discipleship framework. However, the term “Growing Fruitful Disciples” and acronym TGFDF are often used in its place for simplicity.
4. To view the complete framework in graphic form, see page 19 of this issue.
5. For an article by Gordon Kainer defining the concept of “biblical worldview,” go to <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201073021006.pdf>.
6. Examples include Zechariah 7:9; John 13:34; Romans 12:16; 13:8, 15:14; Galatians 5:13; 6:2; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Peter 1:22; 3:8; 4:9; 1 John 3:11, 23; 2 John 1:5; Hebrews 3:13.
7. C. Ellis Nelson, *Growing Up Christian: A Congregational Strategy for Nurturing Disciples* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), p. 97.