

# DISCIPLING



**T**he concept of discipleship is often misunderstood solely as something Christians *do*. We study the Scripture, get baptized, and tell others about Jesus. We must do these things, but we must understand that who we *are* as disciples is as important as what we *do*. At the core of discipleship is relationship, and who we are in a relationship with Jesus creates a solid framework for what we do for Him (John 13:34, 35).

Discipleship is teamwork, and so this article is co-written by the faculty of the Department of Discipleship and Lifespan Education (DSLE) at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, with each sharing a brief overview of his or her area of specialty or framework in discipleship. As part of a departmental-

wide emphasis on clarifying and bringing attention to the concept of discipleship, the authors have begun collecting short one-page responses from seminary students around the world with an assignment titled, “Who Discipled You?” The following testimony was written by a seminary student who was discipled by several of his teachers in Adventist church schools and illustrates this point:

### **More Than Words, Discipleship Is Care in Action – A Personal Testimony**

“My discipleship was never anything formal. No one specifically chose to walk alongside me to teach me how to form a spiritual life. I grew up in the church and was familiar with the importance of prayer, Scripture reading, and daily devotion. While I understood the importance of these things, I didn’t have a decent framework of how to put them into

practice. My parents wanted me to adopt these spiritual habits, but I rarely saw them spend much time developing their spiritual lives outside of church on Sabbath.

“Where I did experience what I might consider discipleship was in the examples of teachers I had in academy. Many of my teachers would have devotional thoughts and prayers before class. I could tell that spirituality and connection to God were important to them. I would also see how they handled difficult situations with Christ-like attitudes. When my teachers were struggling with troubled students or enforcing rules, they did so with an air of mercy. Even in my own mistakes, my teachers showed me much grace. I wasn’t sure how they developed their spiritual life, but I knew I wanted my spiritual life to look like theirs.

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BY SCOTT R. WARD, DAVID SEDLACEK, ROGELIO PAQUINI, AND JASMINE J. FRASER

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“The most noteworthy discipleship I received was in college. As a theology major, I got to talk with professors who were deeply rooted in the Word of God, some of whom were previously pastors, which was what I wanted to become. During my time in college, I was able to ask questions like, ‘How does God speak to you?’ and ‘How do you deal with unanswered prayer?’ Getting to ask these deeper questions and receiving thoughtful answers was helpful for the foundation of my spiritual life. On top of that, my professors took an interest in my well-being. They would genuinely ask how I was doing or how they could pray for me. Their care impacted me deeply.”<sup>1</sup>

Teachers first must see themselves as disciples who need to be nurtured closer to the heart of God so that they can then share what they have personally experienced with others.<sup>2</sup> I (S.W.) always tell my seminary students that if they have a good relationship with Jesus and meaningful devotional times with Him, they will always have something ready to share from their experience with Jesus that morning, the previous day, or week, or whenever the most recent meaningful devotional moment happened. Educators all know, and it is obvious from the story above, that students see us for who we really are, and when Jesus shines out of us, they can’t help but notice. And then, if we go on to actually talk about it, it can inspire them in their own search for meaning in their lives.

And then we also need to consider other influences that can hinder disciples from fully experiencing Jesus and living for Him. Human beings were created to be in a relationship with God (Genesis 2:24-28; 3:8, 9). Being in a relationship with God is fundamental for our existence now and throughout eternity (John 15:5). It is possible to do many things for Jesus without being in a daily, devoted, covenantal relationship with Him. But it is impossible to be in a

committed relationship with Jesus without sharing our experience with Him with others, engaging them in ways that breathe hope and alleviate humanity’s suffering.

### Discipleship Overview (Scott R. Ward)

It is important to note that a relationship with Jesus and devotional time with Him is not a one-size-fits-all type of engagement for students or educators. Disciples of Jesus come in all shapes, sizes, and colors, and speak hundreds of different languages representing cultures and relationship dynamics covering a vast spectrum of diversity. Numerous scientifically defined learning styles, love languages, and temperaments impact how we engage with the world around us. Differences in how we love and learn impact how we engage in relationships. The way our parents and grandparents practiced their faith may look much different from the ways we have found to nurture our spirituality, and that will most likely be somewhat different from some of the ways that help our students connect with Jesus. I (S.W.) believe that as educators, we all need to find our own personal connection that feeds our spirituality so that our teaching ministries flow from the heart rather than mere religious obligations.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, every generation reacts to and adapts from the generation before it. Each generation makes changes resulting in new ways of thinking and interacting, adapting and creating a new culture. These changes are not always positive or in alignment with biblical principles and may promote suppressive and destructive ideologies. The reality that we all live in a sinful world where we are all victims of various afflictions and abuses also impacts our ability to have healthy relationships with Jesus and other humans.

Though we are diverse in culture, language, and temperament, collectively, we have similarities in devotional practices and the way we interact with Jesus. Sometimes these similarities become ritualistic encounters that are divisive and hinder

growth in our relationship with Jesus. Hence, our differences and similarities challenge us as educators and ministry leaders to assess the individual and collective needs for discipleship and develop approaches to meet the needs in each context.

We must recognize the diversity and struggles amongst the incredible variety of people and circumstances around us as we engage in discipleship. A wholistic approach to discipling students demands that we seek to understand their spiritual as well as their emotional needs.

One of the challenges to wholistic discipleship is the tendency to compartmentalize our lives and the issues we face. I (S.W.) believe compartmentalizing our lives contributes to idealistic methods of discipleship that fail to adequately meet many people’s spiritual and emotional needs. Everything that affects our relational dynamics (positively or negatively) with Jesus or others must be included in our discipleship journey. When all our experiences are counted as opportunities for healing and nurturing, we are more likely to grow into healthy disciples displaying the fruits of the Spirit.

I (S.W.) have been invested in discipling young people, leading them into a growing relationship with Jesus that naturally bears the fruit of the Spirit. Throughout my career as a youth pastor and teacher (volunteer art teacher in the academy, adjunct Bible teacher, and currently seminary professor), I have focused on teaching young people devotional life practices and service through lunchtime campus-based devotional groups and outreach projects at my local Adventist academy and in the elementary junior high grades. These outreach projects have involved community services, mission trips, and other methods of evangelism. Many of these young people continue to grow in their devotional habits and are committed to Jesus as they serve humanity.

Discipleship is also a community endeavor. Through collaborative efforts, I was also able to build/foster community, engaging in church and school discipling ministry by facilitating an on-campus Christian club at one of the local public high schools. These are just some of the practical outworkings of my focus on discipleship and biblical spirituality during my doctoral studies. Over the years, my passion for discipling through the lens of relationships and community has deepened. I endeavor to equip teachers and pastors with tools for church and school collaboration in their approach to discipleship.

### Discipleship and Trauma (David Sedlacek)

We live in a fallen world. As a result, hurt, pain, and trauma exist, which interfere with a people's ability to trust God. I (D.S.) believe that since discipleship, by definition, is assisting people in developing a loving, intimate relationship with God, Satan's goal is to interfere as much as possible in the discipling process. He does this in several ways. He knows that the iniquity of parents is visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation (Deuteronomy 5:9). Modern science confirms this biblical reality.<sup>4</sup> Both genetics and parental modeling make children vulnerable to household trauma, such as having a parent who is divorced, mentally ill, an addict, or in prison. Even more directly, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the home, domestic violence, or the emotional and physical neglect of a child's basic needs can be traumatic.<sup>5</sup> Additional types of traumas include community trauma such as living in an unsafe neighborhood, bullying, or being exposed to a mass shooting. Environmental trauma, such as damage from a flood, fire, earthquake, tornado, or hurricane, extreme heat, and more, can create anxiety and hypervigilance in those exposed to them.<sup>6</sup>

In God's design, parents are to be in His place to disciple their children into loving relationships with Jesus. However, when parents, due to their own brokenness, are not present for



their children emotionally or physically or are active in their children's abuse, the children's capacity to see God as unconditionally loving is diminished. If the parents whom children see and experience cannot be trusted, can a heavenly Father who cannot be seen be trusted? Even if the children go through Sabbath school, church services, Adventurers and Pathfinders, they may have a cognitive relationship with God and be very dutiful in the way they practice their faith, but they may not believe that God loves them or that He can be fully trusted.<sup>7</sup> Further, since some students enrolled in Adventist schools also come from homes that are secular, agnostic, or a variety of religious traditions and may not have had exposure to discipleship, Adventist educators will need to be especially attentive to their needs.

The goal of discipling broken, traumatized persons is to give them such an experience of unconditional love (either through safe communities or through a therapeutic counseling process) so that rather than their being severely affected by anxiety or hypervigilance, they will be empowered to open their hearts to God's love (1 John

4:18). Safe communities might include Christ-centered 12-step programs such as Journey to Wholeness (<https://www.adventistrecoveryglobal.org/resources/journey-to-wholeness/>) or men's or women's groups that focus on emotional healing. Professional interventions should be trauma-focused and include an experiential element. The wounding occurred in a relationship with someone else, and the healing is best done in a way that includes both cognitive and experiential components. It is important to note that these interventions and healing opportunities are important not just for the students we work with, but also for educators, pastors, and parents as well.

We (the authors) have seen the importance of taking a person's pain and trauma into account in the discipling relationship. It is important to understand a person's journey so we can better understand the next steps in discipleship for that individual and how we can best surround and support him or her. This includes understanding our fellow teachers' journeys as well as the journeys of our students. The more that everyone can understand that we (pastors, teachers, parents, and students) are all victims of trauma, the more we can try to work together to support one another

in our spiritual journeys and in forming a true spiritual community.

### Discipleship and Culture (Rogelio Paquini)

Youth discipleship is an essential aspect of spiritual development for young people. It is a space where young people can come together, grow in their faith, and build community. In this context, culture and spirituality intersect in a significant way. In my (R.P.) experience, and supported by the literature and research on discipleship, I have found that culture informs how young people understand and engage with spirituality, an essential factor in shaping their culture. James Emery White defines culture as “the comprehensive, penetrating context that encompasses life and thought, art and speech, entertainment and sensibility, values and faith.”<sup>8</sup>

Society’s dynamics and social structures shape the culture of young people. In many groups, a desire for independence, belonging, and a search for meaning and purpose define youth culture.<sup>9</sup> The way young people approach spirituality and faith seems to be an expression of their youth culture. They want to understand their beliefs and practices in a way that makes sense to them, and they want to express their spirituality in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their experiences.

One of the primary challenges of youth ministry is providing young people with space to explore their faith and spirituality in a safe and supportive environment. Good discipleship practices require an open and inclusive environment where young people are encouraged to ask questions and share their thoughts and feelings. In the fall of 2019, prior to COVID-19, the Springtide Institute surveyed a representative sample of 1,000 youth, ages 13 to 25, in the United States. In addition to surveys, researchers conducted 35 in-depth interviews. Responses indicated that 36 percent of this population “don’t have anyone to talk to.”<sup>10</sup> Post-pandemic research is ongoing, but what this study

continues to reveal is that one in three young adults in the U.S. feels completely alone, 40 percent believe they have no one they can talk with, and 45 percent believe they are misunderstood.<sup>11</sup> Educators and other leaders engaged in ministry to young people must demonstrate a willingness to listen and engage in open and honest conversations with the young people in their care.

Relating to other cultures is essential in discipling young people because it helps them broaden their perspectives and develop empathy for those who are different from them. Jennifer Guerra Aldana says it best: “Diversity is a gift.”<sup>12</sup> Exposure to diversity can lead to increased understanding and acceptance of various cultural practices, beliefs, and values. When young people connect with others from different backgrounds, they are more likely to be open-minded and accepting of diversity; it is imperative in today’s world, where we are more connected than ever. Young people must understand and respect the cultural differences of those around them. As educators, we are

also responsible for teaching them how to use their knowledge of biblical principles to understand what helps humanity to thrive and then provide opportunities for them to apply this to their lives. Relating to other cultures can promote spiritual growth and a deeper understanding of God’s love for all people, regardless of their background.

However, while young people are growing progressively diverse, many ministries still have not yet contextualized their practices to welcome and engage with this population. A clear and straightforward example of a lack of contextualization is the absence of integration of young people in participation and involvement in the decision-making process in most churches, even when such organizations proclaim to care for them. In such cases, programs and styles display more interest in pleasing previous generations’ tastes and interests than in what is relevant for young people.

University and academy settings have an advantage over local churches since they have a higher population of young people and operate within the



context of young people. Their chapel volunteers and worship leaders are students; however, as I (R.P.) have heard from many students on both levels, that they do not feel that the Bible class lectures relate to their needs. Therefore, professors and Bible teachers must become aware of the characteristics of this generation and create learning environments that support students within their context.

Every culture worldwide engages in relationships differently and in accordance with its various cultural traditions and practices. Spirituality and discipleship are, as stated earlier, not one-size-fits-all activities. It is critically important to meet people where they are within their culture—whether it be ethnic or generational—to give them the best opportunity to understand the gospel message and be drawn into the new discipleship culture of the local church context.

### A Biblical-Theological Framework for Understanding and Practicing Discipleship (Jasmine J. Fraser)

A biblical-theological framework for understanding and practicing discipleship centers on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20) to preach, teach, and baptize. Jesus gave the mandate in His parting words before ascending to heaven. Central to fulfilling this commission are the practical, wholistic, and emotional attributes that define human relationships. However, I (J.F.) believe that we must not miss the practicality of discipleship expressed throughout Jesus' life in His relationships with people, particularly the 12 men in His inner circle. Jesus is the ultimate model of discipleship. He modeled what He taught; He showed His disciples what devotional life with the Father looked like (Mark 1:35; Matthew 11:25-30; John 17). Jesus also modeled what was involved in meeting His disciples' emotional needs; He expressed empathy and compassion in addressing those needs (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; John 11:32-38).

In several instances, we see Jesus embracing a wholistic approach to discipleship, meeting the physical, physio-



Faculty in the Department of Discipleship in Lifespan Education at Andrews University engaged in conversation about developing the whole student.

logical, psychological, and ultimately the spiritual needs of those He served. Matthew 9:36 tells us that when Jesus saw the crowds, “He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (NIV).<sup>13</sup> As Jesus witnessed the suffering of the people He served, He felt their anguish and was moved with compassion. His compassion led Him to care for their physical and physiological needs by healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, and feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14:14-21; 20:34). Jesus’ tearful response (John 11:35) to Martha and Mary on the death of their brother Lazarus indicated that psychologically He was sensitized to the emotional anguish that accompanies grief and loss. He enters the experience of His disciples, empathizing with them, sharing in their affliction, and bringing comfort to the suffering ones. The author of the Book of Hebrews also tells us that Jesus was “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (chap. 4:15, KJV), confirming His compassionate and empathetic approach to discipleship.

It is also necessary to understand the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in the discipleship process. Paul discusses various gifts the Holy Spirit

gives disciples as tools for building healthy relationships and communities (Ephesians 4:1-12). Then in verses 14 to 16, he emphasizes the *reason for* and *benefits of* the discipleship gifts. While the gifts are multifaceted, the common objective is the formation of Jesus in each disciple (vs. 13). This formation leads to maturity: “The object of the bestowal of gifts is that God’s children might grow into spiritual manhood.”<sup>14</sup> The outworking of gifts of the Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit. As we grow in faith, we are empowered to live and speak the truth in love, becoming more like Jesus, who is Love and Truth. As each disciple experiences transformation through devotional encounters and relationships with Jesus and in community, collectively, we grow in unity, building up the body of Christ. (See Sidebar for Attributes of the Relational-Communal Model of Discipleship.)

### A Basic Definition of Discipleship

Before making a few final suggestions for engaging in wholistic discipleship in the classroom, let’s look at a short definition and then a breakdown of wholistic discipleship.

**Discipleship:** leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus

**Leading:** All leaders lead by exam-

ple whether they know it or not—actions are more powerful than words. You cannot lead others into what you do not have—especially regarding a personal relationship with Jesus.

**Growing:** Healthy growth, according to principles of Adventist education described by Ellen White, is nur-

tured by addressing body, mind, and spirit.<sup>15</sup>

*Body* is physical and emotional and is impacted by trauma;

*Mind* is both cognitive and affective and involves various learning styles, love languages, and temperaments.<sup>16</sup> All are all impacted by cul-

ture and generational location.

*Spirit* is our experience with **Jesus** via the Holy Spirit. It may also involve spiritual warfare and battling demonic influences and oppression/depression not only within the individual but also affecting all of God’s creation from beginning to end—the Great Controversy.

### Sidebar: Attributes of the Relational-Communal Model of Discipleship by Jasmine J. Fraser

As we seek to understand and practice discipleship as modeled by Jesus, there is no doubt that the process is relational and communal. A relational-communal model approach to discipleship helps us understand the interwoven cords of journeying, obedience, transformation, and serving. We journey with Jesus and others in community and respond daily in obedience to the directive of the Holy Spirit. The relational-communal approach to discipleship modeled by Jesus in the nonformal learning context can also serve as a guide in the formal learning setting.

In the formal learning context, relational-communal discipleship begins at the intersection of faith and learning and is further cultivated by creating inclusive and supportive learning environments where students and educators build meaningful relationships. The table below suggests an outline of how to create such an environment. Through the working of the Holy Spirit in relational-communal discipleship, lives are transformed in both formal and informal learning contexts, and individuals become conduits of God’s love to others in society.

#### Some Attributes of the Relational-Communal Model of Discipleship in the Formal Context of Learning

#### Modeling/Practicing Relational-Communal Discipleship in the Formal Context of Learning

##### Foster Authentic Relationships

**Cultivate:** Foster authentic relationships based on trust and mutual respect (between educators and administrators, between educators/administrators and students, and among students).

**Connect:** Prioritize connection over content dissemination in the teaching and learning process.

**Stories Matter:** Emphasize the value of individual stories and experiences.

##### Transparent Communication

**Dialogue:** Foster a safe space for open and honest dialogue.

**Active Listening:** Practice and encourage active listening and empathy.

**Feedback:** Create opportunities for questions and discussions.

##### Shared Meaning

**Collaborate:** Emphasize collaborative learning experiences.

**Exchange:** Encourage the exchange of knowledge and insights among participants.

**Value:** Respect and value diverse perspectives.

##### Intentional Mentoring

**Engage:** Participate in intentional one-on-one relationships.

**Accountability:** Provide guidance, support, and accountability.

**Growth:** Set realistic personal growth goals, and commend, and affirm progress.

##### Care Project

**Contribute to felt needs:** Create a system to pool resources to temporarily alleviate hardships and difficulties.

##### Community Service Initiatives

**Provide opportunities and foster engagements** for service in the academic setting or the local community.

All three areas (body, mind, and spirit) work together for optimal health and growth, and all need to be nurtured by effective discipleship practices that ultimately lead to equipping and sending (Acts 2). As we address these areas of body, mind, and spirit, we must keep in mind that all are affected by various traumas that individuals experience in life. A healthy discipling community will lift one another up and help in all these areas of life to produce well-balanced followers of Jesus.

**Relationship:** The relationship is between “**people**” and “**Jesus**.” And the relationship with **Jesus** is greatly impacted by the community of “**people**” with “**people**.” There is also a difference between knowing about **Jesus** and entering a personal relationship with **Him** to truly “knowing” **Him** intimately so that **His** life transforms a **person**—re-forming him or her back into **His** image.

### Taking Action

Based on the discussion and definition above, here are some basic steps we believe will help educators as they prioritize wholistic discipleship with students. Many educators already use at least some of these steps, so the goal here is to simply give us all a friendly reminder of their potential spiritual impact:

1. *Spirituality flows from the leader’s own devotional life.* If you are struggling with knowing how to engage devotionally or with prioritizing devotional time, you are not alone.

Devotional engagement is a discipline, and it will not happen without effort. The key is to recognize the positive impact of an active, regular devotional life on daily experiences. As noted earlier in this article, devotional time is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. A good resource for better understanding how to enhance one’s relationship with Jesus and build an effective devotional life is *Authentic: Where True, Life-changing Christianity Begins* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2012). Just as TAG Time (Time Alone with God) has shown great benefits for chil-

dren, it is important for teachers and other educational leaders to remember the importance of it for themselves as well. TAG time is also one of the greatest opportunities for children to experiment with and discover their own spiritual love languages and learning styles.

2. *Other than their parents, there are few people who know students better than their teacher(s).* In helping children to grow in body, mind, and spirit, taking time to check in with students who seem to be struggling is vitally important. Praying with students who are facing challenges at home or bullying at school (and actively implementing policies to prevent these occurrences) can be a great boost for them spiritually as well. The importance of the care and concern that teachers offer their students should never be underestimated. This is critically important for forming community—which is the foundation of Christ’s church on earth. It is also important to know when to refer students for professional counseling and other forms of support that may be needed.

3. *Outreach is an essential aspect of spirituality* and is referenced in the definition above as, “equipping and sending.” Giving students the opportunity to engage in community service, in addition to being helpful in the classroom, is important for their spiritual growth. In my (S.W.) experience, community service and the basic concept of learning to help others can be a great catalyst for greater spiritual interest and growth. If your school doesn’t already have a robust community-service program, visit <http://collaborativeministry.org> for more community service ideas and to learn how community engagement fits into the overall spirituality of your school. Serving the community is a natural outcome of deeper spirituality, and just as the leader’s devotional life is foundational to spirituality, so is active engagement in serving others, side-by-side, working together with students, pastors, and parents.

### Conclusion

Discipleship requires that we know who we are as disciples and what we are called to do. As Adventist edu-

cators, we must lead by example, and this means nurturing our own relationship with Christ and being ready and willing to share it. We must demonstrate care for our students, and this requires that we understand their lives, their traumas, and intentionally seek ways to encourage and support them as they grow physically, mentally, and spiritually. We must not only create environments that encourage and support them but also engage them in outreach and service to others. These principles serve as the foundation of discipleship and can help to build a framework to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ, which is the true purpose of Adventist education.<sup>17</sup>

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*This article has been peer reviewed.*

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*This article was co-written by the faculty of the Department of Discipleship and Lifespan Education (DSLE) at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, with each sharing from his or her particular specialty in the department. A companion article was published in *Ministry Magazine*. See Scott R. Ward et al., “Discipling the Whole Person,” *Ministry Magazine* 95:8 (August 2023): 11-13. Available at: <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2023/08/Discipling-the-whole-person>.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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12. Jennifer A. Guerra Aldana, "Guiding Values for Multicultural Youth Ministry," *Fuller Youth Institute* (March 29, 2018): <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/guiding-values-for-multicultural>. We see cross-cultural connections modeled in Jesus' ministry as he interacted with people from all walks of life: the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13); the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28); the possessed man from Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-20); the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42); the Greeks (John 12:20-26) and many more. See the Involve Youth website: <http://www.involveyouth.org/> for additional resources to help grow and nurture multicultural understanding.

13. Scripture quotations in this article credited to NIV are quoted from the New International Version of the Bible. Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations credited to KJV are quoted from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

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