

# THE ROLE OF DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING IN CHURCH LIFE

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You may have heard the story of the inept construction crew who sent their foreman into the boss's office to ask, "That house you wanted us to build--did you want us to build it top-down or bottom-up?"

"Bottom-up, of course, you idiot!" cried the boss; whereupon the foreman turned, opened the office door and yelled outside, "Okay, boys, tear her down and start over!"

In the hectic rush of life church leaders often end up in a similar predicament. There are so many training needs crying out to be met: marriage enrichment, parenting, recovery, new member training, Sunday School teacher and worker training, stewardship training, spiritual gifts training, etc.

Does it really make any difference where you start training a person? Is there any "bottom" at which to start, a thing that comes first, a foundation upon which other training can be built like the bricks of a home rising on the concrete foundation. The training of new members in the direction, doctrine, ministry philosophy and mode of operation of the church certainly seems essential. Without adequate new member training, new people have difficulty "finding their way around" in the organizational life of the church.

Beyond the new member's course, one type of training needs the church's special attention in order to lay both an adequate foundation for the personal lives of its members and an adequate foundation for future spiritual leadership in the congregation: discipleship training.

"Discipleship Training" has been a "catch-phrase" for some time. Depending on the source, the term may mean anything from "an eight week study on the meaning of the word 'disciple' in the New Testament" to "everything we do to train believers." In our own ministry we use the term to mean training focused on how to (1) walk in a personal relationship with the Lord and (2) be a loving steward of the responsibilities he has given us (witnessing, participating in the Body of Christ, being a steward of money, time, relationships, gifting, job, etc.).

An adequate discipleship training program gives a church three distinct advantages.

- **First, discipleship training allows a church to conserve new believers and the zeal they bring into church life.**

When adults become Christians they soon want to know how this "thing" called "the Christian life" works. They understand that they have been saved by the grace of God without their own works; they know they now have entered into a father-child relationship with God. So...how does this "relationship" work? What do I do now?

The questions are rarely verbalized. New believers usually quietly watch older believers for clues on how to act and what patterns of life to develop.

Adult converts invariably run into problems in applying their new-found Christianity in their homes and workplace. Often the problems mount as time goes on. Soon, a new believer is "stumped," unsure how to solve the complex problems he is facing or how to go any further as a Christian.

After a period of time the new convert's initial zeal cools. He may drop out of church. Or, he may settle into patterns of living that reflect what he thinks is the norm around him.

Discipleship training can provide answers for the urgent questions that new believers are asking while the fire of early zeal is still hot. Practical, Scriptural answers and practical help in dealing with the situations they face fan the flame of devotion to the Lord. Rather than dropping out or cooling off, a new believer can settle into a growing relationship with Christ and continue to develop as a steward of what God has given him.

- **Second, discipleship training also provides the tools for conserving the fruit of "personal revivals."**

In a worship service God may deeply stir the hearts of "already-believers" and call them to repentance and a fresh beginning with him.

In Baptist life such people often publicly "rededicate" their lives to Christ. From that point they need practical guidance in how to grow in their fresh relationship with the Lord. Without adequate training, "rededicated" people soon slip into the old lifestyle. Some may be stirred again by the Holy Spirit at the next church revival meeting. Others become quietly hopeless. I once counseled a man who, by his own testimony, had gone through sixteen major rededications of his life to Christ but each time without further training. He was quite cynical about the possibility of Jesus Christ bringing any real change into his life.

When people who have been Christians for years suddenly come to the point that they sincerely desire to grow in Christ, discipleship training provides the tools they need, not only to start walking with Christ, but to continue walking with him over the years.

There is, indeed, a lot more to learn about the Christian life than what is covered in discipleship training. But, the practical walk with Christ learned through discipleship training provides a solid foundation for future learning. People who have learned how to personally walk with the Lord have set the stage for strong application of what they learn in new arenas, such as marriage enrichment or parenting.

- **Discipleship training performs a third key function in church life: it provides the basis for healthy spiritual leadership in the congregation.**

All organizations, including the local church, are built on trust. They are strong when followers and leaders trust one another. As the leaders of the organization do things that build trust, the organization grows stronger. As leaders do things that violate trust or call their trustworthiness into question, the organization falters.

When leaders in a congregation walk personally with the Lord, handle their responsibilities/stewardship well, and live out the love for one another that is to be characteristic of Jesus' disciples (John 13:34-35), trust and good will grow in the congregation.

When congregational leaders lack a personal walk with the Lord, when they treat people in a less-than-Scriptural manner, when they lead out of "envy or selfish ambition" (James 3:14-17), many of their followers see the contradiction with Scripture. Members question the trustworthiness of such leaders, lose respect for them and hesitate to follow.

In business, an employee may follow a less-than-respectable boss because he is paid to do so. Volunteers, however, are not paid to follow anyone. Volunteers abandon disrespectful leadership. They spend their time, energy and money following people they respect.

Church members are volunteers. When congregational leaders behave in a sub-Christian manner, trust is violated, the leaders lose respect from church members. Members emotionally pull back, and the church begins to falter.

Discipleship training provides a means for developing future leaders of the congregation who have genuine spiritual content in their lives.

As believers learn how to walk with the Lord and actually develop a lifestyle that reflects responsible, loving stewardship, they become people "respectable" to the congregation.

When spiritually respectable people are promoted to leadership and trained as leaders, they gain and keep the respect of the congregation. Over time their lifestyle, their manner of dealing with people and the way they exert leadership continue to show them to be trustworthy. Trust grows among the congregation. The whole church is strengthened as members willingly trust and follow respectable leaders.

So, discipleship training not only provides personal blessings to the individual members of the church who go through it, it sets the stage for future credible leadership that will strengthen the entire congregation in its mission.

In our own ministry we aim toward discipleship training that

1. practically teaches believers how to develop their personal walk with Christ and how to handle the areas of their stewardship from a Scriptural perspective. (An emphasis on doctrine, philosophy, history, etc. is reserved for later.)
2. has an evangelistic context--the trainees are involved somehow in working with unbelievers over time: befriending them, ministering to them, sharing Christ with them.
3. emphasizes successful application of ideas to life rather than covering large amounts of material or merely memorizing concepts. What needs to result from discipleship training is a way of life, not merely a head full of discipleship concepts. (Other, later training may be more conceptual.) Discipleship training needs to stay "applicational."
4. is paced to fit into contemporary lifestyle and to fit the ability of the trainees. If the weekly time demands are too high, few parents and career people will go through the program. We have used

different training packages for people with different natural "paces:" faster paced for "hi-gear" people and slower paced for other members.

5. has points in the training where people can "opt out." Life situations change, and people may not have the same amount of time or the same hunger they earlier had. They need points at which they can leave training without having to quietly drop out in dishonor.
6. has leaders who set the example in the application of the training and also in mature Christian attitudes and values.
7. has leaders available to personally mentor trainees as they have difficulty with application of different parts of the training.

It is true that adults tend to participate in training that personally interests them. Some may be ripe and ready for marriage enrichment training to meet pressing needs in their own life. And they may not be motivated at this point to get into discipleship training. Fine! Wise leadership provides opportunities for people to learn at the point of interest and felt need. And, due to past problems, some people are not immediately ready for the discipline of discipleship training-recovery groups are much more appropriate for their situation in life.

At the same time, amid the whirl of church activities, providing and promoting an effective discipleship training program gives the "new person construction crew" (church staff and teachers) the opportunity to lay in the lives of members a solid spiritual learning foundation on which the later walls and roof of a growing Christian life can rise.