

SPIRITUAL AND RELATIONAL VITALITY

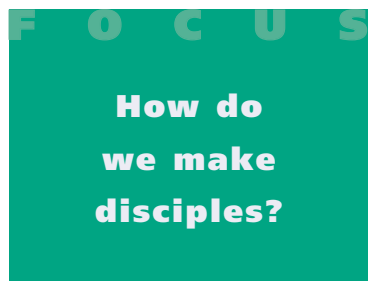
Be a disciple

We often teach children that if they want a friend, they need to be a friend. In the same way, if we want to make disciples, we first become disciples. Jesus said, “Follow me; learn from me; put into practice what you have heard me say.” (See *Matthew 4:19; 11:29; 7:24.*) Disciples are people who follow the example and words of Jesus, who want to be like Jesus in what they do and say, and who consistently choose to live the way Jesus lived.

“Go and make disciples,” Jesus said as he prepared to leave this world, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (See *Matthew 28:16-20.*) If we invite others to be disciples, we must be an example in the way we live. With the assurance that Jesus is with us, helping us do what he has called us to do, we can boldly live every day as disciples seeking to make other disciples.

LOVE AS WE ARE LOVED

The most important thing in life, Jesus said, is to love God with our whole being and to love others as God has loved us all. (See *Mark 12:28-34; John 13:34-35.*) Love is the heart and soul of discipleship. We cannot be Jesus’ disciples if we do not choose to love as we have been loved. (See *1 John 4:7-21.*) Love is “the most excellent way” and “the greatest” of all things in this world, more important than gifts, knowledge, sacrifice, even faith and hope. (See *1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13.*)



Disciple-making is both easy to understand and hard to do, for it begins with our personal commitment to love God and to love others and to let nothing keep us from doing it. We all want to be loved and so our first priority is to love others. Jesus said, “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (*Matthew 7:12*). In other religions, it is often stated as “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you,” so the implication is not to lie, steal, or harm others because we don’t want people to lie, steal from, or injure us. Jesus, however, stated it positively,

calling us not only to refrain from doing harm, but to choose to do what is good – and the very first good, the most compelling and all-inclusive good we can do for others is to love them.



Love is defined throughout Scripture, including in *1 Corinthians 13*, which reads:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

And in *Romans 13:9-10*, we find this summary:

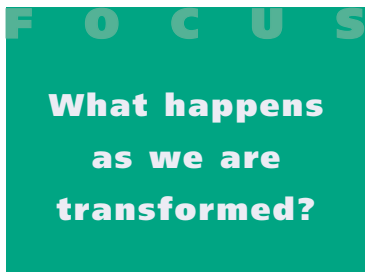
All the commandments are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

We often think of love as emotion, but love is action, what we choose to do in relationships with others, regardless of our feelings. When we choose to do good, we are living in love; we are living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Be transformed

The apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (*Romans 12:2*). Paul understood something that people often forget – that we must be transformed. We must experience the power of God’s Spirit to change us from the inside, transforming how we think, see and feel, how we experience life. It is not enough to choose not to be conformed. We must also be transformed.

Transformation is not just for leaders, of course, but for everyone. The Scriptures often speak of being empowered by the Spirit to do what God calls us to do. That empowerment is not just for the kings and prophets of Israel, not just for Jesus and the apostles, but for every disciple, every Christian. To be transformed by the renewing of the mind does not mean that we simply learn to think in a different way or that we just choose different actions; rather the renewal and transformation happens “by the power at work within us” (*Ephesians 3:20-21*).



Our choice is whether we will continue to live according to the pattern of this world or whether we will allow the Spirit to change us, to help us experience life differently, to empower us to live as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Want for others what we have experienced

As we choose to follow Jesus and to be disciples, as we choose to love as we are loved, as we choose to be transformed by the Spirit, we will experience life in new ways. Scripture calls this “a new creation.” We learn new ways of living in this world and discover the power and confidence to live in those ways. The Bible even says that we are “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Ephesians 4:20-5:2, NIV*), and goes on to describe the kind of life we can live, a life filled with honesty, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, compassion, and love.

As we consistently experience this kind of life, we will want other people to experience it as well. We will not be able to keep it to ourselves; we will tell other people about it. In our daily conversations, as we talk to people about what is happening in our lives, as we try to explain to other people what we have experienced, we will discover a new passion to show other people by our actions and to tell them by our words the experience of new life we have received from God.

Practice spiritual disciplines

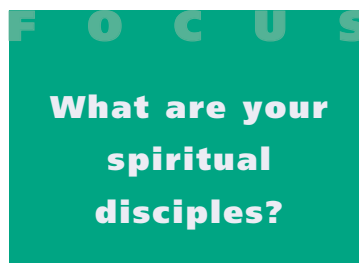
How do we maintain the vitality of this new life in Christ? Once we have made our initial choice to begin this life of discipleship, once we have entered into this new creation through the Spirit, once we have experienced spiritual

empowerment from God, how do we sustain it through the years? Spiritual disciplines is a term used for a broad range of actions and habits that we learn, cultivate, and practice to keep this new life vital and transforming. Richard Foster’s classic introduction to the spiritual disciplines, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), provides a good introduction.

The inward disciplines include meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. Many Christians have a daily time to read Scripture and to pray, perhaps to read a daily devotion. Foster describes how that time can be expanded to include extended times of silence, centering, deep prayer, fasting, and reading and study not only of the Scriptures but of other “spiritual” readings.

The outward disciplines include simplicity, solitude, mutual respect and honor (Foster uses the term “submission”), and service. The way we live with other people in this world is an important part of our journey of discipleship. We can choose to live simply rather than conform to the consumer mentality of our culture. We need to have time apart from other people in solitude. Learning to live in appropriate relationships of mutual respect and honor and to live as servants toward others (rather than expecting to be served) – these, too, are spiritual disciplines.

The corporate disciplines include confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. These are all cultivated within the Christian communities of local congregations and the larger Church. We need to share words of forgiveness, to worship God in the presence of other believers, to offer mutual guidance, and to celebrate all that God has done and is doing in our world.



As we consistently practice these spiritual disciplines, we grow and mature in spiritual and relational vitality.

Be prepared for change and conflict

Conflict is often a major obstacle to vitality in a congregation. When it results in conflict between members, unexpected or unwelcome change can drain energy from congregational life. If conflicts continue or if they escalate into divisive actions and an unforgiving spirit in which people

stop listening and talking to one another and even withdraw from congregational life, then spiritual and relational vitality is greatly diminished. How can a congregation be prepared for change and conflict?

Conflict, at some level, will always accompany change. We may experience discomfort, doubt, or resistance to new ideas. That's normal and to be expected. Transformational leaders will recognize those reactions as part of the process of change and will keep moving forward in appropriate ways. Many resources are available for learning how to respond to conflict in healthy, vital ways. In the context of working through conflict in a congregation, three principles are essential.

Create a safe place.—If we create an environment in the congregation which makes people feel safe, we can work through conflicts in a healthy, empowering way. People feel safe when they feel respected, valued, and loved. People feel safe when they know they can express themselves and know that people will listen—and continue to love and respect them—even if they don't agree. People feel safe when they know that if anyone becomes verbally or emotionally disrespectful or threatening, other people will intervene.

Listen with compassion.—Compassionate listening will vitalize a church dealing with conflict. Followers of Jesus seek to be compassionate as he was compassionate and to listen as he listened to people who were hurting, angry or ashamed. Conflict is filled with hurt, anger, and shame; compassion enables us to listen patiently, with respect and honor, valuing every person in the midst of our conflict. We listen to know the other person's heart, not just their argument or position. We listen to understand even what the other person may have trouble expressing in words.

F O C U S
How can your church respond to conflict in a healthy, empowered way?

Seek discernment for decision-making.—At some point, the problem or issue creating the conflict does need some resolution, but how do we come to the decisions necessary for that resolution? If we only discuss and vote, we often make the situation worse and create even more serious divisions. As Danny Morris and Charles Olsen, in

Discerning God's Will Together (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1997) suggest, congregational decision-making often becomes a process in which people pool their ignorance, value expediency, enter into political tradeoffs, engage in power plays, and rush to judgment and then divide into winners and losers, leaving behind residual feelings of joy or pain. Morris and Olsen describe an alternative in which they encourage churches to practice discernment rather than democratic decision-making, especially in the midst of conflict. "The process of spiritual discernment draws us beyond our own limited reason to seek divine presence and insight," they say. "The Spirit of God, which operates at the deepest levels of the human psyche and within the mysteries of the faith community, brings to the surface gifts of wisdom and guidance, which we only discover and name. . . . It looks to the wisdom of the whole community as people talk to one another, come to consensus, and take action. Discernment includes both being and doing. It focuses on individuals and communities (pp.12-13). Every disciple-making congregation that wants conflict to be transformational rather than destructive is urged to practice spiritual discernment in their decision-making processes.

Build a true community

The process of community-building goes through several stages, as described in Scott Peck's classic, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (Carmichael, CA: Touchstone Books, 1988). Most groups begin at pseudo-community. People often experience their churches as friendly, warm, welcoming, and filled with good people. People smile and chat and offer their help in times of need. Yet most people remain at a superficial level in their conversations and relationships, talking only about subjects that feel safe and don't threaten the friendliness they feel. This is a false community without real inclusiveness, honest acceptance, deep respect or love for one another that transcends differences.

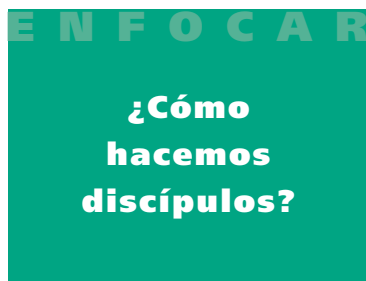
When some crisis occurs, precipitated perhaps by unexpected change, and conflict develops, it feels chaotic and threatening. To maintain a feeling of harmony and goodwill, the group often chooses not to openly face the crisis and stays in pseudo-community. If the congregation, instead, moves into the conflict, acknowledges that they may not know what to do and stays open, they may come to experience true community, which Peck describes as a soft quietness, peace, vulnerability, tears, laughter and joy, healing, and deep inward change (p.104). Such a congregation will be a spiritually vital congregation and powerful witness to authentic discipleship.

VITALIDAD ESPIRITUAL Y RELACIONAL

El discipulado requiere más que esfuerzos y destreza humana. La presencia del Espíritu trabajando en una congregación nos habilita a crecer en Cristo y a amarnos unos(as) a otros(as) así como Cristo nos amó.

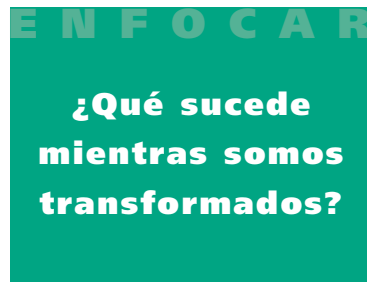
La pasión de ser la congregación que Dios quiere que seamos es la base para el discipulado en la iglesia discipuladora. Individualmente, el deseo de descubrir y responder al llamado de Dios motiva a las personas a poner en práctica el propósito de Dios. Corporalmente, la visión específica de la congregación es la que motiva todas las acciones. Sin esta pasión, el discipulado se vuelve vacío y pierde vigor.

Un discípulo(a) una discípula sabe también que la manera en que trata a otras personas así es la medida de amor que tiene por Jesús. Una iglesia discipuladora enseña a sus miembros a lidiar con conflictos en maneras saludables. Busca actividades que profundicen las relaciones de amor en la congregación.

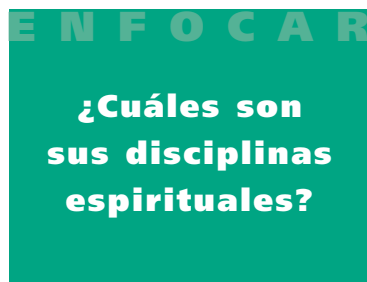


Esta vitalidad espiritual toca cada aspecto de la vida de la iglesia discipuladora. Los(as) líderes continuamente buscan profundizar su estar atentos a la presencia de Dios en sus vidas. Los grupos pequeños buscan ser comunidades en las cuales la presencia de Cristo es real. La adoración exalta a Dios por su presencia y poder que actúa en el mundo.

Esta vitalidad espiritual mueve a las personas y a la congregación a ir más allá de la preocupación por la salvación individual. Les invita a disfrutar de la vida abundante que Cristo prometió, basada en relaciones de amor dirigidas por un sentido permanente de la presencia y el amor de Dios. La vitalidad espiritual nos lleva a ser Jesús para otras personas en un mundo que desesperadamente necesita paz, gozo, esperanza y amor. Toca cada aspecto de la vida –personal, familiar, en el trabajo, la iglesia, la comunidad.



No podemos fabricar esta vitalidad espiritual. Dios es el que controla el proceso. La congregación, no obstante, puede buscar continuamente abrirse a Dios y lo que está haciendo en medio de ella. Esto conlleva a un estudio de la Biblia y oración disciplinados. Requiere que dejemos el pasado para abrazar el futuro. Lo que “queremos” para “nuestra” iglesia se sujeta a lo que Dios quiere para su iglesia. Cualquier congregación que se envuelva en el proceso encontrará incertidumbre, luchas y conflicto.



Pero las demandas de la búsqueda de vitalidad espiritual se opacan a la luz de la transformación que ocurre en las vidas en una congregación. Las luchas traen paz; la muerte, resurrección. Con la resurrección viene la nueva vida –una vida que tiene propósito, que tiene sentido y que tiene una esperanza viva. ¡La disciplina espiritual se convierte en vitalidad espiritual!

