

Romans 12

We who are many are one body in Christ.

A Church-Wide Focus on Intentional Discipleship

Produced by the General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church to communicate effective principles and practices demonstrated by congregations that are actively making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

These congregations are marked by:

- Clarity around the mission and vision of the congregation.
- Practice of spiritual disciplines, both corporately and individually.
- Nurture in growth in discipleship through mutual support and accountability.
- Cultivation of intentional and mutual relationships with the most vulnerable—the poor, children, the imprisoned, the powerless.
- Consistent concern for inviting people into relationship with Jesus Christ, combined with wise practices for initiating them into the body of Christ.
- Connectional relationships that facilitate participation in God's mission of global transformation.
- Shared clergy and lay leadership.

"I now feel more comfortable talking about my faith." "Worship seems more personal." These are just two of the comments from participants in a church-wide study at First UMC in Arlington, TX. The church's goal for the study was to increase prayer, Bible reading, and faith sharing of participants, so it was important to choose curriculum that leaders could adapt for various learning styles and the ways existing groups function. The church offered new study groups at a variety of times and locations and made modifications to meet people's availability.

First the congregation surveyed other churches that had initiated church-wide studies. The survey uncovered successes and barriers to participation. Next they chose a study that they thought would meet their goals. The church staff completed the study first to determine if the study did indeed meet their goals. They then selected study leaders who completed the study together. During this phase of planning, the staff promoted the study in the congregation and encouraged participation from everyone.

People from age 2 to 102 joined in the study. For eight weeks, participants knew that everyone was reading the same Scripture and trying the same prayer activity. Each week the ideas and experiences of study groups were incorporated in Sunday worship. People came to worship with anticipation and noticed ways the elements of worship reinforced the Scripture theme. Preschool children built a prayer wall with Lego bricks, on which they are still posting prayers. Adult groups requested additional opportunities to sing hymns and pray together.

An unexpected benefit of the church-wide study was strong participation of group leaders in meetings to support the effort. The facilitators met regularly to discuss ideas for teaching and engaging participants. These gatherings became teacher development events with 100% participation!

The church-wide study at First Arlington has helped people understand discipleship as a process of growing in the Christian life. Congregants have developed a new awareness of community life, engaging with visitors and with each other. The church is already planning the next study!

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does your church do now to build the understanding of growth in discipleship as a lifelong process?
2. How do you adapt materials and schedules to meet people where they are?
3. What do you need to learn from other congregations to improve your ministry?

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