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A Case Study in Adult Discipleship: Implications for Pastoral Leadership & Imagination

Anglican churches in countries where the church has thrived, are nevertheless struggling with the challenge of discipleship. In his installation charge, Archbishop Jackson Ole Sapit of Kenya asked a series of important questions:

If Christians form 80% of Kenya's population, why are our elections often violence-prone? Why is our society riddled with corruption, nepotism and a great level of social stratification? Why are environmental degradation, poverty and disease still ever-present realities? (Anglican Communion Office, 2019)

John Stott (2014) observed that while the church is “exploding” worldwide, feedback from church leaders on the ground is that it is “growth without depth” (p. 39).

It is not surprising that the theme of the 16th Anglican Consultative Council held in Lusaka, Zambia (April 8-20, 2016) was “Intentional Discipleship in a World of Differences.” At this conference, a season of “Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making” was launched for all churches in the Anglican Communion and it will run until 2025 (Anglican Communion News Service, 2015).

The Anglican Church of Canada (ACC) has some resources to help churches make practical choices so as to live generously, faithfully and intentionally. However, there are no studies on how discipleship is experienced at a congregational level. Some important questions are: How do clergy and members understand discipleship? What challenges do they experience? What strategies and pastoral leadership are needed to nurture discipleship? How, if any, does the Anglican liturgy impact discipleship formation? How do we know if people are growing as disciples? Studies of how some Anglican churches are living these discipleship questions would fill this gap.

In a recent six-month sabbatical, I asked my Bishop to recommend me two or three Anglican churches that focused on “discipleship” in Toronto, the largest and most diverse city in Canada. He named three churches which, according to him, are “doing a good job in discipleship ministry.” Due to limited time and resources, I decided to focus on one of these churches as a case study. The purpose of this case study (completed two years before the COVID-19 pandemic) was to investigate how discipleship was understood, envisioned, nurtured, and expressed among clergy and adult members at one Anglican church in urban Toronto.

Literature Review

Michael Wilkins (1992) notes that the Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, comes from a verb, *manthano*, “to learn.” First used to denote a learner or apprentice in a particular skill or craft, the meaning of ‘disciple’ gradually shifted towards a pupil embracing a concept and being committed to a great teacher or master. By the time of Herodotus (C5 BC), *mathetes* referred to a person who was making a personal life commitment to the master, living out his practices. In the New Testament (NT), disciples within religious groups focused on learning as an imitation of the life and character of the religious leader, to become like him (chapter 4).

Dallas Willard (2011) points out that Jesus was very unorthodox and did not fit the standard model of the rabbi. Unlike the religious teachers of his day, Jesus had no “formal” education beyond the synagogue schools. Yet, the crowds were amazed at his great wisdom (Jn. 7: 15) and authoritative teaching (Mt. 7: 28; Mk. 1: 22; Lk. 4: 32). Instead of vetting and accepting applicants, Jesus personally selected 12 disciples from very diverse backgrounds. While he retained the basic nature of the rabbi-disciple relationship of his day, he invested all of his life into his disciples and taught them about the nature of God and kingdom. His one condition was clear: all who follow him must deny themselves and take up their cross (Mt. 16: 24; Mk. 8: 34; Lk. 9: 23). The 12 disciples progressively engaged in doing as Jesus did, travelling all over Judea and Galilee preaching, teaching and healing. After his trial and death, and during his postresurrection appearances, Jesus assured them of his invisible presence. With the coming of the Spirit, Jesus continued to teach and lead through the formation of the early church.

In a classic work, *The Training of the Twelve*, A. B. Bruce (1871) identified three stages in discipleship, which are ‘come and see,’ ‘come and follow me,’ and ‘come and be with me.’ Bill Hull (2006) added a fourth stage to Bruce (1871), namely ‘remain in me.’ Robert Coleman (1963) in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, lists 8 steps in Jesus’ training of the disciples: selection, association (shared life), consecration (obedience and loyalty), impartation (empowerment of the Holy Spirit), demonstration (modeling), delegation (sent out), supervision (checking), and reproduction (do what he did, and more).

Morgan (2015) observed that while the word “disciple” occurs frequently in the Gospels and in Book of Acts, it is not used either in the Old Testament or in the letters of Peter, Paul, James or John in the NT (p. 115). She concludes that the emphasis in the Gospels is on individuals responding to Jesus’ call, but in the NT the concern is on the group learning to reshape their lives in light of that call. The church, the *ekklesia*, are disciples bound by shared loyalty and values to Jesus. For Morgan (2015), “the plural of disciple is church” and “if the church is not about making disciples, it is not church” (pp. 115-116).

Thinking on the church is shifting from program to process, and from a membership culture to a discipleship culture. Michael Foss (2004) describes two models of church. In the “membership” model, church members pay their dues to support the pastor and keep the organization going. Clergy meets the spiritual needs of members, keeps them happy, and generally does ministry in culturally accepted ways. In the “discipleship” model, the pastor is the spiritual leader and catalyst “through whom the Holy Spirit encourages, equips, directs and strengthens the faith of those they serve” (p. 32). Thom Rainer and Erick Geiger (2011) note that church vitality is not found in complexity (churches with multiple programs) but simplicity, “a congregation designed around a straightforward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth” (p. 60). Rick Warren (2012) emphasizes that a church must be “purpose driven,” not with programs, but through a process moving people from membership, to mature faith, to ministry, and to life purpose and mission.

Dallas Willard (2006) points to a lack of discipleship among Christians as the “great omission” in the church (p. xi). For Morgan (2015), the greatest challenge to discipleship in the contemporary church is “cross-bearing,” because our culture

emphasizes health, security and the good life, free of pain (p. 186). Tom Sine (2008) suggests that the imagery of the good life and better future stems from the Enlightenment, which not only offers a compelling new myth to make sense of the world, but a vision of a better future we are all invited to share. For Sine, the marketers of our economy are now the brokers of meaning (p. 79).

Tom Beaudouin (2002) sees this as something akin to a new religion, "theocapitalism," a spiritual discipline based on four laws: progress through rapid growth, security through possession and consumption, salvation through competition and freedom to prosper through unaccountable corporations (p. 362). These framing stories deeply impact many churches. Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that to be a Christian "is to learn to live in a story you haven't chosen" (quoted in Morgan, 2015, p. 216).

In contrast to our culture's general aversion to pain, the Bible (and church history) points to purification that comes with suffering (Jn. 15; Jas. 1: 2-4; Rm. 5: 3-5; Heb. 12: 5-11). Dallas Willard (2006) speaks of a "golden triangle" of spiritual transformation: (1) embrace the challenge of daily problems; (2) sensitive to "walk in the Spirit"; (3) practice the spiritual disciplines; only then will we shine like stars in a darkened sky and effectively witness to Jesus' offer of a different world (p. 30).

Although Willard values Dietrich Bonhoeffer's important warning about "cheap Christianity" in *The Cost of Discipleship* (1966), he felt that Bonhoeffer, who eventually gave his life standing up to Nazi Germany, may have unintentionally fostered a view that discipleship is meant for "super Christians." Willard (2006) reminds us that discipleship is also about "flourishing," and that there is a cost to "non-discipleship" too.

[Non-discipleship] cuts you off from abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, a faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, a hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, a power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, non-discipleship costs you exactly the abundance of life that Jesus said he came to bring (p. 9)

Method

The use of single case studies is not for generalization to larger populations, but is a valid method to gain in-depth understanding into a phenomenon (Patton, 2014; Yin, 2009; Starman, 2013). Thomas (2011) notes that the case is not selected based upon a representative sample, but rather is selected because it is interesting, unusual and striking (p. 514). Yin highlighted that a case study can be helpful when we are eager to answer the questions of "how" and "why," when we cannot influence the behaviour of those involved in a study, and when we want to cover contextual conditions that may be relevant to the phenomenon under study (Yin in Baxter & Jack 2008, p. 545).

After a successful review by the Research Ethics Board at my institution, I wrote to the rector (lead pastor) who welcomed my research, with a condition that I share my findings with his ministry team. I interviewed each of the four clergy (pastors-3 males; 1 female) in the privacy of their offices. The pastor in charge of small groups and discipleship connected me with some adults (8 male; 9 female), which I divided into 4 focus groups. The criteria for this selection were that they be members of at least a year,

from diverse social-cultural backgrounds, balanced gender and age representations, and actively engaged in discipleship ministries. Patton (2014) outlined the merits of such a purposeful sampling of “information-rich cases” (pp. 242-243).

I participated in and observed a number of events that the clergy and members said were important in discipleship, and consulted various publications and the website of the church to gather any relevant information. Throughout my field research I kept careful field notes, and exercised self-reflexivity. I drew upon these extensive field notes to enrich and triangulate data from the interviews (Fetterman, 2009, p. 93).

A semi-structured interview protocol allowed the participants to elaborate on their lived experience. Using a constant-comparison model of data analysis, the transcripts provided a basis of sifting and searching for what appeared the most relevant codes through identification of repeated words, phrases, constructs and ideas (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 173). Following Gay and Mills (2019), transition from codes to themes involved reflection on key questions, organizational review, and visually displaying the findings (pp. 570-575). At the end of the interviews with the 21 participants, no new data emerged that generated novel themes related to the study, which suggested the sample size was adequate for the study (Silverman, 2006, pp. 306-307).

Preliminary findings were shared with the whole ministry team at one of their weekly meetings. The pastors and ministry leaders acknowledged that the interim report was a fair representation of their core values and strategies for adult discipleship. They asked various questions which added valuable insights. This interim report, a re-examination of data, strengthened the accuracy of the research (Fetterman, 2009, p. 117).

Findings & Discussion

Discipleship as Process of Following Jesus in Community

In a review of ministries of the previous year and strategies for the future at Vestry,¹ the rector emphasized the church’s understanding of discipleship as seeking to follow Jesus in all of life, guided by the Discipleship Covenant, a rule of life in the *Book of Common Prayer* (General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 1962). He said:

A Christian disciple is one who is learning to follow Jesus in every aspect of life.... A disciple’s journey includes aspiring to our Discipleship Covenant, which means active involvement, worship, financial contribution to ministry, prayer and study, as well as sharing the Good News. ... We see discipleship as being at the center of everything we do, both individually and as a faith community (Rector’s Report, Vestry, 2015).

Members said that the pastors often referred to the Discipleship Covenant in their teaching. It is also reviewed when new members join the church.

Discipleship is also understood as something “in process.” One member said: “The phrase, “you are welcomed no matter where you are in your spiritual journey” is

¹ The Vestry is the annual general meeting of an Anglican congregation, which I observed at this church.

“preached a lot” and “almost a mantra” at the church. Reflecting on his long years in ministry, the rector shared that discipleship does not come easy. He said: “It takes time to percolate down the lives of folks. I know the Holy Spirit does that. I have given up looking for ‘a disciple.’ I say, we are on this great adventure called ‘following Jesus’ or ‘discipleship.’ Why don’t you join us?”

Alison Morgan (2015) proposed that “*discipleship is a form of apprenticeship undertaken in community*. It’s practical, and it’s corporate” (original emphases, p. 58). She encourages us to change our focus in discipleship from emphasizing instruction to considering who we are becoming. Kafwanka and Oxbrow (2016) highlight that discipleship is closely related to the Greek word, *metanoia* (change of mind), and urged the church to think of discipleship as involving “a lifelong whole-life reorientation with challenging implications for our self-identity, our belonging within community, our belief systems and our behavior” (p. 5).

There was a great emphasis that discipleship happens in community. Both the clergy and members cited small groups as critical for discipleship. One pastor said: “One of the reasons why we practice something called ‘small groups’ is not because we are trying to help people get to know each other because we are a large parish. It is that and that is important. We practice small groups because we want to learn to follow Jesus in our life together.”

Members outlined the benefits of their small group experience: different backgrounds and cultures, support, accountability, openness and honesty in dealing with hard questions of faith and life. One member summarized it well.

In small groups we actively ask and answer the question: so how should we live, given what we’ve learned and what we seek to be? How does that work out in our lives?’ And when we talk amongst people we know as our confidantes... it really helps deepen the practical application of what are otherwise hypotheticals.

The pastor of small groups and discipleship shared his philosophy for small groups, emphasizing “word, worship, welcome and witness.” Small group leaders, locations and meeting times were prominently displayed in the church and website, and anyone can join by contacting any leader. This pastor regularly conducts “trial small groups” so new people can try small groups for a short time period, a kind of “on-ramp” into small groups. He also encourages small groups to do what they are good at rather than dictate a set structure and curriculum. For the clergy, small groups capitalize on the “one another” aspect of the Christian life.

Alison Morgan (2015) points out that the traditional sit-in-a row Sunday services are inadequate to nurture disciples in a secularized society. She highlights that “even committed Anglicans no longer find them helpful” (p. 238). For Morgan, “small groups” was Jesus’ model with the 12, and is critical “partly because you are a long way from home” and “because none of you has all the resources required by the situations you meet along the way” (p. 237). Dallas Willard (2002) highlighted that “the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of regular church service. They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple” (p. 250). Graham Cray notes that in today’s “corrosive”

culture, it is corporate disciplines and support which are needed for discipleship (cited in Morgan, 2015, p. 242).

While small groups are emphasized, only about 13% of the congregation were involved.² The clergy point out that members live busy lives, but many are also part of “ministry-based groups,” and ministry leaders care about discipleship. Tom Sine (2008) encourages churches in a time-stressed world, to find creative ways to carve out time and space to be truly known, deeply loved, and radically challenged to follow Christ in all of life (p. 261).

Discipleship Today

The clergy pointed to the church’s vision, “to be a transformative community for the City.” With a central downtown location, the church regularly rents out office space to various businesses for corporate meetings. The clergy considers this an important public expression of discipleship, as people become familiar with the beautiful sanctuary and are introduced to its programs.

In addition, this church has a number of outreach programs. Adults and youth regularly volunteer with “Cornerstone,” serving food to the downtown community. The “Café ESL,” an English class for international students at the church, drew about 70-80 volunteers to tutor about 250 internationals on a weekday evening. A small group of members met regularly to discuss how to help a new Syrian refugee family the church was sponsoring. Conscious of the positive impact of “service” in discipleship, the clergy takes extra effort to ensure “accessibility.”

One pastor however felt the church could grow in a more holistic discipleship. This pastor was somewhat surprised that the curriculum in baptism classes did not include the last three obligations of the Baptism Covenant in the *Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (General Synod of the Anglican Church, 1985) which are: seek and serve Christ in all people; work for justice and peace; and stewardship of creation. This pastor said: “Many members see church and discipleship primarily in a pietistic way, which is good, but Jesus calls us to a whole life experience.” For this pastor, “the church has a vision of holistic ministry, but it can do more to promote works of justice, peace and creation care.” Similarly, some members felt the church could do more, citing the need for divorce care, dealing with cancer and depression, which are significant challenges in the community.

In a survey of clergy in the Anglican Diocese of Gloucester asking what they considered the most important elements of discipleship, clergy from all contexts and traditions selected ‘Bible study,’ ‘prayer’ and ‘worship’ as the top three activities. ‘Personal morality’ was rated at the bottom of the seventeen options, along with ‘witness’ and ‘faith at work’ (Anglican Diocese of Gloucester, 2011). Dwight Zscheile (2012) encourages churches to constantly ask “*what is God up to in our neighborhood?* How do we join with it? What is our unique calling, both personally and communally? How are we gifted to contribute?” (original emphases, p. 76). Graham Cray (2011) notes that when Christians live kingdom values, the church powerfully demonstrates a “future in advance”

² This figure was provided by the Director of Operations of the church.

community ... modeling and ministering an imperfect foretaste of the new heaven and new earth” (p. 24).

Two members felt that the church has not sufficiently emphasized “cross bearing.” One person, who had been at church for over a year, said he had never heard one sermon on Luke 14. Another member, nodding in agreement, said that the biggest challenge in discipleship is “how to deny oneself in an age of having everything ... to know where to hold off.” Others in the group disagreed. One person said her “homework” at baptism classes dealt with practical issues. She shared that once during a sermon, the pastor challenged the congregation: “Consider what is important to you. I know what’s important to you. Give me your credit card bill and your diary.” Another member said that the pastors “do not go super hard perhaps because they are sympathetic that people are in different faith stages.”

Alison Morgan (2015) observes that in the developed world which emphasizes the good life, consumerism is perhaps the strongest obstacle to discipleship (pp. 188, 226-228). Tom Beaudouin (2002) and Tom Sine (2008) point to different framing stories which powerfully challenge discipleship in postmodernity. While the clergy seemed sensitive to people in different faith stages, they may need to more consciously help members identify different narratives in the dominant culture, evaluate them, and find their part in God’s larger story.

Nurturing Discipleship

During Vestry, the rector said that as a “disciple-making community,” the pastoral leadership would focus on building the ministry through the strategic stewardship of resources. These include “Introduction to Jesus (ITJ), Turning to Jesus and Following Jesus, Baptismal Formation, Marriage Preparation, our worship services—all aspects of our equipping ministries” (Rector’s report, Vestry, 2015).

Opportunities to learn the Christian basics abound. These short courses are designed to meet needs at different life and faith stages. In response to my question, “What drew you to this church, and what made you stay,” one member declared: “Growth, personal growth. People come seeking answers to deep questions. They get full adult answers and they get interested in going deeper.” The rector emphasized that the approach in Christian basics is intentionally different from the usual “classes.” The teacher is not a “talking head,” and learners are encouraged to engage in small group discussions. I witnessed this approach at an ITJ session.

This church also emphasizes good preaching. The rector who teaches homiletics at a local Anglican seminary, shared that everyone, irrespective of social background or ethnicity, is looking for purpose, hope and meaning. Cognizant of people’s short attention spans but high expectations he wants “the sermons to count.” Many members said that it was the high quality preaching that first drew them here. One member shared how God’s word spoke directly to her at a “crisis” moment and brought her back to church. Everyone appreciated the preachers’ focus on the Bible, making it interesting and relevant.

While Christian basics meets a general need for people in various life and faith stages, some pastors said that it was challenging to get people to attend the midweek sessions. Even small groups, with its appeal in support and accountability, faced a similar problem. Clergy pointed to members’ demanding work and social schedules, most

evident with young families. One father commented: “Sunday is a very busy day. Our Sunday routine is we go to church, we come home, we do homework for an hour, have lunch. I usually try to get 4-5 hours of my work in. I invariably have birthday parties to get the kids to. Sunday is a working day....”

John Roberto (2015) encourages churches to reimagine faith formation for the 21st century, reconceptualizing learning in multiple settings (self-directed, mentored, at home, in small groups, in large group, church-wide, in the community and world) and in multi-platforms (physical and online environments). Dunlow (2021) demonstrated that of the 21 churches in New York surveyed in the first half of 2020, 95% engaged in digital discipleship, and half found it to be effective for their adults.

Some members call for deeper learning than what is available in Christian basics. J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett (2010) noted that catechesis was the early church’s lengthy process of discipleship. New believers were taught the story of the Bible, life and teachings of Jesus, the Lord’s prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and how to be part of God’s new community (pp. 75-88). The clergy may want to consider a more structured catechesis, which would also benefit many members from a non-Anglican tradition.

A danger in over emphasizing “learning” in discipleship is that it can sometimes give the wrong impression that commitment to Jesus is merely about acquiring information. Michael Wilkins (1992) warns that “sometimes, our discipleship programs thwart true discipleship—we can become so involved in our programs that we isolate ourselves from real life” (p. 22). Alison Morgan (2015) emphasized that Jesus’ training began with “come follow me,” then “listen, observe” and lastly, “go and do.” His discipleship was primarily “learning on the hoof” (87 *et passim*). Siew (2013) notes that community service and short term missions can impact faith deeply.

James Smith (2009) notes that the “schooling model” of Christian discipleship is inadequate because people are more than cognitive beings. For him, Christian education is the formation of a peculiar people who “desire” the kingdom of God and thus undertake their vocations as expression of that love (p. 86). Smith (2016) sees discipleship as primarily a “rehabilitation of our love,” with worship as the heart of Christian formation (pp. 22-25).

Another factor in discipleship formation was prayer. The rector said: “Prayer ministry is very important. We’re more and more intentional about praying.” Different groups pray specifically for the Sunday morning worship services, and a prayer chain shares “prayer lists” each week. The ministry team devotes a good part of the weekly meeting to prayer and Bible study, and every board meeting always begins and ends in prayer. One member said, “You asked about leadership. One thing I don’t think we’ve mentioned is that our leaders... engage very energetically in prayer.”

Anglican Tradition & Impact on Discipleship

The clergy were convinced about the formative aspects of the Anglican liturgical tradition. One pastor said: “We have in communion the mystery of faith, where when words fail, there’s still Jesus. ... [W]e are blessed and sent out every Sunday to go love and serve the Lord.... Our actual liturgy has got a lot of the shape of what it takes for discipleship.” Another pastor said that the the liturgy “by a repetitious fashion, schools us

in a kind of ongoing conversion to Christ.” Members appreciate the Anglican liturgy because of its “mystery.” One member said: “For me, it’s like coming home. I really prefer communions.... You just feel cleansed from the inside out, which is a really weird way to describe it. And then the connection you feel” Others shared that the Communion, Creeds, Confession and the Lord's Prayer provide a "grounding" to faith.

Dwight Zscheile (2012) highlights that people today are longing for moorings, with a genuine desire to be formed. He said: “Episcopal worship embraces ancient elements, which provide a depth and rootedness that is increasingly appealing to people adrift in a culture of the new and the next. ... many young people yearn for more stable anchors of wisdom and meaning” (p. 103). Robert Webber and Ruth Lester (2013) point out that many younger evangelicals are moving into Anglicanism for the same reasons. Elizabeth Jordan (2015) notes that Anglican discipleship is expressed clearly in the sacraments, where the journey that began in baptism is nurtured in the Eucharist each week (p. 157).

Evidence of Growth in Discipleship

For the clergy, the best indication of growth came from personal conversations with members and what they observed in small groups. They discerned growth in personal prayer, an “inward to outward” orientation, and a concern for “lived faith” (e.g. integrity in the marketplace, being a winsome witness, and service in various ministries of the church). One pastor said that the “young, urban, professionals” in the church are an exciting group in that "they take initiative when they see a need." After a spiritual inventory, and realizing that their gifts were in administration, a group of young adults decided to be in charge of the worship services at “The Bridge.” In addition, these young adults brought together some prominent Christian business leaders to share their stories about integrity in the marketplace.

Michael Patton (2014) highlighted the importance of "critical cases" in qualitative research. “Critical cases” are incidents “that can make a point quite dramatically or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things” (p. 236). The clergy and members highlighted two critical incidents as evidence of their growth in discipleship. The first happened about two years before this study. Two of the church’s most creative and dynamic pastors were reassigned by the Bishop to other parishes in rather short notice. Many members felt a great sense of loss, and everyone was concerned that it would negatively impact the church. However, the church regained its footing after a short time. One member explained it like this.

When they left ... there were some deep concerns as to what would happen because their leadership was so exemplary, and the ministry team dynamics and chemistry was so well-formed.... that somehow the community would really suffer a big hit, that numbers would die down, that momentum or energy would die down. We have noticed a little bit of a dip, but overall not much at all.

The second critical incident involved fairly complex logistical challenges moving “The Bridge,” a lighter liturgical worship service, back to the main sanctuary because it had outgrown its meeting space. The move involved many departments and leaders, requiring changes in venues and schedules. According to a long-standing member, this

would not have happened years ago as “there’s too much bad, old church attitude.” Yet, everyone worked through the frictions and challenges resulting in a smooth transition.

The power of changed lives is affirmed by this beautiful quote: “Therefore, where Christians live out their faith (‘intentional’ discipleship), new disciples are formed (disciple-making), to the extent that discipleship and disciple-making are a product of each other” (Kafwanka and Oxbrow, 2016, p. 6)

Conclusion

This study examined how one Anglican church in urban Toronto sought to realize its vision “to be a transformative community for the City,” and live its mission of “equipping disciples to make disciples.” The purpose is not to generalize to other churches for each has a different context, but to examine a case in-depth. I wanted to understand how the clergy and adult members at this church understood discipleship, engaged its Anglican tradition, lived and nurtured its reality in their unique set of circumstances. Several themes, related to pastoral leadership, are evident.

Clear Discipleship, Focused Vision-Mission

First, this church has a focused vision-mission and clear set of discipleship values which infuses every aspect of church life. At Vestry, the rector reemphasized these values as he reviewed the year and strategized ahead. Discipleship means following Jesus (values), it is corporate (involves community), practical (Discipleship Covenant), and a process (everyone welcomed no matter where they are in their faith journey). He summarized the church’s mission succinctly: “We see discipleship as being at the center of everything we do, both individually and as a faith community” (Rector’s report, Vestry, 2015). Amidst huge cultural shifts impacting the church, Robinson (2008) calls for strong pastoral leadership with clear understanding of why they exist and a biblically informed vision and community supported clarity about purpose (pp. 80-130). Chan (2015) notes that congregations can only be “intentional disciple-making churches” when there is a clear understanding of discipleship and focused pastoral vision (pp. 55-61).

Integrated Ministry

Second, this focused vision-mission provides for an integrated ministry. When asked about strategies for nurturing discipleship, the rector said it is essential to get the senior leadership and ministry team “on the same page.” He is “relentless about going through their vision, mission and values together.” At the weekly ministry meeting I attended, pastors and ministry leaders recited the church’s vision, mission and core values as they ended the meeting. The rector emphasized that “equipping disciples to make disciples” integrates everything they do.

We do not do ‘spontaneity’ here, unless it’s the Holy Spirit generated spontaneity, meaning everything is integrated. So, what does ITJ have to do with the sermon series? What does the sermon series have to do with Baptismal Formation or

Marriage Preparation? Where are the connections? How do we keep connecting the dots?

Members discerned this integrated, discipleship-focused ministry approach. One member said he stayed at this church because there is “a strong sense of vision and the large pastoral team seems to be really, really well-organized. They are all on the same page.”

Clear Strategies

Third, the values derived from the vision and mission statements are developed into purposeful strategies for discipleship. Convinced that discipleship can only be effectively nurtured in a supportive, accountable community, the pastoral team spends significant time to develop and nurture small groups and leaders. Pastors emphasize learning the Christian basics along with excellent preaching through the Bible. There are also ample opportunities to serve. The structure is flexible so that new ministry initiatives are adopted if someone discerns a need in the community. Pastors constantly think about creative ways for members to integrate Christian principles into their lives, work, and business. Through all these, the pastoral team is conscious of the power of prayer, which undergirds all their work.

Anglican Liturgical Tradition

Fourth, the clergy consciously harnesses the strengths of the Anglican liturgical tradition to foster depth and commitment for members. The Discipleship Covenant is promoted as a framework for lived discipleship. Convinced that discipleship themes are embedded in the liturgy, the clergy reads the words carefully during worship. Members appreciate the mystery of the Eucharist, and the regular recitations of the Creeds, Confession, and the Lord's Prayer provide a rhythm and grounding to faith.

Areas for Growth and Further Research

Most of the clergy view the church's vision “to be a transformative community for the City” as gospel outreach, but some members feel this should include engaging with some of the pressing issues downtown including justice and creation care for a more holistic discipleship. Some members call for a greater emphasis on “cross bearing” and for the clergy to be more vocal against a consumerist culture. While small groups are emphasized, only about 13% of the congregation are involved. Many members are part of ministry-based “groups,” but one wonders what is done specifically for discipleship formation there. In a busy downtown context, the clergy may need to do more to alert members to the dangers of the “trap of constant work,” challenge them to forego some upward mobility, and sacrifice time for a deeper life with God. Combating a “life of busyness” may be the major discipleship challenge for many adults in this urban church; this could be their “cross-bearing.” Christian basics are helpful, but a structured catechesis and explorations into other delivery formats could be explored.

This study would be stronger if the interviews included some of the other ministry staff (e.g. pastors of children, youth, outreach). While the focus group interviews were rich and textured, other ministry “groups” (e.g. parish council, choir, prayer) may provide helpful contrasting views. This study highlighted factors impacting discipleship formation and attendant pastoral leadership at one urban Anglican congregation. It would be interesting to see how generalized these findings are in other Anglican churches in urban Canada through a follow up quantitative study.

Closing Remarks

In closing, Jay Sidebotham (2015) may provide a helpful framework to gauge discipleship ministry at this church (pp. 501-503). He cited research which identified a small number of churches out of 2000, which exhibit a distinct level of spiritual vitality in the US and outlined best practice principles of congregations that thrive. First, it is essential to “get people moving,” launching members in their spiritual journeys, providing “on-ramps” for deeper connection with their faith community and a deeper sense of God. Second, scripture is “embedded” in the church’s culture. People intentionally engage scripture in all aspects of community life, and for all ages. Third, there is a faith “ownership” where in response to the grace of God, every member takes responsibility for growth in their spiritual journey. Fourth, these churches “pastor the community,” seeking to serve Christ passionately among all people in a variety of projects. Fifth, they have leaders with a “heart” for God, because the vitality of the body is dependent on the spiritual health of pastoral leaders, especially the senior leadership.

Although this church can do better in “pastoring the community,” it exhibits each of the other traits well. It also seems to be reaping the benefits of its Anglican tradition. Perhaps its greatest strength is a pastoral leadership with a “heart” for God, evidenced by a certain spiritual depth, strong reliance on prayer, a thoughtful self-reflection, and a healthy kingdom perspective in ministry. At the conclusion of my interview with the rector, he said:

... [W]e are learning to relax.... This phrase is pulled out a lot, ‘I guess I am just watering these days ... or I am planting.’ We are trying to encourage one another. You have no clue... the kingdom perspective on this, that whatever seeds are planted now might not sprout for 40 years. We just don’t know, and that’s not our problem; our job is to be faithful with what we are doing now. So, that changes the perspective. ... So, to your question again, I revisit that and ask, ‘Have I grown in all of this? Is my faithfulness and discipleship healthy?’

Postscript

I have known Rev. Dr. Daniel Chua (Pastor Daniel) for 25 years and was a member of Mount Carmel Bible Presbyterian Church for 4-5 years. Pastor Daniel loves God deeply, evidenced by his spiritual depth, prayerfulness, humility, respect for God’s word, love and sacrificial service. Mount Carmel is blessed to have had this faithful, collaborative, creative, and visionary shepherd-servant-leader for 33 years (half his life) in making disciples! With the wonderful support of his mentor (Rev. Dr. David Wong)

and elders (Dr. Teo Choo Soo, Dr. Chua Choon Lan, Wong Kar Fatt, Siew Kim Siang), Pastor Daniel has matured and developed what Craig Dykstra (2008) called a “pastoral imagination,” a capacity for viewing ministry in all its holy and relational depths and responding with wise and fitting judgment. Dykstra wisely noted that “pastoral imagination” is also a gift of God in and through communities of faith possessed of deep, rich “ecclesial imagination.” These are people who individually and corporately long for a deeper life with God, seeking to be disciples who embody Christ’s abundant life in and for the world. So much of ministry is like a dance. I congratulate Pastor Daniel, the elders and members of Mount Carmel on the conclusion of such an inspiring accomplishment.

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