

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Making disciples

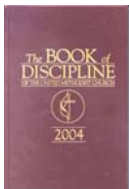
Making disciples of Jesus Christ is officially the mission of the United Methodist Church. However, the Bible says a lot about making disciples and about being a disciple. Therefore many other Christians besides United Methodists also see this as the church's purpose or at least an important part of it.



Recent conversations with *Connections* readers have made me reconsider this subject. What do we mean by making disciples? How do we do it? How do we measure whether someone is a disciple or not? Those questions are important for Christians, and to me the answers don't seem obvious, yet I don't see us looking for them very actively in the church.

We don't all see it alike

We are to make disciples, says the *Book of Discipline*, the UMC's official statement of its rules, policies, and beliefs, "by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and by exemplifying Jesus' command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world." The UMC *Discipline* describes the steps that this process includes. We proclaim the gospel. We seek, welcome, and gather people into the body of Christ. We lead people to commit their lives to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ. We nurture them in Christian living, through worship, sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and other means of grace. We send them into the world to live lovingly and justly.



How different Christians—even different United Methodists—understand and practice disciple-making varies quite a bit, however. The relative importance they give to each of these steps varies even more.

What makes someone a Christian?

Pennsylvania UM laywoman Anne Ewing gets aggravated, as I also do, by churchgoers' so often assuming that being Christian requires what she calls "a kind of weasely 'niceness'" The unfortunate result of seeing this kind of niceness as evidence of being Christian, Ewing observes in the August 2006 issue of *United Methodist Nexus* (www.umnexus.org) an independent online publication of news and commentary, is never talking about real issues of pain, evil, or incompetence, and rarely even openly disagreeing on matters of policy, polity, or theology.



"Without vilifying people for the views they hold," Ewing believes, "if we cannot disagree, discuss and come to conclusion and compromise, then we can never progress. ... We all need to deal with one another directly and clearly. If we are prevented because disagreement isn't 'nice,' then the inevitable result is backbiting, deceit, sneaking around and a very unhappy church."

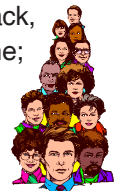


Ewing finds that part of what arises from false niceness is the idea that going to church is the same as being a Christian and that being a Christian is really easy. She thinks that idea is false. So do I.

What would be on your list?

Anne Ewing's experience in the faith and her observation of others, she writes, has led her to feel that Christians share these characteristics:

- "Being loving and caring, but not always falsely 'nice';"
- "Working hard with every skill we have, be it building, repairing, painting, or studying, teaching, thinking;
- "Keeping on, even when we slide off the track, reviving once again our flagging self-discipline;
- "Acknowledging that it is very hard to become a Christian, but accepting that the journey is our home, and there are many wonderful times and wonderful people along the way."



Ewing says her list is merely a good start. Mine would be a little different. What would yours include?

Disciples in the Bible



Like many other differences in the church, our different understandings of being a disciple come largely from differences in how we interpret the Bible's contents and significance. We have different beliefs about which sayings attributed to Jesus were actually said by him, and which express instead later views or even errors. We also have different views on how to deal with contradictions between different parts of the Bible.

He appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.

—Mark 2:14-15

When the Bible refers to disciples, it's not always clear whether it means only twelve men who followed Jesus. Sometimes it apparently means a larger group of insiders that included Mary Magdalene and other women. At other times it seems to mean a still larger group of listeners, or even everyone

throughout the world and the centuries, who has seen or will see Jesus as the model they need to follow.

Whichever of these groups any given scripture refers to, however, the important question for us is what being a disciple requires today. Some of the gospels' descriptions give the impression that only a handful of people throughout history would qualify. But no matter how rigorous the requirements may be, it seems that when Jesus spoke of being a disciple, he apparently was at least talking about something more demanding than simply being a church member or calling ourselves Christians in the rather casual way that many of us do that today.

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ... None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

—Luke 14:25-33

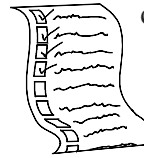
Are we making disciples?

A United Methodist *Connections* reader with whom I discussed this subject recently was concerned because although the UMC says our mis-

sion is to make disciples, we don't seem to be trying to find out whether we're accomplishing that. We're not counting how many disciples we're making. If we were a business whose purpose was to make and sell cars, this reader observes, we'd regularly be looking at how many cars we were making and selling. If we were a service group such as Habitat for Humanity, we'd be counting how many houses we were getting built.



Can we apply this kind of measurement to making disciples? I doubt it, yet I agree that we need to be evaluating our disciple-making effectiveness somehow. What's hard is knowing what to measure and thus whom to count. We often assume that all church members are disciples. That makes the counting easy, but equating names on a roll with disciples seems a long way from what Jesus had in mind.



What makes someone a disciple?

Growing up, I learned from observing everyone around me that being active in a church, being nice, obeying rules and laws, and other such conventional behavior was what being a Christian amounted to. At church I heard other, unconventional teachings of Jesus, like "if you have two coats and someone else has none, give him one of yours," but everyone I knew had several coats and wasn't giving any away, so I saw that for some reason the instructions of Jesus weren't all to be taken seriously.

I now feel that really following Jesus would mean taking them seriously, but I still rarely see the church urging us to do that.



Declaring belief?

Some Christians claim that stating publicly that one "believes in Jesus" or "accepts Jesus as one's personal savior" is what makes one a disciple. But what does believing in Jesus actually mean? Is it believing that he did and said everything we read about him in the gospels? If so, that presents a problem, because they include contradictions, they were written long after Jesus's death, they've gone through a lot of copying, translating, and editing, and their authors wrote for different audiences who all lived in settings very different from ours.

Does believing in Jesus mean believing he was divine in a way that no one else ever has been? If so, how do we explain other religions' similar claims about their key figures? Does it mean that Jesus is still alive in some form? That he is able and willing to set aside "natural law" in certain situations? This is hard to reconcile with our other knowledge of how the physical world works. Does



"accepting Jesus as one's personal savior" mean that declaring belief in him will keep one from having to spend eternity in a fiery place, that can't otherwise be avoided? This raises problems based on what we now know about the universe.



Despite the difficulties these beliefs present for many people, many Christians answer yes to all these questions. And to these Christians, making disciples means persuading others to say yes too.

Getting others to declare belief?

This belief-based understanding of making disciples tends to emphasize a particular kind of evangelism. It focuses on actively seeking new converts to the belief-centered understanding. It says we have a God-given duty to convert as many people as possible, including active participants in non-Christian religions, in order to keep them from going to hell. It tends to be big on having "revivals"—special events aimed at attracting nonchurchgoers and energizing church members. These revivals aim also at promoting belief in Jesus's unique powers and at motivating attenders to confess and repent of sins that are defined mainly as a list of unacceptable personal behaviors.



For Christians with a broader view of what making disciples means, however, this kind of evangelism is not only unnecessary but is offensive or even unchristian. A *Connections* reader wrote me about her dismay with this method's aggressive use in her church. "My son is struggling with the new youth minister in our church," she wrote, "who is very evangelical. This minister forbids the youth from serving in leadership positions unless they are evangelizing their friends. But my son says he will not try to change the beliefs of his Jewish and Hindu friends, and I support his position." Yet the youth minister presumably feels he is obeying a God-given instruction to make disciples.

Doing what Jesus did?

Like this mother, many other Christians also find such aggressive belief-based evangelism unacceptable. They see making disciples instead as persuading others to help remove injustices, feed the hungry, heal the sick, make peace, and protect the natural environment. They see making disciples as persuading others to help protect the weaker members of our society and to welcome social outcasts. Many Christians feel that following Jesus's teaching and example in these ways is being a disciple of his, whether or not one verbally declares belief in him, belongs to a church, or sees Christianity as the only true religion.



Practicing personal religious acts?

The reader who wrote me about his concern over our failure to measure whether we're making disciples is a pastor who has diligently tried to promote and measure discipleship in his congregations.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Once a year he has asked members to sign and turn in a card containing a covenant statement. On it, each



member is to check which of a list of religious practices he or she will promise to follow regularly. Choices include worship attendance, Bible reading, prayer and use of devotional materials, participation in a class or study group, stewardship of money, and participation in a ministry for others. In my opinion, however, these aren't necessarily evidence of being a disciple. Many churchgoers do several of them regularly, yet ignore or even actively

oppose justice-related efforts that following Jesus's teaching and example seems to require.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
—John 13:34-35

Only God can say?

How do we make disciples in the church? We need to inform and encourage our members continually about what being a disciple requires, but I suspect only God can say who qualifies.

Barbara



Connections

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Making disciples

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Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

—Matthew 28:19-20

Making disciples of Jesus Christ. It's the official purpose of the United Methodist Church and a goal whose importance many other Christians also acknowledge. But how do we make disciples? What does it take to qualify as a disciple? How can we know how many disciples our churches are making?

More important, why do we need to make disciples? Because the Bible says we should? Because being a disciple of Jesus keeps one from going to hell? Because doing what Jesus taught and demonstrated helps make the world better?

In our churches we may need to ask these questions more often, and to offer more activities that reflect the variety of answers we find.

