

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System for Children



#SEE^{ALL}THE PEOPLE

"We cannot disciple people that we are not in relationship with. Discipleship begins with relationship."

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This booklet is a companion piece to:

Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations

by Rev. Junius B. Dotson

Introduction

Why minister to children? Children have an incredible ability to understand God and their world. Children are part of the family of God, a vital piece of God's reign. The church community must include them. They are learning about the world around them, the community of the church, and God. Children often profoundly impact the spiritual development of parents or caregivers. Their questions, insights, and general curiosity create reasons for the adults in their lives to become part of a faith community. Children are the leaders of today and the leaders of tomorrow. They create an atmosphere of wonder, laughter, and acceptance that our world needs. Adults who take the time to listen to and wonder with children find their faith deepened and strengthened.

In our world, people often experience uncertainty, fear, and divisiveness. Children need to know the love and acceptance of God through relationships with caring adults. The church can provide a safe place for children to find meaningful relationships with others, especially safe and trustworthy adults; build community with people of all ages; and process the emotions of our sometimes crazy world. The church has an opportunity to be a refuge for families from the chaos of the world and a launching point to make a positive difference in the world.

Why Develop an Intentional Discipleship System for Children?

Pastors, Christian educators, children's ministers, parents, grandparents, and caregivers for children desire the best for the children in their care. They want them to know they are loved, cherished, supported, encouraged, and cared for. They also desire to nurture the faith of children now and in the future. The systems approach to discipleship provides a holistic, overall approach to faith formation for children, their families, and the congregation.

As Jesus' was drawing his earthly ministry with the disciples to a close, he said "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age" (Matt. 28:19-20, CEB). We also remember the vows we make to each person (infant, child, youth, adult) who comes for baptism. The presiding leader asks the congregation this question: "Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include *these persons* now before you in your care?" The congregation responds, "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround *these persons* with a community of love and forgiveness, that *they* may grow in *their* service to others. We will pray for *them* that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life" (UMH, 40).

Developing an intentional discipleship system for children holds importance for several reasons: First, children are integral members of God's family. When we plan for their success, we show them and their families that we value them.

Second, children are sponges for learning. We, as a church, take responsibility to raise children in the faith and stand with their families as we do so. Third, children have much to teach others. Some of the best ideas for stewardship, serving others, and mission comes from the minds and hearts of children.

Providing an intentional discipleship system enables adults who work with children a system as they equip and empower children to love, learn, grow, and flourish with faith in Jesus Christ at the center. The system equips and empowers the congregation's members to know why, how, and what they can do to follow through with baptismal vows.

Faith Formation in Children

Before creating a discipleship system, a brief overview of child development may prove helpful.

Infants & Toddlers (Birth–23 months)

Very young children learn about their world through the people who care for them. They are discovering their world through their senses. The world revolves around the child. The key for children at this age is to build trust. Young children experience God through the people who care for them. They also begin to learn the basics of faith they see modeled for them.

How do we work with this age?

- Provide safe space and people—faith is a feeling.
- Encourage parental involvement at church and at home.
- Provide age-appropriate toys and activities in the nursery and worship space.
- Read and sing songs to children
- Repeat phrases like *God loves you; Jesus is your friend; The church is a special place.*

Young Preschoolers (2–3 years)

Young preschoolers are in the “I can do it myself” phase. Giving children the freedom to do it themselves helps the child develop the strength of will. Examples, actions, and stories from significant people in their lives powerfully influence them. They like schedules and routines and express great curiosity about the world around them. They are beginning to develop a sense of “other” (that the world doesn’t revolve around them). They also need firm boundaries to help them feel safe and secure. They play next to other children but not with them (parallel play). They are concrete, literal learners who need physical, hands-on experiences to grow. They learn by using their senses, by doing and experimenting.

How do we work with this age?

- Create space for autonomy.
- Create predictable routine with room for curiosity.
- Be consistent with rules so children know what is right and wrong.
- Use play, puppets, songs, and movement to tell Bible stories.
- Repeat phrases like these: *Jesus is my friend; God made the world; God made me; God loves me.*

Preschoolers (4–5 years)

Preschoolers are learning how to play with others. This developmental stage requires opportunities to discover, explore, and examine the world around them. They need a comfortable setting in which to ask questions. Preschoolers are concrete, literal learners who feel and understand with rational thought—but their ability to reason is growing. They are beginning to develop a conscience, and they depend on adults and rules to confirm when they are on the right track.

They are starting to understand consequences, cause and effect, and if/then. Preschoolers experience God through story, play, and wondering. Reading Bible stories and singing songs strongly influence this stage of development. Role-playing, puppets, and other active play also help preschoolers grow. Many preschoolers can sit through at least part of a worship service, participate in worship by helping as an usher, and help with age-appropriate service/mission projects.

How do we work with this age group?

- Provide children lots of opportunities to explore, discover, examine, and ask questions.
- Initiate helping and serving opportunities for children in the classroom and in worship.
- Use play, songs, movement, and activities to learn about the Bible and God.
- Repeat phrases like these: *I can trust God; God loves me even when I disobey; God helps me everyday.*

Early Elementary (1st–3rd Grade)

Early elementary school age children are developing reasoning skills. They are often very physically, socially, and intellectually active and desire independence. They need safe opportunities to practice their new skills. The development of personal values comes to the fore during these years. This is a story-centered stage of faith. Children at this stage take on the stories, beliefs, and observances that define belonging to their faith community. They still think in literal ways and need hands-on experiences to learn best. They still depend on rules.

How do we work with this age group?

- Provide physically and intellectually relevant tasks.
- Discuss the meaning of Bible verses before memorizing.
- Give honest praise and acceptance.

- Treat all children fairly.
- Make the learning environment a safe place.
- Give opportunities to read as comfortable.
- Use visual aids.

Older Elementary (4th–6th Grade)

Older elementary age children are beginning to grasp abstract concepts. They often appreciate a wide range of experiences. They may enjoy competition. Older elementary children have an awareness of justice and fairness. They may sense their need for God.

How do we work with this age group?

- Vary the pace between physical and mental tasks.
- Make the learning environment a safe place.
- Use visual aids and life experiences.
- Work in small groups on projects.
- Teach Bible skills (how to read, use, and understand).
- Provide opportunities for active involvement—including missions and service.
- Use humor and healthy competition.
- Build a strong sense of group identity.

How to Create an Intentional Discipleship System for Children

Systems make up our world. Children and families are familiar with systems at daycare, school, and neighborhoods. We have systems in place at church. The focus is whether or not they are intentional. How do we consider the ministries and opportunities we offer as a big picture that ensures that we include children and families all along the age, ability, and faith spectrum? An intentional discipleship system for children empowers us to look at the big picture; to make room for the unique gifts, questions, and needs of children and their families; to affirm our care for the faith development of all children.

What Is a Disciple?

First we have to ask, “What is a disciple?” What does it mean for children to be followers of Jesus? Since children are concrete/literal learners and model those around them, we cannot limit this question to children. What does it mean for the youth and adults who spend time with children to be disciples? The first responsibility comes in clarifying what it means in the local church context for a person to be a disciple. One definition might be this: In my church a disciple is one who knows Jesus, loves Jesus, and shines the light of Jesus to all they meet. This definition could serve for all ages, but how it is lived out will look different.

What Is the Goal for Discipling Children?

Regardless of the age and ability at which children begin their faith journey, their growing faith requires a familiarity with the central Bible stories, as well as an ability to share their own faith stories, relate meaningfully with the people around them, and participate in ministries of compassion and justice.

What Do We Include?

If you have an intentional discipleship system for adults, it helps to keep the structure the same or similar so that children see the value in lifelong faith formation and adults see the value in raising up children with faith.

In *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century: Engaging All Areas and Generations*, John Roberto writes about eight faith-forming areas that support a person's growth in faith. They are briefly explained below (for complete explanation and more about the eight areas refer to page 35):

1. **Caring relationships**—building meaningful relationships with adults, youth, and other children
2. **Celebrating the liturgical seasons**—celebrating seasons such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost
3. **Celebrating rituals and milestones**—celebrating significant moments in the faith journey
4. **Reading the Bible**—hearing the Bible read and reading the Bible, learning to interpret and apply it
5. **Learning the Christian tradition and applying it to life**—both the Christian traditions that have been passed down and the important traditions of the local church

6. **Prayer, devotions, and spiritual formation**—learning about and practicing prayer and spiritual disciplines individually and in community
7. **Serving and justice**—learning about faith by serving others, becoming aware and active in social justice and how to care for creation
8. **Worshipping God**—worshipping in community, celebrating the sacraments, being the living presence of God in the world

Each area plays an important role in the faith growth of children. However, emphasizing eight areas may be too much, so combine them or include the ones significant to your context.

As United Methodists, we also have the opportunity to teach and model theology and traditions that are important to our faith including grace, sacraments, the Wesleyan “quadrilateral,” social holiness, and devotion to God.

Step by Step

1. **Gather a team.**
2. **Find 6–12 people who are willing to share in this journey to create a discipleship system for children and families.**
3. **Pray together about the process.**
4. **Consider reading a book together** (like this booklet or a book about child faith development).
5. **Ask questions.**
 - Start with the why. Why is your congregation choosing to create a discipleship system? How does the “Great Commission,” the mission of The United Methodist Church, and baptismal vows impact and inform the “why”?
 - Define *disciple* in terms of what that will mean for the children involved in the congregation
 - What ministries and traditions hold a place of influence in your congregation? Think about your context, cultural relevance/sensitivities, established programs.
6. **Identify stages of growth.** For children this means taking into account growth related to age and ability as well as faith growth. This could involve four or five stages of how children grow. Avoid using use stages because the faith stage is not necessarily tied to their age. If you have an intentional discipleship system for youth or adults, consider using the same language. If you do not you might use stages such as:

- From *Intentional Discipleship Systems for Congregations*, Junius Dotson:
 - ▶ Searching
 - ▶ Exploring
 - ▶ Beginning
 - ▶ Growing
 - ▶ Maturing
- Another option might be the following:
 - ▶ Exploring
 - ▶ Learning
 - ▶ Growing
 - ▶ Sharing

7. **Decide the categories for faith growth.**

- If you have an intentional discipleship system for youth or adults, consider using the same language.
- If you do not, consider using the eight faith-forming areas above or combine them into your own categories

8. **Create your grid.**

- Use the stages of growth as your labels across the top of your page (columns) and your categories for faith growth as your labels along the edge (rows). Fill in what children/families/the church can do to equip, educate, and empower faith growth in each box.
- Look at the resource page at the end of this booklet for an example.

9. **Make it relevant.**

- After completing the grid, look at the overall children's ministry plan for the year. Ask the following questions: What current activities overlap the new system?

Where are there gaps? What could you start or do differently to fill in those gaps?

- What special needs or considerations in your congregation need to be taken into account?

10. Review and revise.

- Invite a family or two to look at the new system. Ask them questions like these: What makes sense about this system? What doesn't make sense? What have we have left out? What do we need to include?
- Make any necessary changes to make the system user-friendly and manageable for your overall church system and families.
- Use the new system to inform ministry for the next year and beyond
 - Use the created grid to ensure the building of ministries and strategies for children and families so they can grow in each area along the stages of growth.
 - For example, if you have "Discovering God" as one category, how might children grow in their faith? Be specific. Make it measurable.

11. Communicate.

- Create brochures, booklets, websites that give families the information they need to grow in their faith. A booklet that talks about how parents can help their child grow in his/her faith through different prayer practices, offering a workshop or Sunday school class about prayer practices, and sharing different resources that parents can use for themselves and with their child provide a good foundation.

12. **All God's children are unique.**

- The discipleship system will work well for many people, but the wonderfully creative and grace-filled part resides in its adaptability and flexibility for families with children of all abilities. You can create custom plans for families with children who learn, communicate, understand, or process the world in different ways. This allows the system to include all God's children.

Example of Discipleship System for Children in Local Church

Central United Methodist Church, Waterford, Michigan

In 2015, our church underwent a process for looking at vitality in our congregation. One goal was to create an intentional discipleship system for adults. When we completed that process, we knew we needed to create a system for use with children and families. Creating an intentional system allowed for a stronger overall vision and better planning for children's ministries. Using our adult discipleship system (called the Faith Growth Pathway) as our starting point, we created this pathway for children and families. We also drew from John Roberto's book, *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century* and Melanie Gordon's resource *What Every Child Should Experience* to craft this system. It incorporates four columns of faith growth and six categories to describe different aspects of faith growth. We designed the process so that regardless of the age or ability of a child coming into the church, he/she could discover ways to grow.

The system also guides our overall planning and vision for the school year, making sure that we cover each area in some way. That could include making sure that our Sunday morning ministries cover learning about our traditions. It means creating intentional involvement for children in worship, milestones, and service. It means taking time to include our children in the stewardship program. They receive a pledge card and access to child friendly offering envelopes as well as a brochure about what stewardship means and how to encourage it in families. Our pathway keeps us on track

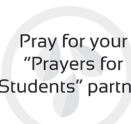


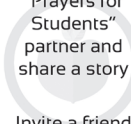

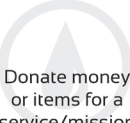

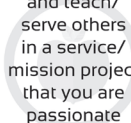
about what we have deemed to be the most important but allows for openness to the Holy Spirit's leading. Perhaps most importantly, our pathway for children opens up conversation about the importance of lifelong faith formation. As our children become youth and then become adults, a pathway designed for them to grow, to learn about and love Jesus, and live out the light of Christ in the world exists.

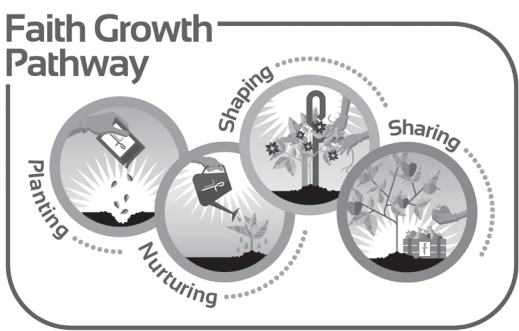
—Children's Ministry Team

Central United Methodist Church, Waterford, Michigan

Connecting with God and Others

		Planting	Nurturing	Shaping	Sharing
Discovering God		Attend Worship Occasionally Read Bible Stories or books	Attend Worship at least once a month Serve as a Greeter Read Bible Stories regularly	Attend Worship regularly Serve as an Usher Read a child friendly devotional regularly	Participate in Worship Serve as a Liturgist/Acolyte Create a Bible reading plan Share your faith story
Forming Disciples		Pray at mealtimes Learn about different kinds of faith practices Learn about Generosity	Pray at mealtimes and bedtime Try different kinds of faith practices Stewardship	Create prayer rituals (blessings, "Faith5") Engage in conversations about God and faith Practice Generosity of Time, Talents, Financial Gifts	Integrate prayer into daily routines Integrate faith concepts and actions into everyday life Share a story about your faith practice/generosity
Learning Christian Traditions		Introduce Basic Faith Words (appropriate to development)	Learn about Foundational Faith Concepts (appropriate to development)	Learn about John Wesley and our Methodist Heritage (appropriate to development)	Participate in a children's small group experience
Seasonal Events and Milestones		Baptism Back to School Blessing Attend Christmas Eve and Easter Worship	All About Baptism & Communion All About Church Participate in a seasonal event	3rd Grade Bible Workshop Participate in a seasonal devotion or study	Tween Group Service Projects Integrate seasonal themes in everyday life

Connecting with God and Others		Planting	Nurturing	Shaping	Sharing
Changing Our World with Christ's Love	Caring Relationships	 Pray for your "Prayers for Students" partner Attend VBS Learn about the needs of others	 Send a card to your "Prayers for Students" partner Attend VBS and donate to the mission project Pray for the needs of others	 Sit with your "Prayers for Students" partner at worship Attend VBS and be a friend to someone who is new Help a neighbor or friend	 Pray with your "Prayers for Students" partner and share a story Invite a friend to attend VBS with you Invite a friend or neighbor to church or a church event
	In Service and Mission	 Learn about the needs of others in our community, nation, and world	 Donate money or items for a service/mission project Give of your time or talents	 Participate in a one-day service project Participate in a short-term family mission experience	 Learn about and teach/serve others in a service/mission project that you are passionate about Invite others to participate in service/mission projects Share your experiences



Central United Methodist Church
Waterford, MI

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Resources

- *United Methodist Hymnal*. United Methodist Publishing House, 1990.
- *Common English Bible*, 2012.
- Discipleship Systems:
 - ▶ *Developing an Intentional Discipleship System: A Guide for Congregations*. Junius Dotson. Discipleship Ministries, 2017.
 - ▶ *Membership to Discipleship: Growing Mature Disciples Who Make Disciples*. Phil Maynard. Excellence in Ministry Coaching, 2016.
 - ▶ *Start with the Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*. Simon Sinek. Portfolio, 2011.
- Faith Formation and Childhood Development
 - ▶ *Reimagining Faith Formation for the 21st Century: Engaging All Ages and Generations* by John Roberto. Lifelong Faith Associates, 2015.
 - ▶ *Families at the Center of Faith Formation* by Leif Kehrwald, John Roberto, Gene Roehlkepartain and Jolene Roehlkepartain. Lifelong Faith Associates, 2016.
 - ▶ *What Every Child Should Experience: A Guide for Leaders and Teachers of Children in United Methodist Congregations* by Melanie C. Gordon. Discipleship Ministries, 2015.
 - ▶ *Growing Everyday Disciples: Covenant Discipleship with Children* by Gayle Quay, Melanie C. Gordon, and Susan Groseclose. Discipleship Ministries, 2016.

- Helpful Online Resources
 - ▶ www.buildfaith.org
 - ▶ Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: Ted Talk*, www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action
- Examples of Intentional Discipleship Systems:
 - ▶ www.umcdiscipleship.org/topics/intentional-discipleship-systems
 - ▶ vibrantfaithathome.org
 - ▶ www.vibrantfaith.org

About the Author



Rev. Kathy Pittenger is an ordained deacon who serves in the Detroit Conference (soon to be Michigan Conference) of The United Methodist Church. Beginning July 1, 2018, she will serve as the Coordinator of Children's Initiatives for the Michigan Conference. From June 2006–June 2018, she served as the Pastor of Lifelong Faith Formation at Central United Methodist Church in Waterford, Michigan.

Rev. Kathy attended Malone University and graduated in 2002 with a BA in Educational Ministries. From there she attended Asbury Theological Seminary and graduated in 2006 with a Master of Divinity. She is passionate about children's ministry in the local church and advocating for childhood literacy. She builds relationships with local elementary schools to advocate for children, brings the needs of local schools to the church, and brings caring adults to the school.

Rev. Kathy lives in Michigan and is married to Rich. They have two boys, Elijah and Micah.



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