

Discipleship through Community Connections in Faith – written and presented by Jon Etherton, Mary Helen Harris, and Linda Peebles

As Christians, we are called to live our faith within community, and we grow as disciples through the faith experiences we share. This can happen when we gather for worship and fellowship on Sundays, but if that is all we do, we limit our congregational connections and our spiritual growth as individuals and as a community.

At APC, we have a history of rich opportunities for nurturing discipleship through relationships in our faith community, and we certainly have opportunities now.

A few happen on a regular basis, reflecting a commitment to time together: weekly worship with time for fellowship before and after, Sunday School for our teens and tweens, the monthly gathering of the Women's Circle, and serving home communion to those who are homebound.

Other connections happen coincidentally as we participate together in church-related activities: sharing our faith through music during choir rehearsal, sharing the joys and challenges of our lives during meetings, sharing faith in action while working in the clothing bank, sharing stories of our faith journeys as we prepare and serve food for our APC family and guests.

And other connections happen apart from intentional, structured faith experiences. When someone sends a card to celebrate a birthday or anniversary. When someone gives a ride to a medical appointment. When someone sends an encouraging message by e-mail or on Facebook. When someone visits a homebound APC member or friend.

All of these are part of our current ministry of discipleship, but most happen informally rather than with intention. With work, school, family, volunteering and other commitments, and for many of us, more distance between our homes and APC, it's challenging to participate in church-based activities. But when we limit our time of intentional, shared faith experiences, we all lose opportunities to grow in faith, and some could be left out completely.

Our vision for APC is strengthened nurture of discipleship, with increased commitment to intentional faith-based connections with each other.

Those of us who served on the Vision Team experienced the transforming power over time of:

- Daily bible study
- Daily prayer
- Availability
- Listening
- Outreach and encounter with those outside of APC
- Being connected with one another and accountable to share insights on the journey each week with others on our team.

We recognized that we need to be a defined community of followers and believers in Christ if we are to witness to and interact with our neighbors in service

What is discipleship in our emerging Vision?

Discipleship in the Presbyterian tradition

- Only named once in the Book of Order at F-1.01 “calling all people to discipleship in Christ.” No further explanation of the meaning of the term.
- No discussion found in the Book of Confessions
- Focus in both the Books of Order and Confession on believers and membership
- Traditional theological focus on the Person and Work of Christ (Incarnation, Atonement and Redemption) rather than following the teachings of Jesus.
- Nonetheless, we believe that a focus on the meaning and practices of discipleship are not incompatible with the Presbyterian witness
- Presbyterians throughout our denomination are joining in new approaches to spiritual formation and growth in Christ

Discipleship is about the APC tradition of Faith in Action. Remember the insights we all shared in answer to the questions at the October 2011 congregation retreat?

Who is Jesus?

He is a radical teacher who shows us how to have a meaningful life with God—the impossible right way to live.

What is church?

Church is a community of ordinary people who follow Christ, who welcomes people to join them in the journey of faith and moves into the community carrying God’s love and reconciliation.

What is service?

Service is the way the church is the eyes, ears, hands, feet and heart of Jesus Christ in the world.

At APC, being and becoming followers of Jesus Christ are at the core of who we are. Our vision is to continue to help everyone continue on the journey from wherever they are and to center on Jesus Christ by following his teachings and supporting one another in living out the basics of discipleship.

What are our next steps?

- We believe from our Vision Team experience with daily and weekly disciplines that working in small groups is key for supporting one another on our discipleship journeys
- Sunday worship together can help us forge a common understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ
- We do not have all the answers and we do not get them from following a set curriculum. We must all open ourselves to being led a few steps at a time in sharing, listening, scripture reading and reflection and in daily prayer.
- We will shortly be offering everyone an opportunity to take part in small groups that will not exist only for a short season, but are intended to serve us for long-term fun, work and life together.
- We will have an inward-directed component of getting to know one another better, building relationships and caring for one another.
- We hope that the groups can help us be supportive and also accountable to one another for living as disciples.
- We are hopeful that the groups can also take the love of God outward into the community as Jesus' hands and feet through organized faith in action.
- Finally we believe that journeys in spiritual formation and discipleship must be the foundation and support for the other components of the vision so that they remain foremost a reflection of our love of God and our desire to serve our Lord and master, Jesus Christ in South Arlington.

We ended our Discipleship time with a hands-on, visual experience of how we support each other's faith through things we say and do.

We stood in a circle and took turns rolling a ball of yarn to each other while holding on to the end, each saying one way we connect with each other in faith. As we did, we formed a web of yarn in the center, a physical reminder of our connections within our faith community. And a reminder of the nets of the first disciples, called to be "fishers of men (women too)" by sharing the Good News.

We have inherited a legacy of nurturing discipleship at APC, but we have lost some of our sense of Christian community as a congregation as we have spent less and less time together in intentional faith-based and faith-building activities.

Each of us is on a personal spiritual journey, and in this time and place we are on a shared spiritual journey with each other, and are called to invite others to join us.

See how we are all connected through our shared faith experiences. We are committed to providing intentional opportunities to make this happen. But we cannot do this by ourselves. We need God's guidance, and we need you- to help with leadership and to participate. What call do you hear?

We ended by singing a hymn- "Blest Be the Tie That Binds."

As people bound together by our faith, let's move forward, remembering who we are and whose we are. Amen.