**Encouraging a Disciple-making Culture at Providence Church**

Considering membership in a new church raises a lot of questions. One common question asked is "how do I get connected in a discipling relationship?" We hope that this article will help answer some of your questions and help you to get connected in a spiritually encouraging discipling relationship. Of course, the Providence Church elders and deacons (and members, for that matter) are happy to talk with you further about any questions you may still have. It's our prayer that our deliberate love and spiritual care for each other will build up the body of Christ at Providence, will make the work of the gospel more visible in our lives, and ultimately will bring glory to God.

**What is meant by "discipling?"**

In one sense most everything we do as a local church is about being and making disciples. The songs we sing, the prayers we pray, and certainly the sermons preached all aim to grow us as God-glorifying disciples. Our corporate relationships as we live, serve and learn at Providence are also an important part of our growth in discipleship. But, for the purposes of this short paper we have something even more specific in mind. When we write "discipling" we are thinking particularly about individual relationships. More formally stated, we are talking about the intentional encouragement and training of disciples of Jesus on the basis of deliberate, loving relationships.

One place where we can read about these loving relationships between Christians is the gospel of John. In John 15:17, Jesus says, “**My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you**.” Jesus goes on to describe how he has loved us and, by implication, gives us ideas about how we should love one another as his disciples.

We can't take the space here to unpack all of John 15, or even verse 17 for that matter. Simply notice a few of the things Jesus tells us about his love toward us and, by extension, our appropriate reflection of that love toward one another. We see in this chapter that Christ's love for his people is *intentional*, *purposeful*, *relational*, *joyful* and *normal*.

**Intentional** - "You did not choose me but I chose you..." (John 15:16a). Jesus did not merely stumble across his disciples - he took loving initiative. He chose them. Christ-like love is not passive...it takes initiative. And so when we seek to love others as Christ has loved us this must imply we will take some kind of similar initiative, too.

**Purposeful** - "**...and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last**" (John 15:16b). Christ's love for his disciples is purposeful. He has something in mind; that they would bear fruit for God's glory. Christ's love is not merely sentimental. It has a wonderful, God-glorifying agenda. As finite and fallen men and women, our love for other members of Providence will of course have less certain effects...but if we are to love one another as Christ has loved us surely we will at least have an agenda of similar intent—the spiritual good of our friend and God's glory through their joy in the gospel.

**Relational** - "**As the father has loved me, so have I loved you**" (John 15:9) and, "**Instead, I have called you friends...**" (John 15:15a). Jesus is clear that his relationship with his people is one of loving friendship, even though he is infinitely far above us in majesty, holiness and honor. Surely then if we are to love fellow fallen humans after the pattern of Christ's love for us we must relate to them as loving friends. We must not treat them merely as projects, nor only as master and student. We should pour out our very lives for one another's good in Christ­like, loving relationships.

**Joyful** - "**I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete**" (John 15:11). Jesus' purpose in his instruction to love one another is that we would know his joy. Caring for other Christians and purposefully setting out to encourage them to grow in grace may be very hard work. But it is wonderful work. According to Christ, it is joy-producing work.

**Normal** - Jesus makes this kind of loving discipling his basic command to all his people and, thus, normal for all Christians. We read in verse 15 “**My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you**.” The idea that basic Christian discipleship involves encouraging other believers is found throughout God's Word. So in Hebrews 3:13 we are told, "**But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness**." In Romans 12:10 we are told, "**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.**" And in 1 Thessalonians 5: 11 we read, "**Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.**" We could go on and on; one of the main concerns of the New Testament writers is that all the Christians in the various churches would be active in encouraging one another in the faith. As a member of Providence Church we want you to help us sustain this culture of discipling by letting other members get to know you and by working to get to know members. And we want you to do this with the aim of encouraging and being encouraged by one another. By this we hope that as a church we be characterized by a culture of discipling where we do what Christians have done for two millennium: "**to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us**" (1 John 3:23).

**What do we mean by a "culture of discipling?"**

Most dictionaries define a "culture" as something like "*the shared values, goals and practices that characterize a group.*" That’s kind of what we have in mind when we talk about wanting to encourage a "culture of discipling" at Providence Church. We want to see discipling one another as an obvious characteristic of our church—not merely as program or activity but as a basic part of the fabric of our community, part of our church culture. While formal programs are not necessarily bad, in this case we think that would fall short of the Biblical ideal. We want to encourage a culture where it is simply normal for members, out of love for Christ and one another, to take the initiative to build relationships with other members with the deliberate aim of doing them spiritual good. We want to encourage a culture where members don't have to sign up for anything or get any special permission before they can begin to love one another in this Biblical way. We hope and pray for a culture where member initiative, not a staff­sustained effort, keeps these deliberate, loving relationships going. In short, we want Providence to have the culture of a Biblically healthy church.

**What should I do in a discipling relationship?**

I think it's safe to say that the most significant aspects of any discipling relationship are not what you do or when you meet but THAT you do something and that you have Biblical truth at its core. There is no "set program" or form for discipling relationships at Providence. Some folks get together once a week and talk about the prior Sunday's sermon; some read a book from the Book Table one chapter at a time and meet up to talk about it; some outline through a book of the Bible and meet to compare outlines; some attend a Core Seminar together and meet up to talk about application to their lives; some regularly invite an unmarried member to sit in on their family devotions; some schedule "play dates" for their kids and talk about the Sunday night talk. I could list many more but I trust you get the point. We think it's not so important exactly what you do but that you simply decide to relate to another member of Providence with the intentional aim of encouraging them with truth from God's Word. Be creative! Be flexible! But be intentional about loving one another in the best, the highest, the most Biblical way—by deliberately setting out to relate to one another with the aim of doing the other person spiritual good. If you would like even more help thinking through discipling relationships we have a 13-week Core Seminar class on Discipling.

Feel free to check it out the next time it's offered on Sunday mornings at 9:15 AM. Or ask an elder for the manuscripts from the class and you can read and find help on your own.

**How can I get into a discipling relationship?**

There are basically three ways to establish a discipling relationship at Providence. First, as a member of Providence you are simply free to take personal initiative to try to work out a discipling relationship with any other Providence member (of your same gender, please). You don't need to sign up for anything or get permission from staff. It's our hope that as you get to know other members of Providence you will find a member whose schedule and availability match up with your own. If so, you should feel free to invite that person to meet up regularly to pray and be encouraged by God's Word in some way.

Second, once you have joined a Life Group, you can talk to your LG leader for some suggestions and assistance. They may not be free to meet up with you personally, but as they get to know you chances are they can help connect you with another Providence member who would love to meet up regularly.

Third, if for whatever reason neither of these avenues results in a regular discipling relationship, feel free to contact one of the Providence elders or deacons. There are always quite a few members who because of schedules, geography or other reasons aren't able to connect with another Providence member one-to-one. In those cases the Providence staff is happy to try to help out. Just call the Providence office and ask for Shawn Bergen.

But, we do encourage you to give your own personal initiative a try first. You might just find that taking the initiative to be a source of spiritual encouragement for others is one of the most satisfying experiences in your life as a Christian. And you just might find yourself understanding even more clearly what Jesus meant when he said, "**By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**" (John 13:35).