

# DISCIPLESHIP *strategy*

*How will Bethel be and make disciples of those we are reaching in our community?*

## **Executive Summary**

As we reach people in our community, we will make disciples of them primarily through Sunday worship and Sunday School. We will be disciples ourselves through these same means. Based on Scripture, a mature disciple is characterized by four basic attributes (summarized in the acronym TREE):

**Thirsting** (for Christ, in all of Scriptures)

**Reaching**

**Exalting**

**Evangelizing**

Our adult Sunday School classes will teach topics related to each of these attributes in regular succession, and all other teaching ministries for adults will be coordinated with Sunday School. Children's Sunday School and youth group will follow a separate plan suited to the particular needs of covenant youth. Our strategy also includes a discipleship challenge.

## **What is the biblical mandate for discipleship?**

Jesus calls us to be and to make disciples who are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and who are learning to observe everything Jesus commanded. As we saw in our outreach strategy, Jesus gave us this command as the crucified and resurrected King who had been given all authority in heaven and on earth to save His people. Since He was crucified for our sin, we follow Jesus as disciples in the joy of complete forgiveness and surpassing love. Since He was raised from the dead, He now rules our hearts by grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness in our behalf and now makes us like Himself. What He commands He also gives us freely. Thus the gospel makes us a people growing spiritually in warm and vital union with Christ.

Since the gospel is the power of God for salvation in general, it follows that it is the power of God for discipleship in particular. It is by hearing the gospel of Christ and His love that our hearts are moved by the Spirit to obey God's law out of genuine love for Him. This growth in love and obedience does not happen automatically. We must pray to be strengthened with power through the Spirit to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love, so that through this knowledge of Christ's love we might be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-19). We ask this of God based on His promise to put the Spirit in us and to cause us to walk in His ways and observe His commandments (Ezekiel 36:27).

Because God has promised to give us the Spirit and cause us to walk in His ways, we must be disciples. We must obey everything Christ commanded because God has promised we

will. What great confidence God gives us as He calls us to obey everything Jesus commanded! We commit to discipleship emboldened by God's wonderful promises.

### **How does our discipleship strategy relate to our mission, vision, and values?**

Our core passion is what we call "gospel for growth." It expresses a deep conviction that only the gospel of Christ makes and grows believers. It is the heart and soul of Bethel Church and drives our mission, vision, and values. As we look to the future, we envision Bethel as an exciting place to be for one all-consuming reason: we hear the gospel every week and people find themselves growing closer to God as a result. Our mission is to spread the gospel of Christ so that Bethel Church, North Dallas, and the world grow in Him.

Accordingly, we value consistent proclamation of the gospel: we will proclaim the good news of what God has accomplished for us in Jesus Christ as the sum and substance of every sermon and Bible study—without exception. There should never be a sermon or Bible study where the good news of what God has done for us in Christ is not the main message.

Another value is life in Christ. We value celebrating life in Christ, joyfully acknowledging God's promise to keep working in us by his Word and Spirit until we are as perfectly loving and obedient as Christ was for us. We value prayer and will call on God to rule us and fulfill in us all His saving purposes.

As we commit to observing everything Christ instructed, we are helped by the Reformed creeds and confessions. We value them as faithful summaries of God's Word. We are gladly Reformed because, of all the branches of Christianity, it is the richest way to know Christ and the fullest way to give all glory to God. Included here are the "Westminster Standards" (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism), as well as the "Three Forms of Unity" (the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism). God's Word has ultimate authority. The Reformed creeds help us to know it by offering faithful summaries of biblical teaching that have stood the test of time.

We see discipleship happening naturally and seamlessly, because the whole congregation is engaged in one long unending conversation about gospel of Christ. This conversation takes place formally in every sermon and Bible study and informally as people encourage one another in the midst of life's blessings and struggles. As they engage in this conversation people are equipped with a deeper and clearer understanding of the gospel and its implications for life. Thus, it becomes increasingly natural to discuss Christ because people are accustomed to working out the implications of His death, resurrection, and present reign for their lives.

### **What is a mature disciple?**

We define a mature disciple with the image of a tree:

**Thirsting** (for Christ, in all of Scriptures)

**Reaching**

**Exalting**

**Evangelizing**

### *The Image of the TREE*

Our passion at Bethel is gospel for growth, and the image of a tree that bears fruit communicates this passion. The tree is the cross of Christ, which bears abundant fruit. Jesus speaks this way in reference to wheat in John 12:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Jesus came to earth and died on the cross: now as a result He bears much fruit. Jesus also compares Himself to a vine: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, He it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing...By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:5, 8). We must preach and teach the gospel of Christ consistently so that disciples abide in Christ and bear much fruit to the glory of our heavenly Father. It is the gospel that bears fruit and grows us (Colossians 1:6).

### *Thirsting (for Christ, in all of Scriptures)*

A mature disciple longs to know Christ more deeply. “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Knowing Christ is not merely intellectual. Paul prayed that we might receive power to know the love of Christ so that we might be filled with all the fullness of God (cf. Ephesians 1:18f; 3:14f). The knowledge of Christ’s love, ministered by the power of the Spirit, is what fills disciples with the fullness of God. Thus, a mature disciple longs to hear of the love of Christ. Mature disciples read and study Scripture in order to find life in Christ (cf. John 5:39-40).

### *Reaching Out in Fellowship and Service*

We are made in the image of the triune God, so we are communal by nature. As we are renewed in Christ’s image, then, we will naturally reach out and serve others in our church and out in our community. Christ calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him, serving others as He serves us. We reach out to fellow church members in various ways: inviting others into our homes to share meals, writing cards, calling to encourage someone or simply to say hello! We reach out to those in our community as well: inviting neighbors into our homes, volunteering in soup kitchens and homeless shelters, serving others in the workplace. Christ calls us to give up all our time, talent, and treasure—to be used no longer for our own self-serving purposes but for the good of others. It is what Christ has done for us, so as we are made like Him it is what we must and will do more and more for others.

### *Exalting*

Mature disciples worship God in all of life and especially when gathered with God’s people on Sundays. Mature disciples center their lives around corporate worship: gathering to worship God with His people is the highlight of their weeks. They look forward to worship because they understand that in worship God meets with His people to bestow His blessings upon them and they respond in joyful praise. We are always on the receiving end of God’s blessings and delight to return thanks for all we have received. Corporate worship spills into all of life as we glorify God by loving others with the love we ourselves have received. We show the love of Christ in church, work, and home—to fellow church members, to those we work with and for and those who work for us, and to family, roommates, friends, neighbors, and people in our community.

### *Evangelizing*

Mature disciples also have a heart for the lost. Christ came to seek and to save the lost. United to Christ, they share his passion for a world that is dying and needs Christ desperately. This passion leads them to serve others where they live, work, and play so as to gain an open door for the gospel. Mature disciples regularly look for ways to spread the good news of Christ to the people around them.

### **How will Bethel be and make disciples?**

We will make mature disciples through Sunday worship and Sunday School as our primary avenues of discipleship. This means we will plan our discipleship strategy around Sunday worship and Sunday School.

Sunday worship services contain all the essential elements of discipleship. Jesus told us how to make disciples when He told us baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and to teach them to observe everything He commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus' method for making mature disciples is Word and sacraments. Worship services contain both the preaching of the Word and the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper). Therefore, Sunday worship services contain all the essential elements of discipleship.

Sunday School is another avenue to teach people to observe everything Jesus commanded. Sunday School offers unique teaching and learning opportunities that are different from those in worship services. For instance, members have an opportunity to dialogue with the teacher and ask questions in Sunday School. Sunday School also gives members time to give sustained consideration to a particular area of biblical teaching or to receive training for some aspect of Christian life and ministry.

We will plan adult Sunday School classes around the TREE acronym. Our strategy is to make mature disciples by regularly teaching through the components of the TREE acronym in regular succession: first a study related to Thirsting, next one on Reaching, then one on Exalting, finally one on Evangelizing. Then we will start over at the beginning of the acronym and repeat. We will teach through the TREE acronym whether we are meeting year-round in quarters or taking summers off and have Spring and Fall semesters.

#### *Meeting year-round:*

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Quarter</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter</b>	<b>4<sup>th</sup> Quarter</b>
Some topic related to "thirsting"	Some topic related to "reaching"	Some topic related to "exalting"	Some topic related to "evangelizing"

#### *Taking summers off:*

<b>Spring Year 1</b>	<b>Summer</b>	<b>Fall Year 1</b>	<b>Spring Year 2</b>	<b>Summer</b>	<b>Fall Year 2</b>
Thirsting	Off	Reaching	Exalting	Off	Evangelizing

## **What about other teaching ministries?**

As we enter 2016 Bethel has many discipleship avenues beyond Sunday worship and Sunday School, including:

- Small groups (evenings of 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of each month)
- Wednesday Night Men's Bible Study
- Wednesday Night Women's Bible Study
- Bethel Youth Group (Wednesday evenings)
- Thursday Morning Women's Bible Study

To make our discipleship strategy coherent, we plan to coordinate these additional ministries with the adult Sunday School teaching schedule. The component of the TREE acronym being covered in Sunday School will also be taught in these additional ministries (it is not necessary to teach the same book or material as adult Sunday School). We hope this approach will provide greater unity and deeper discipleship. Everyone will be studying the same basic topic, which will unify members as fellow disciples, and hearing from different teachers will provide multiple perspectives, which will impart richer wisdom. The discipleship ministry team will serve Bethel by coordinating our various ministries.

Bethel Youth Group and children's Sunday School will follow their own curriculums (more information is provided below). The discipleship team will help plan these curriculums.

## **Discipleship Challenge**

To encourage discipleship we will challenge each other to do two things:

1. Attend Sunday worship and Sunday School.
2. Do one intentional discipleship activity each week.

The first challenge reflects the fact that our discipleship strategy is planned around Sunday worship and Sunday School. The second challenge is really meant to reflect the fact that all of life is discipleship and to encourage one other to think that way. The challenge is to take one block of time (morning, afternoon, or evening) and do something intentional to give intentional expression to your life as a disciple. Examples of intentional discipleship activities might include spending extended time in prayer, having unbelieving neighbors over, meeting someone for one-on-one discipleship, serving your community, attending a Bible study, writing cards or making phone calls to encourage fellow members, serving on a ministry team, doing landscaping, etc.

We recognize that life is busy. We can't do everything. We shouldn't feel obligated to do so. But choosing to do one thing intentionally as a disciple helps us practice doing all we do intentionally as a disciple of Christ. We don't do everything, but what we do, we do intentionally as a disciple. Discipleship is not an activity we do here or there (e.g. attending a Bible study, going to church, doing devotions). We *are* disciples. It is who we are. So all we do, we do as disciples (cf. Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31). Choosing to do one intentional discipleship activity each week helps us live all of life intentionally as a disciple.

### **How will Bethel disciple children and youth?**

We will also make disciples of our covenant children. Due to the unique discipleship needs of youth and children, youth group or children's Sunday School will follow their own discipleship plan.

At the end of 2015 Bethel has a fair number of children under the age of 5 and only a few high school students. Our immediate discipleship strategy will need to be somewhat flexible until we gain enough students to sustain a full Sunday School and youth group ministry. In the meantime our discipleship strategy focuses on two key areas: we want all covenant youth to learn the Bible and to learn the doctrines of Scripture summarized in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. We will teach the Bible and the catechism in such a way that children learn from the very beginning that the gospel is the main message of the Bible. They need to be taught that the purpose of all the various Bible stories, key passages, and basic doctrines is to lead them to Christ that they might find life in Him—not simply to teach them general moral lessons about life or important truths about the world. Bible stories help us see our own failure to do what pleases God and our need for the forgiveness and new life only Christ can provide.

As we look to the future we anticipate using something like the GCP curriculum (taught in a way that fits “gospel for growth”) for children through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade class will teach general Bible knowledge in a Christ-centered way. The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade class will teach students the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Building on general Bible knowledge and catechesis, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade class will prepare students for life after high school and focus on ethics, apologetics, and the importance of the Reformed faith.