Cities around the world have become a concentration of the world’s population as tens of thousands of new people move to them every day. It is estimated that today, more than one half of humanity is living in cities (Massey, Allen, and Pile 1999:1). Because of his love and care for all his creatures (John 3:16), God definitely loves city dwellers and is sensitive to their spiritual needs. That is why he sent Jonah to Nineveh and also inspired Paul and his companions to minister in cities like Rome, Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica. He is also interested in today’s city dwellers’ spiritual wellbeing. They are part of the people of all nations Christ commands us to disciple.

With the Great Commission, Jesus set the agenda for the raison d’être of the church. In a sort of farewell speech, he said to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18-20). The task of making disciples is placed right at the center of the Great Commission as an imperative for the church in all ages and contexts. Christ’s command was so central to the Early Church’s identity that each of the four gospels ends with a version of it (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:45–49; John 20:21–23). Giving one’s ultimate allegiance to Christ and leading other people to make the same decision is still expected from all professed Christians today, no matter the challenging contexts they live and witness in.

This paper discusses three essential dimensions of biblically shaped discipleship, the challenges of discipleship in urban contexts, and then offers suggestions for developing effective discipleship models.
Three Essential Dimensions of a Scripture-Shaped Discipleship

Jesus’ call to disciple all nations has been interpreted and applied differently over the history of Christianity. However, any approach to and practice of discipleship must be firmly rooted in principles derived from Scripture. My survey of discipleship literature revealed the following three essential dimensions that should be emphasized in every effective approach to helping believers become committed followers of Christ: the rational, relational, and missional dimensions (Wilkins 1988; Hull 2006; Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014; Hirsch 2006; Harrington and Absalom 2016; Melbourne 2007; Barna 2001; Willard 2006; Putman 2010).

The rational (communion) dimension of discipleship is where a believer intentionally learns from Jesus. In its original context “disciple” (mathētes) referred to “someone who was either an apprentice in a trade or a pupil of a teacher” (Harrington and Absalom 2016:20). That person would attach themselves to a teacher for the purpose of acquiring both theoretical and practical knowledge (Brown 1975:484). The rational dimension stresses the need for a continuing transformation and growth even for those who have already become disciples. It is a call to all believers of all ages and in stages of spiritual growth to continue their journey of discipleship. Because faith is formed and grows by the knowledge and application of the Word of God, meaningful ongoing communion with God through his Word, soul searching prayer, and other spiritual disciplines help consolidate the need for believers’ continuing spiritual growth and transformation. Since “teaching” in Matthew 28:19 is an ongoing process, the rational dimension of discipleship refers to “a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith” (Blomberg 1992:431). It should however be noted that the goal of this continuing learning is not to just impart knowledge but to rouse total commitment to Jesus (Wilkins 1988:159).

The relational (community) dimension of discipleship develops in the context of a supportive community where accountability can take place. The New Testament portrays a very dynamic communal culture in the Early Church because of their understanding of disciple-making as a relational process. Because of its Old Testament roots, the Early Church continued to emphasize kinship as one of its core values. What was different about this new community was that kinship was no more defined in terms of blood lines and ethnicity but rather in terms of shared faith and fellowship in Christ. The church became an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and unity without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or social status (Gal 3:28). Membership was open to all on the
basis of professing faith in Christ as Savior and a public demonstration of complete allegiance to Christ through water baptism (Acts 2:37, 38). The Early Church expressed its values of corporate solidarity and kinship through the use of motifs such as the body of Christ and family of God to describe the interdependence between its members and to convey the close bond that enabled them to treat each other as family members (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). Their concern was not power but the development of a lasting sense of interdependence, corporate solidarity, and accountability among believers. This interdependence suggested that each member of the body had a unique role to play and yet was dependent upon all other members. By demonstrating a new way of living, multitudes were attracted to this new community of faith (Acts 2:46, 47). In such settings, being a disciple was not synonymous with only accepting abstract propositional truths about Jesus. Being a disciple of Christ was about learning from Jesus and modeling in life what they knew about him. Their brand of discipleship was both what they did on behalf of Christ and how they represented Christ in the world (Melbourne 2007:10). This communal culture of the New Testament, where believers were integrated members of supportive groups, became a fertile ground for the seed of the gospel to be sown and nurtured.

The missional (commission) dimension of discipleship is concerned with understanding the call to “make disciples” (mathēteusate) in Matthew 28:19 as essentially a call for believers to duplicate themselves through their engagement in mission. This is the primary command of the Great Commission and it must remain the primary responsibility of the church in every context. Believers of the New Testament linked together their belonging to a community and their responsibility to share what that community stood for. Mission in the context of the Great Commission was understood as more than a call to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ. It was understood as both a call to share one’s faith and to disciple interested recipients to free them from the grasp of the devil so that they could fully and continually devote themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Hence, the New Testament uses the word disciple to indicate a lifelong process rooted in a relationship with and total commitment to Christ. This comes as the result of learning and internalizing Jesus’ teaching, being changed by constantly growing in his knowledge (2 Pet 3:18), living a life of total submission to his lordship through the power of the Holy Spirit in the context of a loving and supportive community (John 15:1-17; Phil 3:8), and helping others begin to taste, trust, and follow Jesus (2 Tim 2:2). In other words, discipleship refers to the way Christ’s followers put their beliefs into practice in their relationship with Christ, each other, and how
they are to practically reflect the kingdom of God to the world they are called to witness to. From this perspective, discipleship is not to be understood as a church program, because it is not an event in time. It is rather about believers embracing the lifelong journey toward fullness in Christ that transforms their cognitive, affective, and evaluative perspectives on life. Disciples of Jesus do not just profess certain cognitive beliefs in God; they also apply those beliefs to every aspect of their daily life.

**An Overview of the Current State of Discipleship**

There is an agreement among Christian discipleship scholars in the West that compared to the New Testament, the current practice of discipleship has, to a great extent, lost its primacy of focus among Christians. A Barna report produced in partnership with The Navigators on the current state of discipleship in the United States points out that only one percent of church leaders (senior pastors and discipleship leaders) agree that “today’s churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers” (The Navigators 2015:9, 10). The making of disciples has largely been watered down to merely moving converts to Christianity into church membership (Ogden 2016:22-39; Lear 2016; The Navigators 2015; Willard 2006; Putman 2010:21). Thus, some scholars perceive current church growth as largely numerical and statistical growth without much spiritual depth (Ogden 2016; The Navigators 2015). From his international ministry experience, Greg Ogden posits that generally speaking, Christians are much better at converting people than they are at helping these converts become disciples of Christ. He justifies his remarks about the lack of depth of transformative discipleship in Christianity by pointing to the weak impact Christians have on the moral and spiritual climate of their contexts even in countries where the vast majority of the population identifies itself as Christian (2006:23; The Navigators 2015; Willard 2006). This echoes Bill Hull’s claim that “the crisis at the heart of the church today is a crisis of product” (Hull 1988:14). For Dallas Willard, there is a relationship between churches’ failure to make discipleship a core condition of becoming a Christian and the false but widely accepted assumption among a significant number of churchgoers that one can become a Christian without necessarily having to become a disciple of Christ. He observes that among too many professed Christians,

One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example,
spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church. . . . So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, *discipleship clearly is optional*. (Willard 2006:4, emphasis in original)

The above comment only seems to be one of the symptoms of the lack of drive on the part of many Christians to prioritize an investment in their spiritual growth (The Navigators 2015:11, 12).

**Some Contributing Factors to the Current State of Discipleship**

Several factors contribute to the current low state of discipleship in Christianity. The first four of the factors that will be considered here are typical of urban contexts. Although no two cities are the same, there are a number of key features that are common to urban contexts. These factors may present challenges for making disciples. The remaining three factors are related to approaches to discipleship among Christians. It is not my intention to attempt to cover all those possible contributing factors in this paper.

**The Impact of Secularization**

The interrelationship between urbanization and secularization is a consistent theme in urban literature. Harvey Cox points out that “the rise of urban civilization and the collapse of traditional religion are the two main hallmarks of our era and are closely related movements” (2013:1). He links the collapse of traditional religion to secularization which he defines as “the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed world-views, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols” (2). As a result of the interrelationship between urbanization and secularization, many urban dwellers are turning away from anything that has something to do with organized religion or even belief in God. Instead, their attention is often turned toward self and what life has to offer them.

**An Isolationist (Loner) Approach to Spiritual Growth**

By focusing on “the immediate world as the ultimate reality and the individual as the center of authority,” secularization has also contributed to the “disruption of community life and fragmentation of family relationships” (Van Gelder 2000:69). It is estimated that more than 32 million
Americans live alone today compared to only 4 million in 1950. These singletons “represent 28 percent of all households at the national level; more than 40 percent in cities like San Francisco, Seattle, Atlanta, Denver, and Minneapolis; and nearly 50 percent in Washington D.C. and Manhattan” (Klinenberg 2012:208). They seem to value nearness to conveniences like stores, restaurants, and gyms more than communal commitments (Dever 2016:12). Because of this growing trend in urban settings, many believers have also relegated spirituality to the private realm. Forty-one percent of professed Christians see their spiritual life as entirely private (The Navigators 2015:108). Thirty-seven percent opt for a loner approach to discipleship (109). In a research on the state of discipleship, only 18% of the participants strongly agreed that a believer cannot be complete and mature in their spiritual journey without the influence and support of a community of faith (Ogden 2016:28, 33). It is disconcerting that while a community of faith is central to God’s plan of salvation (Acts 2:47; Heb 10:24-25), many Christians choose to pursue spiritual growth on their own.

**Consumerism**

Consumerism in the context of this chapter refers to “the belief that meaning and satisfaction in life are to be found through the purchase and use of new consumer goods” (Goodwin, Nelson, Ackerman, and Weisskopf 2008:4). Although this phenomenon is of global scope, it is much more accentuated in urban contexts where a multitude of consumer items associated with success and wellbeing are more readily accessible through the “buy now, pay later” options offered by stores and credit card companies. Because of this obsession with the acquisition of the latest consumer goods, people’s quality of life is often measured by what they consume or the latest gadgets they possess (Twitchell 2002:1).

A consumerist lifestyle thus poses a challenge to discipleship because of its competition with biblical values of stewardship, contentment, and simplicity. Because the consumerist mentality teaches people that they can have whatever they want, whenever they want it, and at the least cost to them (Metzger 2007:40), some believers become church shoppers in the sense that their “relationship with a church is based on whether it meets [their] needs or checks the boxes of what [they] are looking for in a church” (Ogden 2016:33). Whenever such believers are challenged to make spiritual commitments that are not in harmony with their personal preferences and the comfort they seek, they move to another church. With so many churches competing for members, congregants can easily be perceived as consumers to be wooed (Finke and Stark 2005:8-9). As a result, some churches can become so concerned with satisfying worshipers’
needs and preferences that they fail to focus their ministries on making biblically-faithful disciples (2 Tim 4:3-4).

**General Busyness of Life and Lack of Commitment to Spiritual Growth**

Participants in the Barna Group’s 2015 study on the state of discipleship in the United States were all in agreement that the general busyness of life and the lack of commitment to discipleship are the two most significant barriers to spiritual growth among American Christians. While the general busyness of life is typical of living in an urban context, the lack of commitment to discipleship is an indication of most Christians’ lack of drive to prioritize their spiritual growth when confronted by existential needs (The Navigators 2015:56, 57, 101). Another sign of spiritual disengagement among American Christians is that 64% of practicing Christians feel comfortable with where they are now spiritually. Therefore, they do not feel compelled to progress in their spiritual life, 23% do not see spiritual progress in their lives as very important, and 24% do not even see the benefit of trying to make progress in their spiritual life (106, 118).

**Professional Monopoly on Ministry**

Despite the teaching of the New Testament on ministry as the function of the total church membership (1 Pet 2:9-10; Sanou, Campbell, and Williams 2017), by the end of the first century, a shift from spiritual giftedness to that of formal church office as the basis for ministry had begun. Ministries that members of the Christian community once performed without official appointment started to be clericalized, and liturgical actions were turned into permanent offices. As a direct result, the possibility of lay people exercising individual ministries sharply declined, even to the point of extinction (Bradshaw 1982-1983:52). While the first century church was marked by a people without the hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity, in the second and third centuries a definite clergy/laity distinction was gaining ground. By the fifth and sixth centuries, the cleavage between clergy and laity had become entrenched (Stevens 1999:39). In the Middle Ages, with the establishment of a sacerdotal system of mediated grace, the laity became a submissive, docile part of the church with the priest holding authority over souls (Borchert 1996:556). A sharp differentiation between clergy and laity had thus developed, degrading the ministries of the lay people and emphasizing the special function of the clergy. During this period, the laity became dependent upon the clergy for access to God’s favor. Although the Protestant Reformation recovered much of the
New Testament teaching (e.g., Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists), nevertheless, the laity were still often considered, and even considered themselves, a lower grade of Christians than the ordained ministers (Richardson and Bowden 1983:318-319). For example, despite their strong emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, to some extent, the Reformers maintained a clear and rigid distinction between the role of the ordained minister and that of the rest of the believers in congregational involvement in worship. The ordained ministers were there to minister and the congregation was ministered unto (Bradshaw 1982-1983:56).

Regrettably, the same trend in ministry lives on in many Christian circles today. Instead of fulfilling their divine calling and giftedness to equip believers for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12), the majority of pastors continue to monopolize almost all the ministry responsibilities assigned to the entire body of Christ. By creating a dependency of congregants on them for all aspects of spiritual care, pastors implicitly teach believers that they pay to be ministered to. Greg Ogden is right to compare the contemporary approach to ministry to “a football game with twenty-two people on the field in desperate need of rest, and fifty thousand people in the stands in desperate need of exercise” (2016:25). This approach to ministry, which fosters a spectator mentality on the part of the vast majority of believers, runs counter to the core principle of the priesthood of all believers. As a result of spiritual caregiving being solely assigned to ministry professionals, the majority of believers are neither using their spiritual gifts nor maturing in their discipleship experience.

Discipleship through Church-Centered Events

Spiritual caregiving is often monopolized by ministry professionals so they are unable to invest quality time in building strong relationships with each of their congregants to help them grow toward maturity in Christ. Instead of adopting the scriptural model for growing disciples through intentional transformative relationships, most congregations have centered their approach to discipleship on “programmes and finding ways to attract people to their physical building” (Lear 2016:8). Although such activities can, to some extent, contribute to discipleship development, they neglect person-centered growth as the central ingredient in discipleship. As such, they are unable to address spiritual growth factors particular to each congregant (Ogden 2016:45). Besides, there is a steady decline in church attendance in America. Recent research on church attendance reveals that far less than 40% of American Christians attend church at least twice a month (Lear 2016:8, 9; Shattuck 2018). That means that church-centered events do not even reach the bigger segment of those they were planned for.
In addition, many people who show interest in becoming Christians are taught the fundamental beliefs of the church they want to join and then baptized. Because there is often no or little personal follow up, the event of baptism marks the end of the discipleship process for the majority of new members. Once accepted into church membership, there is an assumption that by regularly attending weekly worship services and other programs the church organizes, new converts “will naturally know what it means to be and how they are to practically live as disciples of Jesus Christ” (Lear 2016:8). Unfortunately, the sharing of Christian principles in these kinds of events usually does not effectively address the spiritual growth needs or deep issues some of the believers might be struggling with. These events also tend to focus heavily on cognitive knowledge with the assumption that a sound and articulate presentation of the Bible will inevitably lead to transformation and right Christian living. Sadly, there is no automatic transfer from cognitive knowledge about Christian beliefs and lifestyle to the actual practice of these aspects of Christianity. Thus, a person can fully ascribe cognitively to a set of right scriptural teachings without ever having their lifestyle transformed by them (Jas 2:14-26).

Making disciples is far more than simply presenting biblical truth no matter how crucial that truth is. The process of discipleship involves more than just doctrinal correctness in information transfer. I agree that before surrendering their lives to Christ, people need a certain level of understanding of scriptural truth and need to know the requirements of being Christ’s disciples (Luke 14:25-34). Jesus himself spent an important part of his ministry in teaching truth (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5-7; the parables in Luke 15; 18:1-14; 19:11-26; Matt 11:1; Luke 4:31-32; John 15:1-17). His intention was for his hearers to grow in their understanding of the person and will of God in order for them to have an informed and better relationship with him. However, he taught the truth as knowledge grounded in a relationship and experience with God rather than a mere cognitive understanding of the Word of God (John 8:32, 15:1-10). He always challenged his hearers, especially his disciples, to apply their intellectual knowledge to their day-to-day experiences (Matt 7:24-27). To help his disciples understand the implications of his teachings for their lives or to further explain his teaching to them, Jesus often gave them private tutorials (e.g., Matt 18:1-5; 24; Mark 9:28-29; Matt 16:13-20; Mark 8:13-21; and Luke 22:35-38). These kinds of follow up to church programs are still important for growing faithful disciples today.

### Lack of Personal Discipling Experience

Another contributing factor to the low state of discipleship comes from
the fact that only a very small percentage of Christians have personally been in intentional discipleship relationships in which other believers have walked alongside them over time with the express intention of helping them grow toward spiritual maturity (Ogden 2016:56). With only 23% of all Christians surveyed in the United states being personally discipled by someone else, it is not surprising that only 19% of them are active in discipling others (The Navigators 2015:50). Not having been personally discipled, many Christians perceive themselves as unequipped to disciple others.

**Addressing the Current State of Discipleship**

In the face of the reality about the current state of discipleship and some of the factors that contribute to it as described above, it is important to think about ways to reshape the practice of discipleship as intended by Jesus in the Great Commission. Before suggesting useful steps toward developing a scripture-shaped discipleship model, I will draw some biblical discipleship principles from 1 Thessalonians 2:7-13.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-13: A Biblical Model of Discipleship

A biblical model of discipleship that stand out to me is depicted in 1 Thessalonians 2:7-13. This text compares discipleship to a process of spiritual parenting. Paul uses the parent-child metaphor to describe principles of discipleship by referring to familiar things of life, which both the direct recipients and the wider readership of his epistle were conversant with. This parent-child metaphor is still a powerful means of impressing on people’s minds important spiritual principles about Christian discipleship. This approach to discipleship can help achieve four things: (1) the teaching of biblical truth; (2) modeling a spiritual walk with God to mentees; (3) personal attention to believers’ spiritual growth needs; and (4) a long-term commitment to the spiritual welfare and growth of believers.

**The Teaching of Biblical Truth**

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). Conforming themselves to the command of Matthew 28:19-20, Paul and his companions made the Word of God an essential element of the Thessalonians’ discipleship process. They taught biblical truth using illustrations and metaphors their hearers were
familiar with (2 Tim 2:3-5). This not only helped their hearers relate to their teaching but also to easily remember them.

**Modeling a Spiritual Walk with God**

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed” (1 Thess 2: 9, 10, emphasis added). Paul’s missionary team strove to be role models to the new believers through their shared life with them. If Hampton Keathley’s perspective on discipleship is correct, about 90 percent of what a disciple learns or applies is caught from the discipler’s life rather than from his/her teaching. As a result, he argues that “we should place our emphasis on being a friend and let people see how we deal with things, how we study, how we pray, how we love, etc. We don’t want to just give him all the facts. We need to allow him to see how we work through various issues and help him work through the issues himself” (Keathley 2013). Without any doubt, this was what happened in Jesus’ discipling ministry of the Twelve and his other early followers who so faithfully imitated him that when those who had observed them found no other way to call them but Christians (Acts 11:26).

Following Jesus’ example, mature Christians are called to be pacesetters, positively influencing new believers in their spiritual growth. Paul’s understanding of this principle of Christian growth led him to ask the Corinthian believers to imitate him just as he himself imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He later challenged Timothy to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). This is a challenge to all mature Christians and church leaders to keep on growing in their relationship with Christ so that they can manifest godly character worthy of being imitated.

**Personal Attention to Believers’ Spiritual Needs**

“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:11, 12, emphasis added). Paul’s team gave believers individual attention and instruction as a father would do to his children with the intention to help each of them with their unique needs. They understood that each believer’s uniqueness meant individual attention.
Hampton Keathley illustrates the need for personal attention to believers as follows:

When we bring a newborn home from the hospital, we don’t just put down the infant and say, “Welcome to the family, Johnny. Make yourself at home. The towels are in the hall closet upstairs, the pantry is right here, the can opener is in this drawer. No crying after 10 p.m. If you have any questions, there are lots of people in the family who would love to help you so don’t be afraid to ask.” You laugh and say that is ridiculous, but that is what usually happens to new Christians. Someone gets saved and starts going to church but never gets much personal attention. We devote 18 years to raising our children, but don’t even spend six months helping a new Christian get started in understanding the spiritual world. As a result, many people have been Christians for many years, but have not grown very much. Hebrew 5:12 refers to this phenomenon. So, new believers need someone to give them guidance and help them grow. Like a newborn, they need some personal attention. (Keathley 2004)

Keathley’s illustration highlights the fact that discipling converts is costly in terms of personal and time investment since it requires that each of them be given personal attention in such a way that their unique growth needs are understood and adequately addressed. Jesus’ three-and-half year, day and night investment in his disciples proves that there is no alternative to person-centered growth as a means of helping others matures as disciples of Christ. Disciple-making is not an event limited to a two-to-three-week evangelistic series or something that is taken care of in a formal teaching setting (e.g., baptismal class). This makes mentorship inseparable from discipleship. Since the call to “make disciples” (mathēteusan) in Matthew 28:19 is essentially a call to duplicate one’s self, mentorship is inseparable from discipleship. A spiritual mentor is someone who is committed to a healthy spiritual relationship with another person for the purpose of mutual accountability and growth in Jesus Christ. This type of spiritual relationship between a mentor and a mentee can help keep both of them on track as they become accountable to one another.

Long-term Commitment to the Spiritual Welfare and Growth of Believers

“Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you” (1 Thess 2:7, 8, emphasis added). The process of discipleship requires the investment of quality time in those being discipled. Paul and his missionary team cared for the believers in the congregations they established as a responsible mother would care for her children by intentionally committing themselves...
to their spiritual growth and welfare. This would have involved tenderly and patiently teaching the Thessalonians to walk with God. Their long-term commitment to the welfare of the believers at Thessalonica echoes Jesus’ long-term concern for the growth of his disciples. Before ascending to heaven after three and half years with them, he assured his disciples of his continuing care with these words, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:1, 16-18). An important implication of these two examples is that it takes time and personal attention to make disciples.

First Thessalonians 2:7-13 clearly shows that although the teaching of biblical truth was essential, it was not the sole component of Paul’s missionary team’s discipleship strategy. While the teaching of biblical truth is an essential component of discipleship because a convert cannot fully mature spiritually without understanding biblical principles, it must also be acknowledged that a convert may have considerable biblical knowledge and yet remain spiritually immature. For this reason, the teaching of biblical truth must always be balanced with other components of biblical discipleship such as an intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of new believers, a modeling of a spiritual walk with God, and personal attention to each believer’s spiritual welfare and growth needs. Congregational and small group teaching and personal attention of the believers are needed to encourage them along the road to their Christian maturity. Just as a baby needs an additional amount of attention, new converts also need someone to provide them with attention and guidance in the maturation process.

Suggestions for Developing an Effective Discipleship Model

Below are ten suggestions for developing an effective discipleship model in local congregations that takes into consideration the essential components of discipleship. These suggestions are like ingredients that different master chiefs would use to produce different but top quality dishes.

Develop an Equipping Model of Ministry

Scripture does not support the view that only the paid ministry professionals should do the work of ministry while the rest of the church
membership merely warms the pews and waits to be fed. Because both
groups make up the church, they are called to minister according to their
spiritual giftedness. From the perspective of the New Testament, every
believer is equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister for other believers’ edi-
fication in the body of Christ. First Peter 2:9, 10 and Revelation 1:5, 6 are
two important texts that helped shape the New Testament perspective on
the priesthood of all believers. Peter points out that it is the entire church
membership that is now called, commissioned, and empowered to per-
form the task of priests. For John, the eligibility in this new priestly order
is no longer determined by gender, ethnicity, or position in the church,
but exclusively determined by faith in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

One way God has equipped every believer for his or her priestly min-
istry is through spiritual gifts. The fact that each believer has received at
least one gift from the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 4:10) is an indication that each
member of the body of Christ has a ministry to perform. An expectation
from those in pastoral leadership is to resist the temptation of monopo-
lizing ministry. Instead of doing all the work of ministry themselves, for
whatever reasons, pastors and other official church leaders must be faith-
ful to their calling “for the equipping of the saints for the work of minis-
try, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12). This equipping of
believers for the work of ministry starts by helping them discover their
spiritual gifts. However, the process of spiritual gifts discovery should
not stop with merely naming and defining believers’ gifts. They should
be coached on how to effectively use them. Believers’ awareness of their
spiritual gifts can also contribute to the establishment of gift-based minis-
tries in the church (Dick and Miller 2003:29). Placing believers in their area
of giftedness is vitally important for effective ministry in the local church.
If they do not have a passion for the area in which they serve, they will see
their responsibilities as burdensome rather than joyful. Gift-based minis-
tries can fulfill a twofold function: (a) help each believer become an active
participant in the body of Christ and (b) pay personal attention to spiritual
growth factors unique to each believer in the body of Christ.

Prioritize a Personal Commitment to Developing
a Growing Relationship with God over
Participation in Church Programs

Although involvement in church programs may influence spiritual
behaviors, only God can transform the human heart. The goal of any ap-
proach to discipleship should not be to keep church members busy by
a plethora of activities, but rather to help them embark on a quest for a
growing relationship with Christ (John 15:1-8). Also, the weekly worship
gatherings should not be the main focus of discipleship. Discipleship is not pulpit-centric. Dallas Willard rightly observes that “one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of ‘regular church services.’ They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple” (2002:250). To be effective, the impact of worship services and other church programs needs to be designed in such a way that they address believers’ spiritual needs, challenging them and suggesting to them practical ways and tools to take the next step in their spiritual journey.

Do Not Make Numbers or Regular Church Attendance the Only Standard for Measuring Success in Discipling Others

Membership and church attendance are not sufficient measures as to whether or not people are becoming more like Christ in their spiritual journey. The health of a church “is not just about the numbers. It’s about the movement of people toward Christ, toward deep love for God and genuine love for others” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:8). Bigger is not always better. Quality should be preferred to quantity alone. Our motivation should be to see hearts grow and not to simply see numbers grow. In discipling others, the How many? and Where are they spiritually? questions need to be addressed together. While the How many? question helps evaluate the statistical impact of an activity, it is the Where are they spiritually? that will help measure the spiritual impact of that same activity. In discipleship, numerical and spiritual growth should not be seen as two separate agendas. Both belong to the same agenda. It is this misunderstanding of the correlation between evangelism and discipleship that “has given rise to churches that produce large numbers of converts with little depth, converts who could hardly be called disciples of Jesus Christ. . . . Conversely, there are also many churches that emphasize great teaching and theological depth but fail to see God use them to bring very many, if any, new believers to faith in Christ” (Rainer 2016:11). A biblically-faithful approach to discipleship seeks to find a balance between attracting numbers and at the same time helping those numbers grow to maturity in Christ.

Balance Any Seeker-Sensitive Approach to Discipleship with a Concern for All the Overall Spiritual Growth of the Congregation

Well-established believers as well as religious explorers need to be comprehensibly taught all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19) and not
primarily what they want to hear or what they feel good about. This is important because whenever the primary energies of a congregation are spent on well-crafted program productions solely focused on meeting the needs of people who are still exploring what they believe about Jesus and Christianity, then only secondary energies are left to help both those seekers and the other congregants grow in their spiritual journey. Sometimes, it becomes very challenging to help the religious explorers who are used to big event gatherings to find God in other “less significant” gatherings if the church programs somehow already communicated to them that God is found and experienced only through sophisticated weekly programs (Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014:78).

**Approach Discipleship as a Life-Long Process**

Being a disciple of Christ is a lifelong journey, not an event in time. It is about “becoming a disciple rather than having been made a disciple” (Hull 2006:35, italics in original). As a process of becoming Christ-like, “discipleship isn’t a program or event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners alone; it’s for all believers for everyday of their life” (24). Since “the path to spiritual maturity is not correlated to age” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:33), every church member needs to be constantly challenged to grow in their love for God and other people. The fact that the role of the church in helping nurture a growing relationship with Christ decreases as people move along the later stages of the spiritual continuum should not lead to a congregation’s total disengagement in the spiritual welfare of those along those stages (42). Adequate attention and resources should be available to congregants at every stage of their spiritual journey to help them continue growing in Christ.

**Make Mentoring an Essential Component of the Process of Discipleship**

Beside the formal teaching settings, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with new converts. I once invited a renowned Adventist preacher to share her spiritual journey with a group of students I had mentored. She explained to us that throughout her life she always sought to be happy. Before she became Adventist, she searched for happiness through wrong means to no avail. When she was converted and later became a pastor, she unsuccessfully sought happiness in the applause and approval of other people. One day, she finally found the answer to her quest in the
following statement: “God made man perfectly holy and happy” (White 1999:9, emphasis added). It was only then that she understood that true happiness is only found in fully surrendering one’s life with its past mistakes to God. My students really appreciated our guest being vulnerable in sharing her life experience with them. They understood that she did not get where she is currently in her spiritual journey at a click of a button. They also understood that they are not the only ones struggling in their spiritual journey. As a result of this open conversation with our guest, we all resolved not to let our past mistakes determine who we become in life. Rather, we need to daily open our heart to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Motivate Believers to Invest in Intentional Spiritual Growth Practices

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, Paul uses the disciplined training of an athlete as an image for Christian living. Just as record-winning athletes are disciplined in their training, he encourages believers to be more so since the prize they have in view is eternal. The correct understanding of this training in the process of spiritual growth is rightly captured by Dallas Willard when he states that “grace is opposed to earning, but is not opposed to effort” (2006:61). This diligent training for spiritual maturity can be enhanced by giving due consideration to the practice of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines refer to deliberate self-imposed spiritual habits for the purpose of nurturing spiritual health, thus fostering spiritual growth and maturity. They constitute concrete expressions of our decision to place ourselves before God for him to change us into his likeness (Calhoun 2015; Whitney 2014; Dybdahl 2008). Spiritual disciplines help us check our spiritual life for toxins (Groeschel 2012). Examples of spiritual disciplines include the study, memorizing, and meditation on Scripture, journaling, prayer, fasting, service, etc. A word of caution about the practice of spiritual disciplines is that it does not automatically result in spiritual growth, especially if they are practiced for self-glorification (Luke 18:9-14). By opening our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the cleansing power of God’s Spirit and truth, spiritual disciplines place us before God where genuine transformation can only take place.

Approach Mission as Disciples Making Other Disciples

By commanding his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), Jesus was basically telling them “to make more of what they are
themselves” (Wilkins 1988:162). The primary focus of a congregation should not be on what happens at its facilities. Although we find the “Come and See” method of evangelism in the New Testament (John 1:39), the church was mostly expected to go out, mingle with people, and sow the seeds of the gospel. The emphasis on “come and see” puts the responsibility on individuals to come and hear the gospel rather than on the church to take the gospel to them (Hirsch 2006:275). “When Jesus delivered the Great Commission, he revealed God’s plan for his church as well as for individual disciples. He charged the church to go to the world, because the world has no reason to go to church” (Hull 2006:254). According to the parable of the lost sheep, it is the church, not the unchurched, who are supposed to be the “seekers” (Luke 15:1-7). As such, “we are not to wait for souls to come to us; we must seek them out where they are [because] there are multitudes who will never be reached by the gospel unless it is carried to them” (White 1900:229).

Local Congregations Should Become Genuinely Welcoming and Loving Congregations

People were irresistibly drawn to Jesus because of the unselfish love and concern with which he treated them. In the same way, sincere and loving Christian communities can become fertile ground where people grow in their relationship with Christ. As young adults account for the majority of urban congregations, hospitality, authenticity, and vulnerability should be among a local congregation’s key values (Lear 2016:14). Since “the strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian” (White 1909:470), it is right to say that it is believers rather than programs that are the most effective bridges to Christ. As a loving community, the church becomes not only a true reflection of Jesus Christ but also an answer to Christ’s prayer for unity among his followers (John 17:11, 20-23). While life has become so politicized around ethnic, racial, and national identities, the church, through genuine and loving relationships between its members, is able to irrefutably show our fragmented world that “a community of diverse persons can live in reconciled relationship with one another because they live in reconciled relationship with God” (Van Gelder 2000:109).

Become Sensitive and Respond to Community Needs

A biblical perspective on discipleship indicates that ministry success also relates to the positive impact believers have on the larger community they live in. From that perspective, Christ’s model of discipleship as
expressed by Ellen White should be adopted by local congregations: “The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (1909:143). Just as Jesus was incarnational in his ministry, so should we. We can be confident that such an approach “will not, cannot, be without fruit” (144).

Conclusion

With the current state of discipleship, congregations can no longer afford to rely on their church-centered programs as their main means of growing disciples. Programs do not disciple people; people disciple people. Becoming authentic communities who create intentional spaces where believers of all ages and stages in their faith journey can effectively and meaningfully connect with one another and with God, grow spiritually, and reach out to the world around them is of vital importance in urban discipleship. With the imperative to share the gospel in the cities, urban congregations need to objectively do their own discipleship reality assessment in light of Jesus’ example and command. A thoughtful assessment of the gap between Jesus’ intention and current practices will help them make necessary adjustments to their approach to discipleship.

Works Cited


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