

## **Growing Disciples in Community: Validating a Model**

### **Abstract**

A conceptual model of discipleship based on theology and social science was developed and tested for its validity. The *Growing Disciples in Community* model includes concepts of *connecting*, *understanding*, and *ministering*, which are considered processes of personal discipleship. The model indicates that the discipling attitudes and behaviors of family, friends, Christian teachers, and the local congregation (*equipping*) help explain adolescents' responses to the indicators of personal discipleship.

**Key words:** discipleship, adolescents, discipling, church life, intergenerational

### **Purpose of the Study**

It was hypothesized that an increase in adolescents' reporting of the discipling behavior in the family, with friends, with Christian teachers, and in the local church congregation would lead to increased self-reported scores by the adolescents in personal processes involved in discipleship. Thus, the *Growing Disciples in Community* model was conceptualized. The purpose of this study was to investigate the validity of the model on a population of adolescents attending Seventh-day Adventist junior high and high schools in North America.

### **Literature Review**

Three themes appear to run through the Christian literature: (a) the cultural ethos in the developed world is post-Judeo-Christian (Nelson, 2008; Ogden, 2003), (b) the majority of those who claim Christianity as their religion, if they do attend church at all, do so more as consumers of religious goods and services than as disciples of Christ (Hull, 2006; Willard, 1998), and (c) a rising number of young people are choosing to disconnect from the church as soon as they are able (Black,

2008; Dudley, 1983, 2000; Martin, 2008/2009). These themes suggest that the subjects of discipleship, discipling, and Christian formation may provide some insights into how to reverse these trends.

Currently, discipleship literature and models are focusing strongly on what Hull (2006) calls “environmental discipleship.” It is also called “psychological discipleship” or “relational discipleship” by others. Crabb (1999), Wilhoit (2008), and Gorman (2002) write about community or sometimes family, J. D. Jones (2006) and Nelson (2008) speak of congregation, encompassing “the ways people get along” (Hull, 2006, p. 20). All models of discipleship can ultimately be traced to processes of how humanity connects with and relates to God and how people connect with and relate to the rest of humanity. Further insights about discipleship that have been selectively borrowed from the therapeutic world come from the work of Cloud and Townsend (2001), Crabb (1997), Holmes (2006), and Holmes and Williams (2007a, 2007b).

As Nuesch-Olver (2005) discovered in qualitative research on college freshmen at a Christian university, “to a person, they used language that clearly illustrated their conviction that relationships were of higher importance in the shaping of their faith than programming” (p. 101). The research revealed that all the students who had steady habits of prayer and Scripture reading described having had a relationship with a mentor who modeled a love relationship with Christ. As Aoki et al. (2000) pointed out, in becoming involved in discipling a young person, “an appropriate role for the mentor in this situation is to come alongside the adolescent, modeling Christian virtues and beliefs, without pushing the adolescent to champion the cause of the church” (p. 382).

The methodology for how Christians should disciple one another by walking “alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Ogden, 2003, p. 129) was first outlined in the biblical book of Deuteronomy. The Israelite tribes or families to whom the Shema (Deut 6:4-9) was first addressed were a large extended network of believers living in a pagan culture who were being told to see to it that God’s law was written

on their own hearts and then to intentionally walk alongside their children (or the less mature among them) as they all grew into spiritual maturity.

Looking at the post-Judeo-Christian culture in which we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is not the small mobile and nuclear family of today that is most reminiscent of the Hebrew family Moses was addressing in Deuteronomy; instead, the church as a family is much more similar to Moses' audience than are the social units we usually call "family" today.

Hellerman (2009), in his book *When the Church Was Family*, draws on the sociology of the Mediterranean family to make this concept clear. According to the methodology of discipling laid out in the Shema, therefore, the church should be involved in discipling one another in everyday life, such as "when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deut 6:9, NASB). This is a far different picture from that of Christians as consumers of religious goods and services.

Peterson's (1993) model of discipleship and discipling, which builds on Paul's counsel to the church in Thessalonica, explains aspects of the dynamic of church-family discipling. He explains the family discipling approach that is to be taken with various developmental levels of disciples. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7-10 the disciple is described as a little child, and the discipler is to be "gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children" (NASB). In 1 Thessalonians 2:11 Paul describes the "adolescent" stage disciple. The discipleship-prompting that this group needs is that of a father "exhorting and encouraging and imploring" (1 Thess 2:11, NASB). As the disciples grow and mature, they become brothers and sisters (see 1 Thess 1:6-10 and 2:13-16), peers, standing "shoulder to shoulder."

The goal, of course, is maturity in Christ; it happens only over time, and it relates to spiritual development, which may or may not coincide with physical development. Different stages of spiritual growth require different parenting roles to be taken by the discipler. Everyone is both disciplined and discipler—brothers and sisters growing together toward fullness in Christ. The letter to the Ephesians sums it up with these words:

As a result we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves carried about by every wind of doctrine . . . but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Eph 4:14-16, NASB)

As the Commission on Children at Risk (2003) made plain after investigating “empirically the social, moral, and spiritual foundations of child well-being,” a crisis among children and young people in the culture in general is being caused by “a lack of connectedness . . . close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning” (p. 5). In their report they concluded that “what can help most to solve the crisis are *authoritative communities*” (p. 6). Their short definition of this term was “groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life” (p. 6).

Oman and Thoresen (2003) suggest a “powerful intervention strategy would be to give people the tools to establish effective relationships with individually appropriate spiritual models whose lives facilitate the observational learning of important spiritual skills” (p. 158). Although they were speaking about spirituality in a much broader sense than understood by evangelical Christians, what more important place for these strategies to be in place than the local Christian congregation? Collinson (2005) reflects that “the stimulation of learning from close, personal relationships between individuals, partners, small groups and a larger community offers opportunities for learning which appeal to the deep social, emotional and psychological needs of humanity” (p. 103).

Boyatzis and Janicki (2003), in the *Review of Religious Research*, point out that it “takes a village” to socialize a child. The family, for better or for worse, is the first village. However, as Goodliff states, “Family is too fragile an institution to bear the burden of responsibility placed upon it” (as cited in Collinson, 2005, p. 194).

The second village must be the other Christians in a child's life—friends, teachers, and local church.

A caution for relying on “observational learning of important spiritual skills” (Oman & Thoreson, 2003, p. 158), however, is based on the same learning theory that makes it a powerful strategy—hidden curriculum. Collinson (2005) comments that “desirable attitudes and values are influenced more by the hidden curriculum than by intentional teaching (p. 189). Unfortunately, the converse is also true—undesirable attitudes and values are also influenced more by hidden curriculum than by intentional teaching. Religious socialization as a method of “prompting discipleship” (Samra, 2003) breaks down when the disciplers themselves are not growing in the strength of their connecting with God and others, understanding of God through His Word, and in involvement with ministering to others by participating in God's mission of revelation, reconciliation, and restoration.

Once again, the Shema (Deut 6:4-9) gives the methodology: “And these words, which I am commanding you today, *shall be on your heart*; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut 6:6, 7, NASB, emphasis mine).

Paul gives the goal: “As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, . . . but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph 4:14, 15, NASB). A primary group of those who need “to grow up in all aspects into Him” are the adolescents in the church. They are both developmentally and spiritually younger believers and who have a very recognizable need to have other maturing disciples come alongside them in their spiritual journey.

The *Growing Disciples in Community* model presents a person's discipleship as their being involved in processes of connecting with God and with others, coming to a deepening understanding of God through His word, and developing a deepening connection with others through ministering and service. The model also presents discipling—called equipping—as an implicit part of the ministering aspect of discipleship and thus incumbent upon every disciple as they intentionally walk

“alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Ogden, 2003, p. 129). The bi-directional, non-hierarchical aspect of discipleship and discipling is made clear in the apostles’ communication to the early church regarding how they were to relate to “one another.”

### **Methodology**

This was a secondary data analysis of the Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> study conducted in the year 2000 among junior high and high school students attending Seventh-day Adventist schools in North America. The Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> data included sufficient items measuring self-reported beliefs and attitudes that could be interpreted as indicators of discipleship and the students’ perception of attitudes and actions inherent in their relationships with family, friends, Christian teachers, and their local church congregations (see Appendix A). A model of discipleship was proposed and tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) with data from 8,284 adolescents who participated in the Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> study.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) allows a researcher to take the theory of a paradigm such as the *Growing Disciples in Community* model, and, given an appropriate database, test its validity. The first step was to do confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on newly formed scales using Amos 7 software. The CFA revealed that the correlation between the latent variables Discipleship and Connecting in the initial hypothesized model (see Figure 1, Appendix B) was so high as to suggest that these two factors were not distinct (i.e. had poor discriminant validity).

A review of the theory confirmed that discipleship is actually a matter of connecting with God and with others—resulting in an increased understanding of our relationship with God as revealed in His Word and an increased commitment to ministering to others. During confirmatory factor analysis, the model was adjusted, deleting the latent variable “Discipleship” and representing “Connecting” with God and others as a latent variable explaining the latent variables “Understanding and “Ministering” (see Figure 2, Appendix B).

## Findings

Structural Equation Modeling procedures using Amos 7 indicated that the covariance matrix for the conceptual model fit the covariance matrix for the structural model, thus indicating empirical support for the *Growing Disciples in Community* model.

The significant relationships among the variables in the model indicated that the Equipping (exogenous, latent variable) or discipling attitudes and behaviors of Christians in the lives of adolescents (family, friends, Christian teachers, and local church members) explained 72% of the Connecting (endogenous, latent) variable, and the Connecting variable then explained 42% and 29% of the Understanding and Ministering variables, respectively (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Correlations for Both Corporate Discipling and Personal Discipleship Processes in the Model*

Relationships	Correlation co-efficient	$r^2$
Equipping ⇒ in the family	.77	.59
Equipping ⇒ with friends	.93	.86
Equipping ⇒ with Christian teachers	.74	.55
Equipping ⇒ in the local church	.60	.36
Equipping ⇒ Connecting	.85	.72
Connecting ⇒ Ministering	.54	.29
Connecting ⇒ Understanding	.65	.42

1. The theoretical covariance matrix and the empirical covariance matrix were found to be consistent, which indicates that there is empirical support for the Growing Disciples in Community model.

2. There were found to be significant relationships (correlations) among the variables of the model.

3. The validity of the model was also found to be stable across demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, grade levels, and even at-risk behaviors (provided the sample size was greater than 100).

### **Discussion**

So what would be different if the Christian church put into practice a church family equipping model of discipleship and discipling according to Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 1 Thessalonians 1 and 2, and Ephesians 4:14-16? And, how, if at all, might it prompt discipleship in young people?

To answer with another question, What better place for “authoritative community” to exist than the local Christian church? Not only do Christian young people increasingly need this type of community beyond their nuclear family, but these communities could be the very agency that could fill this need for the children and young people of our modern culture who are not already part of church “family” and who have no other authoritative community of any kind.

The ideas of “authoritative communities” (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003) and “observational spiritual modeling” (Oman & Thoresen, 2003) are practical applications that Christian families, Christian teachers, and the local church congregation could all make in their attempts to improve their equipping/discipling of adolescents. The bedrock of this equipping, however, needs to be the local church congregation.

The family is, of course, the “first village” that socializes children. However, parents themselves need to be disciplined and equipped somewhere so that they learn the skills of “observational spiritual modeling.” And, although families are also the best “authoritative communities,” the secular culture and the demise of the extended family (even the nuclear family) make the potential of having many family-

based “authoritative communities” slim at best.

Christian friends, who were the group registering the strongest correlation with the equipping/discipling of other adolescents also need an “authoritative community” mentoring them so that the strong correlation (.93) between their equipping behaviors and their friends’ discipleship is a positive one.

Christian schools are primarily a part of, or strongly affiliated with, local congregations. If the local congregations do not have a mind-set of being “authoritative communities” that supply “observational spiritual modeling,” the work of the teachers at the Christian schools is much less effective. And, although the research used in this study was conducted with adolescents attending Christian schools, the reality is that the majority of Christian adolescents do not attend Christian schools. Besides the strength of the Christian parent/family, adolescents need another strong “authoritative community” to supply “observational spiritual modeling” and mentoring.

At present there seem to be few, if any, attempts within local churches to intentionally disciple/equip adolescents within a relational and not programmatic structure. What might local church congregations do to intentionally come alongside adolescent disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge them in love to grow toward maturity in Christ?

It appears that it is time that the local Christian church congregation, with or without the guidance of an active youth or family ministry, accepts the role each member plays as part of “authoritative community” and therefore a vital part of “what can help most to solve the crisis” (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003, p. 6), as Christians view it, of the low estate of discipleship and the corollary rejection of the church by its young people.

In response to the first Valuegenesis study of Seventh-day Adventist adolescents in 1990, youth ministry expert Steve Case (1993) wrote, “Without question the weakest link is the local congregation. Of the 12 effectiveness factors [to adolescent faith development] in this arena, the 2 most important are a warm, caring environment and a thinking environment” (p. 14). Case decried the lack of youth pastors in the local churches and youth directors in other levels of

administration. He equates the lack of these youth professionals as “nobody being home” when he states, “We can rant and rave about the terrible data and the obvious decline in youth ministry, but it’s somewhat like ordering an absent tenant to pay his rent. What good is it to serve notice when nobody’s home?” (p. 14).

However, the *Growing Disciples in Community* model points out that there *is* somebody home. If there is a church, there must be a church member, and if there is a church member, then someone is home. Both research and theory indicate that intentionally supporting healthy, intergenerational relationships for spiritual growth and modeling within the family of God can only improve the state of discipleship and youth retention.

## **Implications**

### **For Practice**

The church cannot afford to view youth ministry, family ministry, community outreach, support of missions, spiritual growth, and its other ministries and endeavors as isolated initiatives. Everything that is done in the name of Christianity is either facilitating or hindering the growing connections of its young people with God and with others. And, the more closely the young people are involved in all aspects of the life of the church, the more opportunities for and models of connecting vertically and horizontally they are having. It truly does take a village to disciple young people.

According to the *Growing Disciples in Community* model, the discipleship of young people can be strengthened by opportunities for the study of God through His Word and outreach opportunities to share their growing love of God with others through the youth ministry, but also by the following:

1. Strengthening the faith walk of parents and teaching them how to share that faith with their children
2. Facilitating and encouraging family service projects
3. Teaching the young people how to function positively within their relationships with one another
4. Strengthening the spiritual growth of Christian school teachers so that

every teacher's faith walk impacts their students and not just the Bible teacher's

5. Strengthening the discipleship walk of adults at church so that they are able to create a warm, welcoming, and inclusive atmosphere for everyone, including young people

6. Creating an atmosphere of uncritical exchange of ideas and an openness to honest questions.

Individual adults could have a significant impact on the discipleship of young people in the church family without waiting for church-wide programs and initiatives by such simple behaviors as these:

1. Learning the names of the children and young people in the congregation and greeting them with respect and attention each week

2. Attending to their own spiritual growth so that they are prepared to be active spiritual mentors and disciplers, or at the very least not to be negative hidden curriculum about what it means to be a joyous and victorious disciple of Christ

3. Retired church members offering after-school tutoring and care for families with working parents

4. Single adults offering to be big brothers and big sisters to adolescents whose parent(s) do not have much quality time to give them

5. Keeping individual young people in daily prayer, even offering to be prayer partners with them

6. Forming intergenerational small groups in which children and young people can experience spiritual growth not only with their parents, but also with other adults committed both to God and to them

7. Mentoring adolescents to function in many service capacities within the church

8. Involving them in intergenerational community and mission outreach projects.

In the usual age-differentiated church culture, it will take some intentional planning in order to facilitate intergenerational relationships on a church-wide basis, but the benefit for the entire church would be exponential.

Although I do not share Case's (1993) emphasis on youth pastors and youth

directors for the primary discipling of young people, I do concur with his summative appeal:

[Research] won't make change happen. It is only an evaluation tool that we will either respond to or ignore. Those who take initiative for a long-term planned change, whether they be a family, local congregation, school, or conference, will be the ones who truly hear today and change the status quo. Those who listen but don't act will be the foolish ones who hear the warning today but their young people, and their entire church, will be gone tomorrow (Matt 7:24-27). (p. 14)

#### For Future Research

Of course, both theory and statistics are human creations and thus subject to error. One factor that potentially limits the validity or generalizability of the *Growing Disciples in Community* structural model is the fact that the observed variables used to explain the latent variables were items created for the Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> study, which was looking at adolescents and their religiosity and spirituality from a different perspective than the one used in the *Growing Disciples in Community* model.

Empirical data need to be collected using survey instruments created specifically for studying the effect of intergenerational relationships on the discipleship and spiritual well-being of adolescents. Longitudinal qualitative studies would also be an excellent way to study the effects of discipling relationships in the home, in the Christian school, and in the local church and their future impact on the connecting, understanding, and ministering behaviors of young adults into their 20s and 30s.

It would also be helpful to conduct research using a similar conceptual model with adults, particularly with new believers as they come into the church family at an early stage of spiritual development.

## APPENDIX A

### VALUEGENESIS2 ITEMS USED IN GROWING DISCIPLES IN COMMUNITY SCALES

Personal Discipleship Process—**Connecting**: Relating intimately with God and developing positive relationships with others (John 13:35; Matt 22:37-38).

1	I help others with their religious questions and struggles
5	I feel God's presence in my relationships with other people.
6	I feel my life is filled with meaning and purpose
11	I have a real sense that God is guiding me
13	Which of the following best describes your commitment to Jesus Christ?
25	How important is it to you to have friends who you can talk to about spiritual things?
37	How often, if ever, do you read the Bible on your own?
104	How important is it to you to be active in the Adventist church?
105	How important is it to you to show love to other people?
176	How much do you agree or disagree that you get along with your parents?
197	How comfortable are you in talking with others about your faith and what God means to you?
234	How much has personal devotions helped you develop your religious faith?
263	How often in the last few years did you talk to a teacher at school about God or faith?
265	How often in the last few years did you talk to your mother about faith?
266	How often in the last few years did you talk to your father about faith?
267	How often in the last few years did you talk to a pastor about faith?
272	How interested are you in programs that would help you learn more about gaining a deeper relationship with God?
274	How interested are you in programs that would help you learn more

	about how to talk with your parents?
275	How interested are you in programs that would help you learn more about how to talk to a friend about faith?
315	It is important to me to spend time in private thought and prayer
316	I have often had a strong sense of God's presence
328	Prayers I say when I'm alone are as important to me as those I say in church

Personal Discipleship Process—**Understanding**: Learning the truth of God's relationship with humanity through Jesus Christ, the Word (John 8:31; Matt 4:4).

40	I know that God loves me no matter what I do
41	There is nothing I can do to earn salvation
45	I am loved by God even when I sin
53	Salvation is God's free gift to us that we don't deserve and cannot earn
55	My good works are a response to God's gift of grace
69	The body is the temple of God, and we are responsible in every area of life for its care
74	God, the Holy Spirit, teaches us how much we need Jesus in our lives, draws us to Jesus, and makes us like Him.
75	The first man and woman, created as free beings in the image of God, chose to rebel against God. We have inherited their fallen nature along with all its consequences
76	There is a great controversy taking place between God and Satan. It began in heaven with the rebellion of Lucifer and will continue until the end of time
77	The church is God's family on earth, a community of faith in which many members, all equal in Christ, join for worship, instruction and service
84	After the millennium, God will recreate the earth as a perfect, eternal home of the redeemed. Sin will never exist again.

Personal Discipleship Process—**Ministering**: Participating in God’s mission of revelation, reconciliation, and restoration (Matt 28:18; Matt 25:40).

3	I feel a deep sense of responsibility for reducing pain and suffering in the world
4	I give significant portions of time and money to help other people
7	I show that I care a great deal about reducing poverty in my country and throughout the world
18	How often during the last year did you try directly to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ
19	How often during the last year have you told others about the work of God in your life?
20	How often during the last year did you try directly to encourage someone to join the Adventist church?
21	How often during the last year did you help people who are poor, hungry, sick, or unable to care for themselves (don’t count family members)
22	How many volunteer hours do you spend during the average month helping friends or neighbors with problems they have
23	How many volunteer hours do you spend during the average month promoting social equality (racial equality, women’s rights, economic reform) or world peace
24	How many volunteer hours do you spend during the average month making your own town or city a better place to live (be doing volunteer work in a school, being on a city committee or task force)
102	How important is it to you to help people who are poor or hungry?
106	How important is it to you to promote social equality?
244	How much have short-term mission projects helped you develop your religious faith?
256	How much have evangelistic outreach (giving Bible studies, distributing

	literature, etc.)?
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Corporate Discipling Process—***Equipping***: Intentionally walking “alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Greg Ogden, 2003) (Eph 4:15-16; Deut 6:4-9).

***In the family***

247	How much has family worship helped you develop your religious faith?
248	How much has your mother’s faith helped you develop your religious faith?
249	How much has your father’s faith helped you develop your religious faith?
250	How much has your grandparent’s faith helped you develop your religious faith?
253	How much did the family I grew up in help you develop your religious faith?
260	In the last few years, how often did you do or participate in family projects to help other people

***With friends***

27	How important is it to you to have friends who encourage you to meet good goals?
28	How important is it to you to have friends who help keep you out of trouble?
30	How important is it to you to have friends who are a good influence on you?
34	How important is it to you to have friends who attend religious services regularly?
251	How much has your friend’s faith helped you develop your religious faith?
342	My friends attend church almost every week

344	My friends belong to church-sponsored groups for teenagers
345	My friends are very religious-minded

***With Christian teachers***

208	Teachers are interested in students
210	Teachers listen to what their students say
243	How much has the Bible teacher helped you develop your religious faith?
252	How much has the teacher's faith helped you develop your religious faith?
335	How willing are your teachers at your school to talk about sensitive issues (sex, drugs, etc.)?

***In the local church congregation***

87	My local church feels warm
88	I learn a lot there
89	My church accepts people who are different
91	My church is friendly
93	My church encourages me to ask questions
94	Strangers feel welcome at my church
95	My church expects people to learn and think
97	My church provides fellowship
261	In the last few years, how often did you experience the feeling that adults in your local church care about you?
262	In the last few years, how often did you experience the feeling that youth in your local church care about you?
215	At my church, my teachers or adult leaders know me well
216	At my church, my teachers or adult leaders are warm and friendly
218	At my church, my teachers or adult leaders care about me
258	How much has the church pastor helped you develop your religious faith?

APPENDIX B

[FIGURES 1 AND 2]

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Name: Kathleen Beagles  
Degree earned: PhD from Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI  
Employer: Andrews University  
Position: Assistant Professor of Religious Education  
e-mail: beaglesk@andrews.edu