

Plan of Discipleship

Vision

Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

"A sower went out to sow" (Mt 13:3).

The Church has often turned to the Parable of the Sower as a foundational passage shedding light on the work of evangelization and faith formation. In the parable, the sower is Jesus. The seed is the Word of God. The different types of soil upon which the seed falls represent various responses to God's Word.

As baptized Christians, we are invited to be co-laborers with Christ in His mission of evangelization, sharing in His desire to scatter widely the seed of His Word and reach the world with the Gospel. While there is no single method or technique that can guarantee how people will respond to God's Word, we as missionary disciples can benefit from established approaches that help us be more effective instruments in the hands of God. Just as a farmer uses proven practices to prepare the best outcome for his crops (Is 28:25-28) and still depends entirely on the Lord for the fruitfulness of his harvest (Mk 4), so too can we benefit from approaches in evangelization that have been well-tested, and, at the same time, we depend not on any method but on the Lord's grace to form others in the distinct manner and tempo that is best suited for each unique, unrepeatable soul.

Removing Our Sandals

As disciples of Christ, we have the privilege and responsibility of participating in the Church's mission to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). We do so first by being disciples ourselves, allowing our minds and hearts to be conformed to the image of Christ. Then, having begun to be transformed by His grace, we seek to walk with others in discipleship.

This involves an apprenticeship in the Christian life, which is a sacred mission. It requires that we learn the "'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other."¹ It means being a credible witness to Christ through careful listening, generous service, and loving friendship. And it entails walking with others through the ups and downs of both their spiritual journey and all other parts of life. Indeed, discipleship is so much more than simply executing a plan or transmitting the content of the Faith; it is an immersion in the Christian way of life.

The *Plan of Discipleship* document below is a guide that many in FOCUS use to assist in this work of evangelization, accompaniment, and forming missionary disciples by providing an ordered, simple, and repeatable path for growing in the foundational habits of a disciple of Christ. It involves a weekly plan mixing small group Bible study, discipleship training, fellowship, prayer, and other faith formation experiences. It is meant to be used in a relational context, respecting the freedom and unique needs of each individual.

The *Plan of Discipleship* is not the only path for missionary discipleship, but it is an approach that has been helpful for thousands of missionaries and parish and student leaders across the country. While not intended to offer a comprehensive catechesis, the Plan of Discipleship provides some basic foundations for a formation that is more "systematic, meaning not improvised or casual," mapping out clear, easy-to-follow steps in the multi-faceted journey of discipleship that can be passed on to other leaders in a simple, repeatable way.²

Freedom and Structure

A classroom teacher may have a textbook that comes with a structure of daily lessons for their classes. The teacher may usually follow the daily plan and at other times may choose to slow down for students who need extra attention on certain topics or go faster for those who already have a strong foundation. The teacher does not serve the textbook's planned schedule. The schedule is a tool in the hands of the teacher who has freedom to prudently discern when it is best to follow the structure and when it is best to make adaptations, slow down, speed up, or go in a different direction. Still, the textbook schedule can be very helpful, especially for newer teachers, to have as a guide to lay the foundations for their teaching plan, and, as they grow in their teaching over time, they may not need to depend on the structure as much as they did as when they were first starting.

Similarly, the *Plan of Discipleship* is not meant to be a strict, rigid, mechanical process, but one that provides a helpful framework for missionary discipleship, while at the same time inviting the leader to prudently discern what a particular person might need right now. While structure, consistency, and moving forward with people in an intentional way is important, the goal is not merely to check off a box to complete a task or race through a schedule quickly. In other words, the goal is not to follow the plan slavishly but to use the plan as a foundational framework to help prudently discern the next step in one's formation. God wants the leader and student to use their own mind and freedom.

The Mystery of Human Freedom

Most of all, our identity or sense of worth as missionary disciples is not based on metrics or how quickly we progress through a plan. Our identity is found in our Heavenly Father, whose love cannot be earned. Are you convinced, at the core of your being, that your Father in Heaven delights in you because you are His beloved son or daughter, not because of how you perform in your moral life, your prayer life, your devotional life, or your efforts in missionary discipleship? That He gazes on you with such love, echoing what He said on the sixth day of creation and saying of you, *"You are very good"*?

We, therefore, do not turn to any method, tool, or process to measure our worth or find our identity. We turn to Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate sower of the seed, which is His Word. While we draw on best practices and give ourselves generously to the work of evangelization, we humbly recall that Jesus—the most perfect evangelizer, who had the most perfect plan and used the most perfect approaches—still had people ignore and reject him. "This was not because his preaching, to the extent that it did not produce conversion, failed. Rather, it succeeded perfectly in what it was meant to do: it tested the hearts of those hearing such that they either rose or fell when confronted by his message." ³

As Jesus himself taught in the Parable of the Sower, His preaching did not always lead to spiritual fruitfulness. You can do everything perfectly as a missionary disciple, and a person in their free will may still say, "No." There is an enemy, the devil, who sometimes snatches away what was sown in a person's heart. Sometimes the seed of faith does not take root. Other times, the thorns of worldly cares and anxieties choke the life of the plant. *Nevertheless, every small prayer, sacrifice, outreach, and effort in evangelization, if offered in generous love, is taken up in God's saving plan and will have an impact on souls and in the world, even if we don't see it and even if it doesn't look like success in the eyes of the world. As St. Mother Teresa of Kolkata often said, "God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful."*

True Fruitfulness

In the parable, spiritual fruitfulness refers to receiving and being interiorly transformed by the seed of God's Word. The fruitfulness of the seed points to the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). As such, any plan of discipleship cannot be reduced to merely a series of meetings about goals, progress, and accountability, for it will only be fruitful spiritually insofar as it is animated by one's own interior life of deeply abiding in Christ (John 15), one's humble accompaniment of the other person(s), and one's loving desire to share the Gospel with others and equip them to do the same—or as the Church teaches, to "make evangelizers of the evangelized."

When implemented with prudence and charity toward each individual—who has a unique story and set of needs—the Plan of Discipleship can greatly assist us in forming missionary disciples. Just as growing in virtue initially requires the disciplined structure of forming good habits that eventually become second nature, so too might a foundational structure like the Plan of Discipleship be a helpful tool for helping a person grow in some of the basic habits of missionary discipleship, enabling them over time to become more free to accompany others with the wisdom of the Church on their own because the foundational principles have become so intuitive.

Moreover, it's important to keep in mind that this Plan of Discipleship is something we find helpful to use in FOCUS and is only meant to be one part of someone's discipleship in Christ. The whole of discipleship is so much bigger, involving other sources of formation such as one's own pastor, parish or campus ministry, magisterial teaching, the Sacraments, Christian friends, small groups, personal prayer, works of mercy, Eucharistic adoration, retreats, conferences, podcasts, good books, etc. Ultimately, Jesus is the one who discipled, Who grows the seed of faith through many people and ministries in His Church and His own Spirit guiding and sanctifying the soul. We are blessed to accompany others along the way, supporting that spiritual growth and in turn growing ourselves.

Conclusion: Holy Urgency, Holy Patience

Finally, can you hold urgency and patience in balance like Jesus did? Jesus describes His desire to reach souls as an urgent task—like a shepherd searching for the lost sheep, a woman seeking her lost coin, and a father running to meet his lost son (Lk 15:3-32). At the same time, He describes the work of missionary discipleship as a mysterious process that cannot be rushed or controlled. The seed of faith in a person's heart needs to take root, lest it is snatched away or choked by weeds (Mt 13:19-22). This process can be slow and hidden like the growth of a mustard seed or leaven (Mt 13:31-33). Conversion is not always immediate or black and white, but often fraught with mixed results, like weeds and wheat springing up together. Accompanying others requires patience: "See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient until it receives the early and late rains. You also be patient. Establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (Jas 5:7-8).

This *Plan of Discipleship* offers a structure to help facilitate both a broad scattering of the seed and an ever-deeper encounter with God's Word in order to cultivate that interior growth in a person's soul. This involves sharing Christ's pressing need to bring the Gospel to the people and His gentle, patient care for cultivating the seed of faith in one's soul, respecting one's own freedom and timetable. In the end, it is not us or a system or a plan but God alone who gives the growth of faith in His own way and in His own timing (1 Cor 3:7). As Pope St. Paul VI taught, "techniques of evangelization are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit."⁴

Plan Details

The Plan of Discipleship is divided into two sections: Growing Discipleship (living the habits of the Christian life found in Acts 2:42) and Commissioned Discipleship (living the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20). Growing Discipleship begins immediately after someone accepts the Gospel. Commissioned Discipleship begins after the High Call is accepted and the disciple is determined to be FACT.⁵

Each session is numbered and should ordinarily be completed in order. While one session per week is recommended, it is possible to complete one session over multiple weeks or two sessions in a week. Sessions include discipleship articles as well as supplemental resources.⁶ Disciples are invited to incorporate the art of discipleship regularly by using the side columns: Habits of the Spiritual Life (prayer, confession, etc.), Shared Experiences (meals together, events, etc.), and Opportunities for Mission (Bible study invitations, intercessory prayer, serving the poor, etc.).

On some occasions, questions might arise about the best way to apply a particular part of this plan to the circumstances of the people we are accompanying in discipleship. Thankfully, we are surrounded by others who are also walking the path of missionary discipleship from whom we can seek counsel. In those moments it can be helpful to reach out to others to gain greater insight and wisdom about how best to proceed.

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169

² *Directory for Catechesis*, 71

³ *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, 38-39

⁴ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75

⁵ See *Foundations for Discipleship*, 158-165

⁶ See focusequip.org/discipleshipplan/

Growing Discipleship Plan

Session	Date	Done	Content for Discipleship	Habits of the Spiritual Life	Shared Experiences	Opportunities for Mission
Session 01			Article 3.0 Dust of the Rabbi + Prayer Challenge			
Session 02			Article 3.1 Spiritual Breathing + Prayer Check-In			
Session 03			Article 3.2 Fellowship + Praying for Others + Discipleship Check-In			
Session 04			Article 3.3 Free to Love + Virtue Plan*			
Session 05			Article 3.4 The Eucharist + Discipleship Prayer Challenge			
Session 06			Article 3.5 Confession			
Session 07			Article 3.6 The Apostles' Teaching + Church's Teaching on Mission			
Session 08			Article 4.0 Moral Authority + Big Three + Discipleship Check-In			
Session 09			Article 4.1 Faithfulness to the Church			
Session 10			Look Ahead to Mission + MDR + Leadership Examen			
Session 11			Article 4.2 The High Call			

* **Virtue Plan:** Use of a Virtue Plan should accompany the conversation for session 4. This conversation should occur in a one-on-one setting. Ideally, a virtue plan would be created within 1-4 weeks and reviewed at the next check-in.

** **Immersive Experience:** It is highly encouraged that each Growing Disciple participate in an immersive encounter with Christ during this phase (e.g. retreat, mission trip, Catholic conference, extended time in adoration, etc.).

† This article numbering follows the online text at focusequip.org, which includes an additional article: 3.3 Free to Love: Christian Character and "The Big 3." The printed book, *Foundations for Discipleship*, omits this article and numbers the Eucharist as 3.3 and Confession as 3.4.

Commissioned Discipleship Plan

Session	Date	Done	Content for Discipleship	Bible Study Content	Habits of the Spiritual Life	Shared Experiences	Opportunities for Mission
Session 01			Article 5.0 Vision for Missionary Discipleship				
Session 02			Article 5.1 Incarnational Evangelization				
Session 03			Article 5.2 The Power of Your Testimony				
Session 04			Article 5.3 Leading a Transformative Bible Study				
Session 05			Article 6.3 Intercessory Prayer				
Session 06			Preparing Bible Study	Initial Gathering ¹			
Session 07			Review Gospel Article 2.0	Crux 1			
Session 08			Article 5.4 Sharing the Gospel + Bible Study Recap	Crux 2			
Session 09			Practice Gospel Presentations	Crux 3			
Session 10			Article 5.5 Walking with Others in Discipleship	Crux 4			
Session 11			Gospel Presentations	Crux 5			
Session 12			Transformative Discipleship ² + Vision for Plan of Discipleship	Crux 6			
Session 13			Article 6.0 Pursuing Christ Like Character	Depth Chart Activity			
Session 14			Article 6.1 Deeper Prayer	Fun Night			
Session 15			Article 6.2 Works of Mercy	Salvation History 1			
Session 16			Article 6.4 Embracing the Cross on Mission	Salvation History 2			

¹ The commissioned disciple may start a Bible study as early as is appropriate, though a Bible study should ideally begin within 8 weeks. In this example, the disciple begins leading a Bible study after session 6, but it could begin sooner or slightly later.

² This article follows the online text at FOCUS Equip, where it serves as an introduction and is not numbered. In the printed book, *Foundations for Discipleship*, it appears on page 2 as the "Leader's Introduction."