

7 Practices of Spirit -Empowered Disciples

Markers along the Discipleship Pathway

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I first set foot in an Assemblies of God church as a reluctant 9-year-old. I was determined to continue dismissing anything church related. Broken from my parents' recent divorce, I resented my mother's new embrace of Christianity and saw it as a crutch our family didn't need.

I sat in the back of a National Girls Ministries (then Missionettes) class waiting for it to be over. Despite my attempts to blend into the background, I didn't escape the notice of the teachers and volunteers. They reached out to me that night with disarming love and compassion.

Though I didn't have the words for it at the time, these leaders started discipling me. Week after week, they poured into my life. Slowly, my walls came down. I began to imitate their prayers, their worship, and more. These practices brought me closer to Jesus — and I finally accepted Him.

As a newly saved 11-year-old, I thought, *what if God used me to plant a church one day?* I tucked it in the back of my mind and continued living out Christianity the way I knew how: by faithfully engaging in the practices modeled to me.

Twenty years later, as my husband and I were planting a church and strategizing our approach to discipleship, my mind went back to that classroom where my spiritual formation began. I wanted our new church to be full of disciples whose attitudes and actions demonstrated that they were followers of Jesus, just like those in the church who changed my life.

Disciples are built through attitudes and actions, habits and patterns — practices that identify people as followers of Jesus. The New Testament word for disciple means “learner or follower,” and the journey of discipleship is one of lifelong, regular learning.

Throughout my life and ministry, I have discovered several indispensable practices that bolster the discipleship of individuals and churches. As the national Christian education and discipleship director for the Assemblies of God, I regularly receive phone calls from church leaders asking for guidance on discipleship.

Over the past year and a half, our national office team has worked with ministry leaders, discipleship directors, pastors, professors, and laypeople to identify discipleship practices for every age.

To begin, we defined “disciple” as “a Spirit-empowered, lifelong follower of Jesus.” Then we asked what practices are indispensable for disciples. We came up with a list of seven practices — and you will recognize all of them. The goal here is not to share practices you've not thought of, but to ask whether your church is making disciples who participate in all these areas.

In which practice does your church most excel? In which does your church most need improvement? Use this list as a conversation starter for your staff or ministry team to evaluate whether you are making biblical disciples.

1. Bible

A Spirit-empowered disciple accepts the Bible as the authoritative truth and applies its instructions to everyday life.

Both the Old and New Testaments provide a launching pad for a deeper walk with Christ. While we may emphasize the New Testament as we introduce people to Jesus (especially in Western contexts), we should teach the Old Testament as well, empowering people to see the Bible as a unified whole that is relevant to their lives.

Jesus told the gathered crowds on the Galilean mountainside, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). This declaration came after Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness — 40 days combating successive temptations with God’s Word (Matthew 4:1–11). Only after engaging with the Word did Jesus’ ministry begin. So it will be for His disciples. It starts here.

For years, the primary model for discipleship within the AG was Sunday School. However, more and more churches have moved to a small-group discipleship format. Small groups excel in relational ministry, sometimes at the risk of omitting a systematic study of Scripture — a defining feature of traditional Sunday School. The AG seeks to work within both models while ensuring that the Word is at the center of all church-based, community-building discipleship.

What’s your church’s model for Bible engagement — Sunday School, small groups, or a combination of the two? Consider surveying your congregants. Where do they turn first for advice on relevant issues? Is the Bible a last resort? Are they only thinking about it during the Sunday sermon? Or are they interacting with God’s Word daily?

Remember to bring in the whole Scripture as much as possible, whether through exegetical preaching, finding Old and New Testament parallels, or explaining Bible characters in terms of God’s story rather than stand-alone episodes. When people are turning to God’s Word first and regularly, you know they’re walking as His disciples.

2. Spirit

A Spirit-empowered disciple continually surrenders to the ongoing work of the Spirit and seeks the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a Person, not a practice. The practices come when we operate in the Spirit’s gifts (1 Corinthians 12–14) and daily rely on the Spirit’s discernment. When Paul urged the Galatians to “walk by the Spirit” (5:16), he used the imperative form to suggest ongoing action. We are to keep on walking. As people of the Spirit, we practice living in the presence of God.

Some of our churches de-emphasize the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Others focus too much on a single moment rather than encouraging a lifelong journey of staying “in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25).

Are you putting Jesus — our Savior, Spirit Baptizer, Healer, and Soon-Coming King — front and center in your messages and ministries? We are filled with the Spirit to be *His* witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Are we seeking His infilling daily?

Mike Clarensau, research coordinator for the Acts 2 Journey, developed several metrics of congregational health in AG churches using data from Annual Church Ministries Reports (ACMRs) for the years 2008–20.

Among other things, Clarensau examined the ratio of salvations to Spirit baptisms in churches with 1,000 or more attendees compared to that of smaller churches. He found that attending a smaller church correlated with a higher likelihood of receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Larger churches show no signs of closing that gap. In fact, reports of Spirit baptisms in congregations of 1,000 or more decreased 42% from 2016–20. Several factors may have contributed to this decline, including the COVID-19 pandemic and a reported increase in conversions among large churches in 2019.

Across churches of all sizes, only about 1 in 7 converts experience Spirit baptism.

These figures pose long-term challenges for larger churches in particular. Regardless of our congregation’s size, however, we must all ask whether our church is creating opportunities for people to pursue the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Do we teach on the Holy Spirit and celebrate Spirit baptisms?

In the Book of Acts, Luke emphasized the baptism in the Holy Spirit as essential to the growth of the Church (e.g., Acts 8; 19). We must do the same today.

3. Mission

A Spirit-empowered disciple lives out God’s mission in testimony and lifestyle by praying earnestly, giving generously, reaching the lost, participating in church multiplication, and teaching others to follow Jesus Christ.

Missiologist John York defines the mission of God, or *missio Dei*, as “God’s plan to bless the nations through the gospel of Jesus Christ.” *Missio Dei* is distinct from, and yet part of, missions, connoting cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship carried out by those with a God-given call to leave their culture of origin.

In a recent Barna survey, 34% of Christian respondents 18–34 years of age agreed that “in the past, mission work has been unethical,” compared to 23% of adults aged 35 or over. While these statistics indicate a sad cultural shift, as the body of Christ, we must evaluate the ways in which we live out — or fail to live out — God’s mission.

Is our own congregation contributing to an unethical perception? Or are we limiting missions to overseas ministry only? Missions is just one way people may live out *missio Dei*. All followers of Jesus are tasked with fulfilling His mission as recipients of His direct

address to make disciples of all nations, beginning within our own context (Matthew 28:18–20).

My prayer is that your church participates actively in home and overseas missions, offering your congregants a broader view of what God is doing in our world. I also pray that your church enables congregants to view their daily lives as infused with God-given purpose.

Are we dismantling the secular-sacred divide by empowering the royal priesthood of believers to view their workweek as an act of worship? Equipping the saints for their daily service — their part in *missio Dei* — is why the Church exists.

4. Prayer

A Spirit-empowered disciple fosters connection with God through daily time with Him, praying in the Spirit, and praying in faith for the needs of others.

The supreme example of the necessity of prayer for disciples is Jesus. He often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer (Luke 5:16), rose to pray while it was still dark (Mark 1:35), and ended or extended His evenings by seeking the face of God (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12). Jesus taught His followers about prayer (Matthew 5:44; 6:5–13), and He demonstrated it (Mark 8:6; Luke 23:34; John 17).

Without overt teaching on prayer, we can unintentionally communicate that prayer is a last resort, a low priority, or simply a private practice — all of which fly in the face of biblical discipleship. Unless we articulate and demonstrate that prayer is central to all we do — because it was central to all Jesus did — it may fall from prominence in disciples' minds.

Especially for new believers, communal prayer can seem daunting. A prayer meeting may carry connotations of rising early, misspeaking in the presence of seasoned saints who utter far more eloquent and biblically rich prayers, or length that lends itself to boredom. Yet when we show and tell them what a lifeline prayer is, new believers will come to rely on it in individual as well as group settings. Jesus gave His disciples a model for prayer (Matthew 6:9–13), and it encompassed so much more than asking for needs to be met.

At the church my husband and I planted, we and our leadership team emphasized the importance of faith in prayer. One Sunday morning, a deaf man came forward for prayer during the song service, and our elders gathered around him to pray in faith. By the end of the prayer, this man was able to hear!

What can God do in your midst when you come together as a body in prayer? Do you live with the expectancy of the miraculous? Are you modeling that in your church?

Your church may excel in prayer. You may even have multiple prayer groups for different ages and interests. Take a moment to consider whether every age-level ministry in your church is explicitly communicating the primacy of prayer. Are infants prayed over in the nursery? Are toddlers encouraged to share the names of those who need prayer? Are young people asked to pray for one another?

I participated in all-night prayer services as a young person because my church expected Christians of all ages to seek God sacrificially. While I'm not urging that you make the children of your church stay up all night, I am asking whether prayer shares that kind of centrality in the life of your church.

5. Worship

A Spirit-empowered disciple continually and humbly worships God in every area of life.

The Hebrew and Greek words for “worship” in Scripture suggest a bowing of the knee, even prostrating, before a leader or deity. The Bible does not associate acts of worship exclusively with music, and neither should we.

Biblical worship demonstrates the utmost respect and love for God. Our worship should come from a heart that honors Him above all else. In a world in which myriad rival interests compete for our attention, we need to teach people how to redirect their hearts and affections toward God.

I don't mean to diminish the importance of music in church services, the training needed for song leaders and musicians, or the atmosphere congregational singing creates. May our churches be places where we teach all ages to worship “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) — and where we teach them how to worship God with their lives Monday through Saturday.

My prayer is that your church presents a holistic picture of worship by acknowledging the tensions inherent in a world that fights for our affections and by providing ways to identify our proclivities and reprioritize our hearts.

How does your church present a holistic view of worship at every age and stage of life? It certainly looks different at various stages of human development, and at various points in the journey of discipleship from new to mature believer.

Whether your church excels in music ministry or is praying for a worship team, promote a biblical understanding of worship in every age group by teaching people to put God first in their hearts.

6. Service

A Spirit-empowered disciple serves through using their unique gifts, abilities, and callings, recognizing the value of every person.

Jesus came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Service was His way of life. The same should be true of us. Our service should not be confined to certain times or spaces. Disciples of Jesus should serve wherever they go. In fact, community engagement is critical to the health of a Spirit-empowered church.

Our church plant in New Jersey intentionally fostered a relationship with a nearby elementary school, filling backpacks for back-to-school season, supporting faculty and staff for teacher appreciation, and more. As we built trust, the church eventually became

the first-place school leaders turned when families were in need. They would call us when a student's house burned down or when a student was enduring family trauma. This provided many opportunities for us to become the hands and feet of Jesus throughout the community.

When it comes to serving the congregation, many churches have an onboarding process for new volunteers that teaches the mission, vision and values of the church before sharing all the available opportunities for service.

Some churches have more volunteers than they know what to do with, but most do not. People who serve commonly cite a desire to make a difference. Are you and your ministries communicating that people can make a difference — both now and for eternity — or are you asking them to serve because you're short on volunteers?

Of course, love for Jesus and others is the greatest motivation for Christian service (Mark 12:30–31). You may paint a picture of the changes that will reverberate when people step up and volunteer. But are you also pointing to the example of Jesus? His love compelled Jesus to lay down His life for us. When His disciples serve others, they are demonstrating the love of Christ.

I pray that we are addressing the perspective shift that needs to happen for people to view their entire lives — not just their free time — as service. This is critical for a life of discipleship.

7. Generosity

A Spirit-empowered disciple gives generously of their time, talents, and resources to meet the needs of others.

No more generous a statement can be made than John 3:16. The connection between love and giving is unmistakable, and as with worship and service, this practice of a Spirit-empowered disciple is holistic. Increased devotion to God yields generosity in all areas.

Generosity might not be in your church's description of a disciple, perhaps because people who do not have a relationship with Christ also give generously. Yet generosity remains a defining feature of a Spirit-empowered, lifelong follower of Jesus. After all, Jesus gave until He had nothing left to give.

The hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 beautifully illustrates the willing emptying of divine privilege for our benefit. Are we teaching, in a similar fashion, that generosity involves far more than tithes? What about welcoming the foreigner, or caring for orphans and widows? Service and generosity are tightly linked. We should be serving generously, as Jesus did.

A Barna report published in 2018 revealed a link between serving and giving financially. Christians in the U.S. who gave the most were more likely than others to say they had volunteered within the past week or month. Disciples who are generous in one area are more likely to be generous in the other. Both are expressions of an overflowing heart.

I grew up in a single-parent home in which resources were tight. Yet when my mother heard that someone was in a difficult situation, she always gave from the little we had — because generosity starts in the heart, not the pocketbook. I remember one day when my mother heard someone was sick. We had only a small portion of rice, two cans of beans, and a can of vegetables. Mother packaged up half the rice and a can of beans and gave them away. She didn't wait until the next paycheck. It was in her power to practice generosity that day, so she did.

Does your church teach generosity as a hallmark of discipleship? How would you explain biblical generosity as separate from the world's generosity? And how do you teach and model generosity among impoverished congregants?

These issues are critical to living a generous life modeled after Jesus and His followers. Tithing and supporting missionaries are indelibly part of generosity, but the more holistic aspects are the ones we might unintentionally neglect. No one is off the hook when it comes to generous living. Generosity is an attitude that, even at the youngest ages, should be caught rather than merely taught.

Conclusion

Spirit-empowered disciples look different in every culture, age, and stage, but they are all engaged in the same core practices that increasingly identify them with the Word of God made flesh. From church plants to legacy churches, discipleship should be an embodied invitation to never stop learning about Jesus and never stop following Him.

As your church refines its discipleship pathway, may these time-tested practices reach the broken girl in your children's ministry and the seasoned saint at the altar, so that all may gain Christ and become one with Him (Philippians 3:8–9). That's what being a lifelong learner and follower of Christ is all about. There is no higher goal.

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