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LEARNER GUIDE

Developing Maturing Disciples

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A study to assist congregational leaders in identifying the characteristics of a maturing disciple – to assist with planning for educational ministries

A few words from the Director of the IRE

Congratulations on being a congregation that seeks to be intentional about its educational ministries!

Congregations work to deliver educational offerings for their members, but the vast majority of them are not intentional in determining the hoped-for outcomes of these offerings. In almost every other educational experience, stating the hoped-for outcomes for learners is an expectation, but this seldom happens in the church.

This resource intends to give congregational leaders a way to define these outcomes for their church. Scripture is clear that maturation should be a goal for believers.

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still and infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Paul also demonstrates that leaders should be able to purposely plan their educational programming to accommodate those they are leading

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly, mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

This study is designed to assist church leaders in their review of the guidance that Scripture provides and the process of translating that guidance into a specific plan for their congregation. Through the use of these three studies, congregational leaders will study Scripture allowing them to better define what they see as the priorities for a maturing disciple. The Bible provides us with many things that should be priorities for disciples of Christ, but each congregation

will be able to reflect on the Word and define the characteristics that they will promote among the body of believers at each church.

Once the leadership has a better understanding of what members should know, feel, and do as maturing disciples, the leadership will work to assist the members in understanding these priorities. When the hoped-for outcomes of a maturing disciple are known, it allows studies to be chosen or designed in order to promote those outcomes. Research on adult education is clear; people participate in educational opportunities when they are motivated by relevant and applicable outcomes. Providing members with clarity about the purpose and outcomes is the first step in developing a rich learning environment.

May God bless your efforts,

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The mission of the IRE is to “enhance the intentionality and effectiveness of Christian education in the church.”

SESSION 1

Exploring Maturing Adult Discipleship

OPENING ACTIVITY

Take a moment and consider all the different programs and/or activities that you provide for all your different age groups in your congregation. Don't worry about missing anything; just think of all the different ways your congregation provides opportunities for learning or community together. On your own, in the space below, take a moment to write down as many programs or activities as you can.

EXPLORING THE TOPIC

What About the Goal?

Regardless of what your congregation provides for children, youth, or adults, we need to keep one thing in mind: programs or activities are not ends unto themselves. They all have different purposes. Some are social, some educational, and others service-oriented.

It is important, however, to consider why we do what we do. Why expend energy, time, talents, and treasures? What's the end goal? The purpose of this study is to help you consider a major overall goal of all that we do in our education, service, and community-building endeavors:

The cultivation and nurture of lifelong, maturing, adult discipleship.

Think of it this way: when starting a major project, you want to keep the end goal in mind. When you start building a house, the goal is the completion of the house. The goal is not to hammer some boards together or lay a foundation. These are important steps to building a house, but they are not the end goal.

The same goes for getting a college degree. The goal is to learn what needs to be learned in order to complete the degree requirements and graduate. The goal is not to simply write some papers or attend some classes. These are important steps but not the end goal.

So it is with our educational programs and activities in our congregations. We attend the Divine Service to receive God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. This is the heart and center of our identity as God's people – it's all about receiving the gifts that Christ gives to us. Congregational programs and activities, then, extend to further developing and fostering that identity as God's people.

Yet, in the day-to-day operations of children's ministry, youth groups, board meetings, service events, and coffee hours, the simple end goal of cultivating and nurturing lifelong, maturing adult disciples is often lost. It's time to regain that end goal and reignite our desire to focus on lifelong discipleship.

Now consider, what would change in your congregation if more adults took more initiative in taking their identity as disciples of Jesus seriously? What sorts of changes might that bring, to you as a congregation and to your programs and activities?

But What is Maturing Adult Discipleship?

Though it's easy to talk about in the abstract, if maturing adult discipleship is to be our overall end goal to educational program and activities, we need more clarity. How do we define this thing called maturing adult discipleship? Let's let Scripture show us the way.

Look up and read the below ten Scriptures, for each quickly summarize how this Scripture passage helps us understand lifelong maturing adult discipleship.

John 8:31–33:

Matthew 28:19–20:

Matthew 16:24:

Hebrews 5:12-14:

Colossians 1:28-29:

John 13:34-35:

John 15:1-6:

Titus 3:14:

2 Timothy 2:1-2:

2 Peter 3:14-18:

Putting Topic Into Action

Now that you've taken a brief look at a Scriptural view of maturing adult discipleship, it's time to put even more definition to maturing adult discipleship. You do not have to have all this figured out now. The next two sessions will help you think about how this applies to your congregation. For now, let's think about what this end goal of parish education and activity looks like in the life of a maturing adult disciple.

Below is a simple chart with three columns, each with its own category. Looking back over what you've considered and read in this session, write down different understandings, attitudes, and behaviors a maturing adult disciple would have in his or her own life. For the rest of this study we will refer to these as characteristics of maturing adult discipleship. For each of the categories, try to come up with a variety of examples.

A maturing adult disciple should:

Understand / have a growing knowledge of...	Value / have an attitude of...	Be able to / know how to...

CLOSING OUT THE SESSION

What you've thought about in today's session only scratches the surface of a deep biblical understanding of maturing adult discipleship. However, it should provide you with a foundation for the future. In the next session you'll really start to dig into what those aspects of maturing adult discipleship would look like in your context. Until then, commit yourself to doing three things.

Read over the Scripture texts provided in this session. Reread them and recall them frequently. Trust that the Spirit uses God's Word to create and sustain faith as well as grow your understanding of discipleship.

Identify and describe at least two other selections from the Bible that you did not look at in this session that help define maturing adult discipleship. Write them down and come to the next session ready to share.

Pray. Pray that God would use the efforts of your group to help steer your congregation to focus more on what matters most for you. Pray that more adults would take their roles seriously and that your programs and activities would help equip them to do so.

SESSION 2

Contemplating Maturing Adult Discipleship

OPENING ACTIVITY

In the last session, you considered a major goal of education in the parish: the cultivate and nurture lifelong, maturing adult discipleship. You read Scripture and summarized key takeaways from Scripture on understandings, values, and abilities of maturing adult disciples. You finished with this challenge: to meditate on the Scriptures, identify two other selections from the Bible that help define maturing adult discipleship, and then pray.

Let's start this session by sharing your further reflections. In the space below, write down your biggest takeaway from your ongoing reflection on maturing adult discipleship since your last session. When your time for writing is done, be prepared to share your reflection with your group.

EXPLORING THE TOPIC

Reviewing Maturing Adult Discipleship

During the first session, you individually and as a group brainstormed a list of the different characteristics a maturing adult disciple should understand, value, and be able to do. As we reflect on this list, take a moment to consider what you would add, subtract, or modify after your reflections.

Consider Your Congregation Context

It's likely that, currently, you are a little overwhelmed. After all, the Bible lists many different characteristics of maturing adult disciples. You also know that many adults in your congregation are busy.

They have many responsibilities in life and can feel overwhelmed if asked to do one more thing.

The truth remains, though, that God has called you and has called them to lives of love and service to their neighbor. Though there are some core defining characteristics of lifelong, maturing disciples (like remaining in God's Word), each Christian has different vocations. God has given different responsibilities to different people. This manifests itself in different ways in different communities.

We also know that each congregation is different. Some are in the city, some in smaller towns, some are in the country. Some have many members, others have fewer. Some have an abundance of young families, others have none. Some have members that live close by and others have commuters. You get the picture.

Consider YOUR congregation. Think of things like the average attendance, average age, and cultural makeup of your group. Take five minutes. In the below box, mark down bullet points that describe what your congregation is like. Who are you? What are your opportunities? What are your challenges? There are no right or wrong answers to this. Just describe your congregation.

My Congregation Is:

Narrowing Things Down

In order to avoid being overwhelmed, it's helpful to think of ways you can narrow down a working definition of maturing adult discipleship for your congregational context. Instead of trying everything, focus on a few things your congregation can focus on.

Recall the overall list of characteristics that mature disciples should understand, value, and be able to do. With your context in mind, on your own, narrow each one of these down to two or three that are workable and achievable in your congregation. You may not be able to go on long and involved mission trips, but you may be able to serve your neighbor in your community. Referencing the overall list your group previously made, in the chart below, write down the two or three objectives for each category that YOU believe would best help cultivate and nurture maturing adult discipleship in your congregation.

Understand / have a growing knowledge of...	Value / have an attitude of...	Be able to / know how to...

Putting Topic Into Action

Congratulations! You now have a first working draft of some simple yet concrete characteristics of maturing adult discipleship that you can focus on in your congregational context. Like you previously read in the first session of this study, this is a critical goal of any congregation.

The next step is to consider HOW you will develop an educational and cultural plan in your congregation that will help you build

these characteristics. Before you jump to this, though, it is important that you first gather feedback from your adult congregation members. This feedback will be instrumental for your group as you consider how to put these things into action. After all, you can have the best ideas, but if people are unable to try them, they will just remain ideas.

The next step, before your third session, is to create a simple yet informative survey for your adult members of your congregation. You will use data collected from this survey to help you plan out how.

Things to Look For In This Survey

There are no hard and fast rules for putting together a survey like this. Below, however, are some considerations you should use when building this out.

This survey should be short. This is something that could be put on half a page or a page, handed out, and completed in just a few minutes.

The survey should help you gather data that will be informative for you in nurturing your key characteristics of mature adult discipleship in your congregation. So keep your list in mind as you put together your survey.

At least one question should focus on the times and dates the adults in your congregation are most open to/likely to attend educational opportunities.

At least one question should ask your adults what resources or types of gatherings they would find most useful in fostering their daily life of faith.

At least one question should ask your adults what their greatest challenges are in engaging their faith in their daily lives.

At least one question should ask your adults about what topics they would be most interested in studying or learning about together.

At least one question should ask your adults about how well they feel connected to the overall community of the congregation. Adults will be much less likely to take the initiative to learn something new if they feel disconnected from others.

On your own, write down five questions you think would be useful to ask adult members of your congregation, using the above prompts as guides. Remember, these questions are here to help you gather important data you can use to implement practical strategies.

CLOSING OUT THE SESSION

You've considered a lot of things in this session, including your congregational context, what you can focus on to foster maturing adult discipleship in your context, and questions that your group could ask your congregation that would help you start to think about how this is done. Before the next session, here's what you are challenged to do.

Create your survey and consider how to distribute it to as many adults in the congregation as possible. Have your point person (or leader) use your data to create a short survey. This can be done using an web-based survey tool or paper.

Find a way to distribute and gather data from your survey. Email may or may not be the best way to do this. An electronic survey via email may have a wide reach, but it likely won't yield a broad range of results (it will likely be a small number of the same people who normally give feedback). A better option may be to have a paper survey, available for a few weeks, that you encourage members to fill out after the Divine Service. Use whatever distribution methods you have to encourage members to fill out this survey. As a member of this group, it's your responsibility to encourage as many adults to take this survey as possible.

Collect the data. Before your next session, have your point person collect and compile the data. Ideally, your point person will have this data available for you to consider PRIOR to your next session.

Pray. Continue to pray for the process. Pray that adults in your congregation would step up and take the initiative for their own discipleship so that they may be lifelong learners of God's Word. Pray they would help raise up future generations in the faith. Pray that God would give them peace in Jesus Christ and a future hope of the new creation.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

SESSION 3

Planning For Maturing Adult Discipleship

OPENING ACTIVITY

Since the last session, your group conducted a survey of your adult congregants. You were likely not able to get an abundance of responses, but whatever data you collected will serve as a useful tool for your group moving forward.

Take a few minutes, and review the results of this survey again. In the space provided below, write down one or two key takeaways from this survey. After you're done, you will share your reflections in the group.

EXPLORING THE TOPIC

Taking a Step Back

By the end of this session, your group will have a basic plan for how you can create educational activities and/or an environment that is more intentionally focused on cultivating and nurturing maturing adult disciples. Before then, though, it is important to take a step back at your group's brainstorming and the data you collected from your congregation and look for connections.

Why do this? First, you want to be intentional in what you do. As adults, you know this – adult life is busy! Adding more to anyone's schedule can be a challenge. Secondly, you want to be focused. Plans that you make for your adult learners in your context should be based on the actual needs and interests of your learners. Maturing

adult discipleship is not a subjective thing, it's based on God's Word. It is, however, informed by your context.

So, how do you do this? Take a moment and review your list of congregational characteristics for maturing adult disciples that you've considered over the last two sessions. Then, look at the survey data.

Take a few minutes with both items in front of you. Work to identify connections, similarities, and common themes that emerge between the two sets.

For example, if in your list of discipleship characteristics your group stated that adult disciples should value getting together as a community, and if in your survey your congregation members noted that they like to learn in group gatherings, then see that as a connection. Your connection statement could be "The value and need for community gatherings and getting together."

By contrast, if in your list of discipleship characteristics your group indicated that adult disciples should be highly engaged in multiple small group Bible studies throughout the week, and if in your survey your congregation members noted that they are so busy they can't add anything to their family schedules, your connection statement could be "There's a bit of a disconnect between what the group thinks members should be involved in and what members think they are able to do."

In the box below, looking at both sets of information, mark down at least three or four connection statements that you may find useful when working to set up a simple plan for being more intentional in cultivating maturing adult discipleship in your congregation.

Connection Statements:

Consider What Motivates Adult Learners

You've thought through some connections and brainstormed some realities. Hopefully in this you've been able to identify some opportunities as well as challenges to planning for the future of maturing adult discipleship in your congregation.

Before you move on to the next step, though, just read through and consider the principles below that are true for many adult learners. These are based on an adult learning theory called andragogy, of the art and science of teaching adults. Generally speaking, these are principles that can help any adult plan for making the most out of adult learning.

As you read through the below sections, circle, highlight, or underline any words, phrases, or ideas that stick out to you.

Need To Know:

Generally speaking, adults need to understand why they need to learn something before they'll take the initiative to learn it. This is true for youth and children as well. However, as most adults are not in formal schooling anymore, they have more flexibility to not undertake any new learning. Assume that adults will be more motivated to learn something new when they see the relevance and benefits of the learning.

Self-concept:

Overall, adults tend to see themselves as responsible for their own learning and lives. After all, the adult world requires a lot of learning on the fly and problem solving. If they feel like they aren't in control of their own learning or treated as children in an educational setting, they'll often be put off. Adults generally value some autonomy and control over their learning process.

Role Of Experience:

Remember that all adults bring valuable life and work experiences to the learning environment. These experiences should be acknowledged and used as a foundation for new learning. So one-size-fits-all may not be true for all programs. In addition, assume that many adult learners are going to at least want to have the opportunity to share their thoughts and experiences with others in a learning situation.

Readiness to Learn:

Most adults feel ready to learn when they have a need to learn something. They are more likely to engage with learning that ad-

dresses a current challenge or problem. So, make sure that when you are planning new programs, initiatives, or experiences for adults that you are speaking to their particular needs and roles in life.

Orientation to Learn:

Assume that adults are more likely to learn when the learning is practical and relevant to their lives. They want to see how new knowledge and skills can be applied to solve real-world problems. This does not mean that you abandon solid, Biblical content in your teaching. Instead, it means that as you go through the content with your adult learners, they will see value in taking time to think through real-world problems and practical implications.

Motivation to Learn:

More often than not, adults are internally motivated. Their motivation is often tied to their personal goals and values. In other words, grades and rewards may work in formal education for children, but less so for adults who either have to learn for work (professional development or certification) or must take the initiative to learn on their own. Though external motivators, such as rewards or incentives, may be helpful, try to tap into internal values, loves, and “visions of the good life” of your adult learners when seeking to motivate them to try something new.

Putting Topic into Action

Now it is time to put all these thoughts together into a simple, introductory, concrete plan. By now you have a customized list of maturing discipleship characteristics for your congregation and some connection statements. To keep things reasonable, simple, and attainable, your action plan should be...well...reasonable, simple, and attainable. To do so, start small. As a group, work through the below points one-by-one. Make sure you have one member of your group at least who is taking notes.

Looking over your characteristics and connections, pick the top one to three characteristics that are most attainable right now.

For each of the characteristics, define what tangible “success” would look like for your adult disciples. Then, for “success” to happen, define what specific criteria you would use.

What methods would you use to work towards these goals as a congregation? What mode, program, or adaptation to your life together would work best?

What will your timeline be, both as an end goal and in intermediate steps?

How will you evaluate success at the end of the timeline?

What will you do next?

CLOSING OUT THE SESSION

The three sessions of this study covered a lot of ground. You likely feel overwhelmed by everything. Do not get discouraged. Instead, remember that what you are working on and studying is a great opportunity for the Church.

As we investigated in earlier sessions, cultivating maturing adult discipleship is a key not only to the spiritual health of a congregation, it also makes everything else in children and youth ministry easier. When adults take the initiative for their faith seriously and embrace their vocations as disciples of Christ, the Spirit uses them to build up the Body of Christ. This is an exciting opportunity, and you get to be part of putting that into practice in your congregation.

So, prayerfully act upon your plan. Take the initiative and step up with your group to assist your pastor and other leaders in your congregation to focus on this critical aspect of the life of God's people. In all things, rejoice that Christ has made you His own, and He sends the Spirit to work through His Word to strengthen and guide you in this process.

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