

Akron Mennonite Church Discipleship Hour Narrative

October, 2005

The purpose of this narrative is to outline the process and rationale for the shift from the traditional Adult Christian Education model to the Discipleship Hour experience.

The Discipleship Hour Oversight committee emerged from the focus group known as Renewing our Worship and Community Life as part of the church-wide vision process initiated in 2001. In a subsequent discernment time, an AMC Vision statement was adopted which stated in part, that "Akron Mennonite Church will be fully engaged in God's mission in a broken world as we are called, equipped and sent by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ in life."

The phrase "called, equipped and sent" became the foundational piece for the Discipleship Hour Oversight Committee, as we were charged to renew our time together in the second hour. Specifically, the following recommendation was made:

Transform the focus of Adult Christian Education hour into a sharing and discipleship hour, with more flexible options for participation in Bible Study groups, Ministry team meetings, longer-term classes and other options as called for from the congregation.

These efforts did not happen in a vacuum. Church theologians, such as Lois Barrett, informed our perspective of the church as missional. In addition, our church was at the end of the 10 year cycle of long-term goals. There was both energy and a climate of willingness to change. This energy stimulated new language for the second hour, based on the missional message. We wanted a second hour that would support the congregation's efforts at mission, both locally and around the world. We wanted a second hour that would encourage the congregation to develop more intentional relationships, more community and supportive networks. We wanted to create safe places to share, pray and be church together.

What is Discipleship Hour?

As a result of this effort, Discipleship Hour, is a time where AMC invites participants to experience spiritual formation, nurture and growth, as we are called, equipped and sent by God.

Called: What does it mean to say "yes" to Jesus and to keep saying yes in today's world? Mark 3:13 "He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him."

Equipped: How have you been gifted to the ministry in the Body of Christ and how can those gifts be identified, affirmed, developed and utilized? 1 Peter 1:13 "Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed."

Sent: Where is God at work in the world and how can we join in that mission and witness? John 20:21 "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.'"

Underlying Assumptions for Discipleship Hour (DH)

One expectation is that offerings will be consistent with AMC's mission statement and Anabaptist values. We also ask that the facilitators include a time for checking-in with each other, taking time to pray for and with each other. There should be opportunity to listen to Scripture, as either the focus of the discussion, or as a reference point. Groups also expect accountability (such as confidentiality, etc.). Participants are encouraged to be active in the hour, another shift from the passive-class format where a teacher taught and the participants listened. Finally, active participation requires a commitment to attending the group on a regular basis.

Discipleship Hour Offerings

We have chosen to move away from the traditional "class" terminology, as that often connotes a more passive approach, and call the various choices that occur during the year "offerings." The Discipleship Hour offerings may have different types of activities that can largely be self-determined by each group, in consultation with the Discipleship Hour Oversight Committee. This fosters members and visitors to become engaged where they have passion and desire to grow deeper in their faith. These activities can range from Dwelling with Scripture to Ministry Teams meetings. In the past two years since this process has emerged, we have had a very serious scripture study, a sermon-talk back group which also addressed finding God in everyday life, a group examining the role of the church as a peace church, a house church and youth coming together to work on AIDS kits and a women's group focused on transitions, just to name a few.

How are new offerings formed?

The DH Oversight Committee encourages members of the congregation to discover areas of interest and passion that might attract others to consider forming a group. A brochure has been developed to aid in the process. After finding others to help form a group, the DH form in the brochure can be filled out and turned into the Oversight Committee. The proposal is reviewed with the following parameters:

1. Consistency with AMC's Mission statement and Anabaptist values
2. Balance of topics within a certain timeframe
3. Balance of offerings for both visitors and members (open and closed groups)

The group that is forming identifies their own facilitators, determines any limitations as to the size of the group and space needs. The DH committee works with the Church Administrator to assign space, as available. Groups can meet off-site and at different hours. One group consistently meets prior to worship at the home of the facilitators.

Discipleship Hour is not bound by the traditional three-month quarter system. This flexibility allows for short-term focused efforts (like the AIDS discussion) that might last a month, or year-long discussion groups. With the focus on the three practices of relationship building, dwelling with scripture, and prayer, facilitators are finding more time to address the real needs of the group and not feeling the rush of moving through the content. Through this flexibility, offerings begin and end in their own season.

Supporting Discipleship Hour

The DH committee offers facilitation training several annually to help develop skills that help to foster group cohesiveness and participation. This effort also has the potential to develop more leaders within the church, as congregational members have the opportunity to lead discussions. Again, the gifts that people bring to the congregation that may have been under-utilized or not even noticed, are self-identified, fostering more ownership in the process.

The budget for DH, is developed by the chair of the DH committee with input from the committee. It is used to pay for books, videos, outside speakers, and other needs requested by the forming groups and as approved by the committee. Within this budget category, the speaker for Adult Vacation Bible school is also supported.

Pastoral Leadership

The pastors have played a very important role in the development of Discipleship Hour. From the beginning, the pastors have supported and honored the visioning process within the congregation. Every step of the way, the pastors have been involved in either the listening group, a focus group, or as liaisons to various other congregational initiatives. They have guided, not dictated the process, and demonstrated that change is better than ok - that it can also be exciting and dynamic. They have offered their own expertise to the offerings and have helped identify resources outside of the congregation. Their willingness to try new things has been foundational in the success of the visioning process, as well as Discipleship Hour.

The Impact of Discipleship Hour

Prior to the implementation of Discipleship Hour, attendance had fallen to an average of 65 adults per Sunday. Since the shift in Discipleship Hour, average attendance has been over a hundred adults. The Adult Christian Education Committee had a difficult time finding teachers for the classes and generating an appropriate class schedule. The Discipleship Hour Oversight Committee does not have that issue, as the offerings are coming from the members, capturing their questions, their passions and their interests. In fact, the most limiting factor for this second hour seems to be the availability of meeting space.

We are fortunate at Akron Mennonite Church to have a congregation and leadership that embraces the challenge of change. We are fortunate to have a congregation that is Spirit-led and willing to do what is necessary to call, equip and send its members into a broken world. We express appreciation for all the gifts that our members bring to this church and their willingness to share those gifts.

DH Oversight Committee 2005/2006:

Nancy Emig Chapman, Chair

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