

Spring 2015

# Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 21st Century

Janet Johnson

*University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, revjanetj@gmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ir.stthomas.edu/caps\\_ed\\_lead\\_docdiss](https://ir.stthomas.edu/caps_ed_lead_docdiss)

 Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Johnson, Janet, "Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 21st Century" (2015). *Education Doctoral Dissertations in Leadership*. 55.

[https://ir.stthomas.edu/caps\\_ed\\_lead\\_docdiss/55](https://ir.stthomas.edu/caps_ed_lead_docdiss/55)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Doctoral Dissertations in Leadership by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact [libroadmin@stthomas.edu](mailto:libroadmin@stthomas.edu).

DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Janet Johnson

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS MINNESOTA

Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

*[Handwritten signature]*

John D. Holst, Ed. D., Committee Chair

*[Handwritten signature]*

Stephen D. Brookfield, Ph. D., Committee Member

*[Handwritten signature]*

Paulette E. Sankofa, Ed. D., Committee Member

January, 15, 2015

Final approval Date

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### Abstract

This qualitative case study sought to discover if the African Methodist Episcopal Church is intentional in the discipleship formation of its members. My study examined five African Methodist Episcopal Churches in the Midwest and included 60 clergy and non-clergy participants. I conducted one-on-one interviews with the clergy and I held focus groups of seven to ten participants with the non-clergy. Also as part of the study, I observed weekly worship services, adult Sunday school classes, and mid-week Bible studies at each of the five churches. The major findings revealed discipleship formation is not a one-time event, but a journey with four components: 1) the participants understanding and definition of discipleship as journey, 2) discipleship formation journey aids inside the church, 3) discipleship formation journey hindrances inside the church, and 4) discipleship formation journey aids outside the church. I analyzed the findings using four theoretical frameworks: 1) myths, rituals, habits, and the sacred; 2) critical pedagogy; 3) black liberation theology; and 4) transformational leadership. Analysis of the data revealed the foundational Christian education programs within the church are struggling with being relevant to people's everyday lives. Second, role models play an important part in discipleship formation. Third, because of time constraints, church leaders do not get to focus on their discipleship formation so they can be role models and help others on their journeys.

My findings suggest the following recommendations: first, perform a study of the Christian education programs beginning with Sunday school; second, develop a discipleship formation curriculum for leaders; third, offer exposure to discipleship formation aids outside the local church.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

This dissertation is dedicated to Richard Howard Johnson

my faithful husband and companion

whose loving support and encouragement

strengthened me along the way.

I love you!

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

## Acknowledgements

Completing this dissertation involved the work and support of many individuals. Thank you to my deceased parents, Ed and Rena Williams, for living out the biblical principle of Proverb 22:6 “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it” (King James Version). Your love, support, and life example helped me to become a woman of faith seeking to accomplish God’s will for my life! Thank you to Dr. John D. Holst (Dissertation Chair). I will be forever grateful for your guidance through my dissertation process. Thank you to my Dissertation Committee members Dr. Stephen D. Brookfield and Rev. Dr. Paulette Sankofa for your encouragement and critical insight. To all of my family and specifically to my siblings who offered me great support through prayers and encouragement (six sisters: Mary V. Williams, Edwinnia McDaniel, Gertrude McCoy, Margaret L. Byers, Lutricia Northern and Lee Noria Williams and my one brother: Billy J. Williams), friends (specifically, Rev. Dr. Vapordeal Sanders) and all those who prayed for me, and encouraged me on this journey. I am so grateful.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Table of Contents**

Chapter One – Introduction .....	9
Statement of the Problem .....	11
AME Church History .....	12
Discipleship Definition .....	16
Denomination (AME) definition of discipleship.....	17
Scripture definitions of discipleship.....	23
Literature definition of discipleship. ....	24
Significance of the Problem .....	26
Overview of Dissertation .....	27
Chapter Two – Literature Review.....	29
Topical Literature.....	29
Church leadership role in discipleship formation.....	31
Spiritual practices’ role in discipleship formation.....	33
Personal and corporate discipleship formation.....	38
Theoretical Frameworks.....	40
Critical pedagogy and the church. ....	40
Black liberation theology.....	45
Rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred.....	49
Transformational leadership theory.....	51
Chapter Three – Research Methods .....	55
Description of Case - History: National and Specific Local Congregations.....	55
Research AME church #1.....	60
Research AME church #2.....	61
Research AME church #3.....	62
Research AME church #4.....	62
Research AME church #5.....	62
Data Collection.....	63
Data Analysis .....	68
Ethics, Validity, and Generalizability .....	70
Ethics and confidentiality. ....	71
Validity.....	72

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Generalizability. ....	76
Summary Chapter 3.....	76
Chapter Four – Findings .....	77
Definition of Discipleship.....	78
Discipleship Formation as a Journey .....	83
Discipleship Formation Journey Aids inside the Church.....	87
Sunday worship service/sermons.....	87
Sunday school.....	89
Bible study.....	94
New members class. ....	97
Role models. ....	99
Summary of Discipleship Journey Aids Inside the Church .....	105
Discipleship Formation Journey Hindrances inside the Church.....	107
Church Traditions.....	107
Church Politics. ....	109
Church Trappings. ....	111
Church Expectations.....	113
Doctrine and Discipline (the blue book).....	114
Discipleship Formation Journey Aids Outside the Church.....	116
Bible study fellowship.....	116
Navigators.....	117
Role models in Christian community. ....	119
Chapter Five –Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	121
Analysis.....	121
Discipleship formation journey – rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred. ....	122
Discipleship formation journey – critical pedagogy.....	124
Discipleship formation journey – black liberation theology. ....	129
Discipleship formation journey – transformational leadership. ....	131
Conclusions .....	132
Christian education programs are struggling: Sunday school, Bible study, and new member class. ....	133
Role models play an important part in discipleship formation.....	134

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Church leadership lacking discipleship formation. ....	135
Recommendations .....	136
Christian education programs evaluation. ....	136
Stewards and church leaders curriculum. ....	138
Exposure to outside discipleship formation aids. ....	142
Future Research.....	142
Conclusion/Reflective Statement .....	143
References.....	145
Appendix.....	150

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### Chapter One – Introduction

In the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), discipleship formation is the area of priority in this 21st Century. Discipleship formation is the central focus for the current quadrennial, 2012-2016, with a specific topic of concentration for each fiscal year: 2012-13, The Goal of Discipleship; 2013-14, The Cost of Discipleship; 2014-15, The Evidence of Discipleship; and 2015-16, The Fruit of Discipleship. My research examines five AME Churches in a Midwestern metropolitan area concerning their intentionality in aiding their members in a lifetime of discipleship formation. As a member of this denomination and based on my personal experience of discipleship formation, this topic has deep personal interest for me.

In the spring of 1995, I began studying to be ordained. My ordination as an Itinerant Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church took place at the Chicago Annual Conference of the 4th Episcopal District in 2000. Bishop Philip R. Cousin, the Presiding Prelate of the 4th Episcopal District of the AME Church, ordained all in my class who had completed their Masters of Divinity at an accredited institution. As I reflect on my life's starting point, I realize I had no idea this is where my life would lead.

I was born and reared in a Christian home by parents who were professed Christians. We were a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, and we were members of Diggs Chapel AMEZ Church in a very small town, Blackwell, Arkansas. As children, my siblings and I attended Sunday school followed by 11:00 a.m. service every Sunday. Some Sundays, we would go to the Baptist church in our community because the AMEZ Church did not have a pastor in the pulpit every Sunday.

My father and mother, married in March of 1934, had their first of eleven children in December of that same year. Their last child was born in June of 1957. My father died in May

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

1957; my mother was pregnant with my baby sister when Papa died. Most of the families in our community had a large number of children. We lived in a predominately African American community named "Happy Bend" not found on the Arkansas map. This was my starting point in life.

My parents' goals were to give their children a Christian foundation to build our lives on, get us all through high school, and develop in us a good work ethic. The statement that I remember most from my mother was "get a job, go to work, and take care of yourself." My parents demonstrated that concept to us in their day-to-day life.

When I graduated from high school in 1969 at the age of 16, I left Happy Bend for the bright lights and the big city: Kansas City, Missouri. That had been the pattern for each of my siblings before me and I could not wait to follow suit. I could hardly wait to get out on my own with no one telling me what to do.

I went to church for about a year after leaving home but soon found myself as far away from church as I could get. I stayed away for about 15 years before I started to attend again. By then, I had moved to an even more northern Mid-western city. This time I went to an AME Church in my neighborhood, because there were no AMEZ Churches in the Midwest area of the country where I was living.

For the first three to five years of my return to church, I attended mostly out of tradition. So, other than spending two hours in church on Sunday morning, my lifestyle had not changed. Disenchanted with the way my life was going, I started to seek a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Christian life. I started to wonder what this Christian life was supposed to be about. There had to be more to it than just physically going to church on Sunday morning.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

I began a dialogue with God and anyone who was willing to talk to me about life as a Christian. At that time in my seeking journey, I knew nothing about being a disciple or discipleship formation. Those terms were foreign to me. I became intentional about my conversations with other Christians. I began to look outside of my church and denomination for answers. It was my journey and the life experience of others that peaked my interest in discipleship formation in the church I attended and the other AME churches in this Midwest area of the country. Throughout my spiritual journey, I learned about the AME church's long history as a denomination and its traditions of discipleship formation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

My research question was how are African Methodist Episcopal Churches doing when it comes to facilitating congregants' discipleship process versus just acquiring members for their church? For the purpose of this study, I examined five African Methodist Episcopal Churches in a Midwest metropolitan area as representative samples based on their structure and polity. I also chose them because of my familiarity with and access to these churches.

The mission of Christian churches, also known as "The Great Commission," comes from biblical text. All additional scriptures I make reference to in this document come from biblical text. Matthew 28:19-20 says

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (New International Version, NIV).

The AME church's mission statement lines up with the "Great Commission" of the Christian church. As indicated in the *The Book of Discipline* (2012) of the AME Church,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

The mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: This is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy through a continuing program of (1) preaching the gospel, (2) feeding the hungry, (3) clothing the naked, (4) housing the homeless, (5) cheering the fallen, (6) providing jobs for the jobless, (7) administering to the needs of those in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes; caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed, and (8) encouraging thrift and economic advancement. (2008, p. 16)

The research question is critical because it measures the AME Church's current state which has implications for its future success: "How are AME Churches doing at facilitating congregant's discipleship formation process versus just acquiring members?" Disciple-making is the ultimate benchmark of success as a church – not attendance, offering, or even salvations for that matter. When the first priority becomes getting people to go to church instead of facilitating people's discipleship process, the question becomes is the church missing the heart of what Jesus called the church to do? These are questions I will explore and attempt to answer in this dissertation – based upon my research. The history and traditions of the AME church are describe in the next section.

### **AME Church History**

The African Methodist Episcopal, (AME) Church is predominantly an African-American denomination based in the United States. The Rev. Richard Allen founded the A.M.E. Church in

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1816 from several black Methodist congregations in the Mid-Atlantic area that wanted independence from the white Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen was elected its first bishop in 1816 (Wesley, 1935).

The AME Church grew out of the Free African Society established in Philadelphia in 1787 by free Blacks - Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others (Wesley, 1935). They left St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church because of discrimination. Although Allen and Jones were both accepted as preachers, they were limited to Black congregations. In addition, the Blacks were forced to sit in a separate gallery when attending a White Methodist church. These former members of St. George's made plans to transform their mutual aid society into an African congregation (Wesley, 1935). Although the group was originally non-denomination, eventually members wanted to affiliate with existing denominations.

Allen led a small group who resolved to remain Methodist. They formed the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1793. In general, they adopted the doctrines and form of government of the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1794, Bethel AME was dedicated with Allen as pastor (Wesley, 1935). To establish Bethel's independence, Allen successfully sued in the Pennsylvania courts in 1807 and 1815 for the right of his congregation to exist as an institution independent of White Methodist congregations. Because Black Methodists in other Mid-Atlantic communities also encountered racism and desired religious autonomy, Allen called them to meet in Philadelphia in 1816 to form a new Wesleyan denomination, the "African Methodist Episcopal Church" (Wesley, 1935, p. 150).

The AME Church, first known as "The Free African Society," has a unique history because it is the first major religious denomination in the western world that developed because of sociological rather than theological differences. The church was born in protest against racial

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

discrimination and slavery. This was in keeping with the Methodist Church's philosophy whose founder John Wesley (1935) had once called the slave-trade "that execrable sum of all villainies" (p. 39). It was also the first African-American denomination organized and incorporated in the United States. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the AME Church of Ohio collaborated with the Methodist Episcopal Church, a predominately White denomination, in sponsoring the nation's second independent historically Black college, Wilberforce University in Ohio (p. 261).

In the history of the AME Church, critical thinking and critical consciousness skills are evident throughout its developmental process. Slaves adapted Christianity to their lives with a critical eye. When the "Massa" (term used by slaves for their Master) used Scripture to say "obey your master," the slaves did not see it that way because they had a true spiritual Master, Jesus Christ. The Whites did not bring the Africans to God; the Africans knew God already. It was not hard for them to see a suffering servant in Jesus Christ.

The AME Church, in 1787, started as a benevolent society speaking to issues of injustice, helping the people around them. The AME Church was involved in social movements from combating yellow fever in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the civil rights movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The church was a force to be reckoned with during those times.

In the classic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois stated, "The Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character" (p. 157). For many years, the church was the seat of community and church activity. Throughout the history of the AME Church there is example after example of discipleship in the communities in which they lived.

Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic of 1793 was the largest in the history of the United States, claiming the lives of nearly 40,000 people (Du Bois, 1903). In late summer of 1793, as

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

the number of deaths began to climb, 20,000 citizens fled to the countryside, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other members of the federal government (at that time headquartered in Philadelphia).

At the urging of Benjamin Rush, the support of Philadelphia's free Black community was enlisted by Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and William Gray, a fruit seller who along with Allen and Jones had secured support to build the African Church the previous year (Wesley, 1935).

Benjamin Rush was a prominent Presbyterian doctor and professor of chemistry in Philadelphia and one of the Black community's strongest White allies. The son of a Philadelphia gunsmith and slave owner, Rush studied at Princeton University (then called the College of New Jersey) before he went to Edinburgh and Paris for his medical training (Wesley, 1935).

In an effort to prove themselves morally superior to those who reviled them, Philadelphia's Black community put aside their resentment and dedicated themselves to discipleship by working with the sick and dying in all capacities, including as nurses, cart drivers, and grave diggers. Despite Rush's belief that Blacks could not contract the disease, 240 of them died of the fever (Wesley, 1935).

Wesley (1935) stated that as the weather cooled, the disease subsided, and the deaths stopped. Then accusations began against the Black citizens who had worked so hard to save the sick and dying. Mathew Carey, through his pamphlet led the attack on many in the Black community. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones published a response to Carey's pamphlet.

There might have been a few colored persons who were guilty of plundering the distressed and committing unworthy acts. This they did not deny, but they said also that they knew as many Whites who were guilty of it, though this was looked over, while the Blacks were held up to censure. Several cases of the conduct of the Whites were

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

described, and on the contrary they alleged that they saw more humanity, more sensibility from the poor colored than from the Whites. (as cited in Wesley, 1935, pp. 103-104)

The members of the AME Church certainly had a right not to get involved in such a deadly situation, but their love for God and their fellow human beings propelled them to act. That is discipleship. That is an example of tremendous discipleship in the history of the AME church and the U. S.A. Another example would include the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

The AME Church in the civil rights movement assisted Dr. Martin Luther King in putting pressure on the Jim Crow laws until they broke, giving way to the civil rights law of 1964. Another example of the AME Church's involvement with civil rights is Brown Chapel AME. Brown Chapel AME Church located in Selma, Alabama, played a pivotal role in the marches that helped lead to the adoption of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. On March 7, 1965, state and local police attacked 600 Civil Rights protesters with Billy clubs and tear gas as they tried to march from Selma to Montgomery: the incident gained the name "Bloody Sunday", one of the most violent chapters of the Civil Rights Movement. The event raised the struggle for equality and justice to newer heights. The starting point of this Selma-to-Montgomery March was the Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama. The church also served as the headquarters and meeting place of the SCLC, or Selma Christian Leadership Conference during the so-called Selma Movement. For its historic role, the church was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1997 (<http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/al2.htm>).

### **Discipleship Definition**

*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (1984) defines *mathetes*, the Greek word for disciple as "a learner' ... it denotes 'one who follows one's teaching' ... as the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

‘disciple’ was not only a pupil, but an adherent (member); hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher” (p. 171). The scriptures John 8:31 and 15:8 reinforces *Vine’s* definition of disciple. It indicates that those considered to be Jesus’ disciples hold on to His teachings by appearing like them, having substance like them and appealing to the spiritual appetite like them. Therefore to God they are seen as a tree or vine bearing fruit that is a glorious/fruitful reflection of Him. John 8:31 “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples (NIV); 15:8 “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (NIV).

Even though every church member knows the terms *disciple* and *discipleship*, *member* and *membership* are the terms most often used in conversations of congregants. The purpose of this research is to inquire as to whether churches are being intentional when it comes to developing Christ-like members, disciples. With many born again Christians suffering from biblical illiteracy and culture-accommodating lifestyles, this research is an opportunity to reassess how we are doing at helping members to be true followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, true disciples.

### **Denomination (AME) definition of discipleship.**

I could not find a definition of disciple or discipleship in any of the AME Church literature or website. What I did find was information on church membership. In the *Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church* (2012) there are three and a half pages labeled *Part IV- Church membership Section I. Admission Into The Church* (pp. 58-61). *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* is the law and doctrine of the denomination used to guide the local church in how to be a good institution. *The Book of Discipline* is a companion to the Bible, not a replacement.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

My experience has been that the word disciple is not often used in Christian circles. The language most often used is around the term membership e.g. which church are you a member of? Where are you a member? Have you completed the new members class? Only in the last two years has the term disciple/discipleship started being used, specifically, in the formal themes that the AME Church sets for itself worldwide every four years at the AME Church General Conference. For example, the AME Church worldwide website lists the themes for 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016. Each theme included the word discipleship.

The theme of discipleship started in 2013. According to the AME Connectional Church website (<http://www.ame-church.com/>), discipleship was the focus for 2013 and the next three years. Three of the four years' themes have a scripture reference. I am sure the 2016 will be given a Scripture reference.

- 2013 The Goal of Discipleship Matthew 28:18-20
- 2014 The Cost of Discipleship Mark 8:34-36
- 2015 The Evidence of Discipleship John 13:35-35
- 2016 The Fruit of Discipleship John 15:1-5

Based on that, I would say that a shift in language has started to occur. Currently, in the congregations that are a part of this study, the use of the word disciple is very limited on Sunday morning and any other time. Every Sunday morning, as part of the order of service, at the end of the sermon, the preacher extends the “Invitation to Christian Discipleship.” That is very likely the first and last time congregants will hear the term discipleship in relation to an individual joining the church and seeking to grow as a Christian man or woman. Another phrase sometimes used for the same purpose as the “invitation to Christian discipleship,” is “open the door of the church.” The doors are open so that “whosoever will” can come in. Gordon (as cited in Steward

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

III, 2006) said, “The doors remain open so that the redeemed, transformed, and committed can go back out into the world for mission and ministry” (p. 3).

Discipleship moves individuals into a relationship with Christ thus moving them from simple membership in the church to Christian discipleship. *The Book of Worship* (n.d.) of the United Methodist Church asks of new members, “Will you be loyal to the United Methodist church and ...faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service?” (p. 4). Gordon, (as cited by Stewart III, 2006), stated that this statement is membership producing—not disciple making. So, the statement now reads “I will be loyal to Christ through the church” (p. 4). Now the emphasis is on discipleship, not membership. There is a distinction between membership and discipleship – a member is simply someone who attends church and is committed to the local church and/or denomination but does not have a relationship with Christ; a disciple is one who lives their Christian faith as a lifelong journey of commitment to Christ in every area of life.

Going back to the concept of “opening the doors of the church” or when the “invitation to Christian discipleship” is extended, anyone in attendance may come to the altar and become a member of the church. The person joining could be new to the Christian faith entirely; they could be new coming from another denomination; they could be new coming from another AME Church. The church collects data from the individual or family including: name, address, phone number, birth date, e-mail, etc. During this time, the question is asked, “Are you coming by Christian experience or as a candidate for baptism?”

Christian experience means individuals have been baptized at an earlier point in their life, possibly even baptized in a different denomination. They are already considered a member, a Christian or a part of the Body of Christ but not necessarily a disciple. Being baptized occurs at

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

the beginning of the discipleship process from the local church's perspective. Either way, they are coming on that day to be a member of this local church no matter if they are new to the faith, coming from another denomination or another AME Church. Baptism is tied to discipleship. The ritual of baptism is a requirement of the Christian church "great commission" in Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Candidates for baptism need to be baptized because they have never participated in the ritual of baptism as members of a church and they want to confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. I am noting the use of the term "member" when the people of the church mean disciple. This person is considered a new convert to the Christian faith. This is always a very exciting time when there is a new convert. Scripture says in Luke 15: 7, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (NIV). Even though the invitation is to Christian Discipleship, the language that is used from this point on is around the terms of member or membership of the church.

The AME Church denomination has changed its language to say discipleship via the Connectional Church themes and this is a great start, but the change does not occur in the hearts and minds of the people in the local churches automatically based on the themes. It takes time for the membership to understand the difference between the two terms, membership and discipleship, and to try to figure out what that means for them as individuals. There has to be a change process to aid the church folks in making the change in their understanding of who they are as Christian men and women. This research shows there is confusion and chaos around these two terms and a distinction needs to be made.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Though the church uses the term membership, when individuals join the church and become members, they begin a journey of growing in their relationship with God and their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures and applying both to their day-to-day life. That journey looks different for everybody. Discipleship formation is the journey that begins even though no one uses that terminology. When listening to Christians talk about their lives as Christians, I hear them speak of their journey as a progression. They went through some process of transformation causing them to feel like they were at a new place or at a new level in their journey than they were at a previous time in their live. They have grown in their maturity as Christian men or women even though they most likely would not use the term disciple or discipleship formation. When individuals join a church, as new converts or as Christians coming to a new church home, all who witness this event believe it is a mark of the journey to becoming a disciple of Christ. This journey is life long and unfolds in different ways for each individual. Church members are at all levels of the spectrum when it comes to where they are in their journey.

Some members are aggressive and intentional in their desire to know God, His Word and how to apply it to their lives. Maybe, they may get involved in the teaching ministries of the church by starting to attend church school on Sunday mornings and/or Bible study which happens during the week. Plus they will join one or more ministries of the church such as the missionary society, choir, or usher board. Some may even go outside of their local church on their search for more of God in their day-to-day lives by attending retreats, other Bible studies, and services of nationally known speakers who come to town. Other members join the church and come to the Sunday morning worship service and that may be it. Occasionally they may come to a special service on a Sunday afternoon or evening. They do not join a ministry nor do they participate in the Christian Education (C. E.) ministries of the local church. Many members

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

fall between these two examples when it comes to their participation in the church. From the point of joining the church no matter what route individuals take, they are considered to be on the journey of discipleship formation even though it is not given that name. The terms member or membership say that the individual Christian is a maturing disciple in some shape, form, or fashion.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is the ultimate goal in the AME Church. Disciples of Christ were never called to be church members – or part of a denomination. They were called to be one with Jesus – His Disciples. So a disciple of Jesus Christ follows the example set forth by the example of Jesus' life including, 1 Peter: 2:21, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (NIV). The question becomes is every Christian a disciple of Jesus? More than likely the individual believes in Jesus. They might even be attending church services regularly – but is that what it means to be His disciple?

According to Stewart III (2006), Jesus Christ expects the church to grow and produce more disciples who will transform the world. Stewart III (2006) describes four cycles of discipleship: reaching, teaching, training, and deploying. This process guides individuals from church membership to becoming committed disciples of Jesus Christ.

Becoming a disciple takes place in a process, a journey, and can start even before a person enters a church. The first step begins with a search for meaning in life, part of my testimony. People at this point may not know exactly what they are seeking, but they know something is missing.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Scripture definitions of discipleship.**

Since this study is about discipleship formation in the Christian church, I listed a sampling of scriptures from the NIV version of the Bible that speak about disciples and discipleship.

- Mark 8:34-38

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

- John 8:31-32

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

- John 15:5-8

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

- Matthew 28:18-20

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

- Luke 14:33

In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

- Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me, “Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men. “ At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Discipleship according to Jesus embodied a lifelong journey of commitment to Him in every area of life. Based on the scripture references, Jesus’ disciples, His followers would include study and service in their lives. Both study and service would compel his followers to live out his teachings in love in their day-to-day lives within the communities where they lived.

### **Literature definition of discipleship.**

Forms of related literature – books (Scazzero, 2003; Hull, 2010; Camp, 2003), dissertations (Hearn, 2006; Walters, 2011; Hartley, 2007), and peer-reviewed articles (Vanden Berg, 2009; Grace II, 2011) provides definitions of the word disciple. Discipleship process and

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

spiritual formation were terms sometimes used interchangeably in the dialogue of Christians maturing and becoming followers of Christ. Grace II's article (2011) represents voices from the Swiss Brethren of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century to today; these voices describe discipleship as simply what Jesus expects from His followers. One voice from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Michael Sattler, said discipleship simply means separation from this world. The last encouraging words that Sattler left with his congregation were to "persevere in the way of Christ, to be true disciples who do not fall away, who accept the Lord's discipline, and who love both God and Neighbor" (as cited in Grace II, 2011, p. 144).

Bonhoeffer published a book titled *Discipleship* in 1937. The German word for discipleship literally means "follow after" (Vanden Berg, 2009, p. 339). Grace II (2011), listed the question Bonhoeffer attempted to answer in this book: "What does true discipleship look like?" (p. 148). In my research, one thing has become clear; the answer to that question contains many layers. Grace II (2011) said Bonhoeffer advocated discipleship as "looking to Jesus Christ alone for all faith, doctrine, and life" (p.148). The simple point Bonhoeffer made was "Discipleship means following after Jesus and doing what He says to do" (as cited in Grace II, 2011, p.150).

James Montgomery Boice (1986) said "True discipleship means forsaking everything to follow Christ" (p. 37); therefore, one is not a disciple if one does not follow. The definitions of a disciple range from "a follower of Jesus" to "one completely committed to Jesus in every area of one's life" (Erskine, 2004, p. 17). Understanding the product the Christian church is called to "make" is crucial to disciples' obedience to the Scripture's command. The product, in the case of the church is a transformed life, a process in which a Christian becomes more and more like the master, in this case, Jesus Christ.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

In summary, discipleship is a developmental process of the local church that progressively brings Christians from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity so that they are able to reproduce the process with someone else. In the gospels, Jesus clearly portrays His plan for the church and the intended product of the gospel message, disciples. His plan is clear: Go into your neighborhoods, your nations, and your world and make disciples. The end results are disciples with transformed lives that reflect His model of the Christian life to a watching world. The literature's focus is on the term disciple - what it means, what it looks like, and what becoming a disciple entails, but in the church the word disciple is not often used. Although the church occasionally uses the word disciple and the literature uses the word disciple, we still have not translated it into practice. This fact supports the need for this dissertation research.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the church as “Christ’s very presence in the world” (as cited in Vanden Berg, 2009, p. 336). Is the image of a disciple of Christ that the church projects to the world, one that is in line with Scripture? Is the church’s current image one that would draw others to desire to be Christ’s disciples?

If Christians believe they are indeed “Christ’s very presence in the world,” then it is important that the five AME Churches in the research have an opportunity to analyze the image that they are projecting to the world. If that image is to be one of a disciple of Christ, then it is invaluable that the five AME Churches in the mid-western metropolitan area examine whether they are being effective at facilitating a person’s discipleship process in the 21st Century. Periodic evaluation of the mission is imperative for any organization - the AME Churches, in this research, are no exception. It is not on anyone’s radar to examine how they are doing against the mission that the Bible gives in Matthew 28:19-20 as well as the eight point mission of the AME

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

denomination. The word disciple literally means “learner.” So, as “learners” the five AME Churches will have the chance to learn about how they are doing at facilitating a person’s discipleship process. Is the church willing to critique its own traditions, spiritual practices, and leadership perspectives when it comes to making members versus facilitating people’s discipleship process?

A twenty-year study of trends of protestant churches concluded that the region with the greatest degree of religious change since 1991 was the Midwest (Barna, 2011, Part Five). The four religious behaviors tracked were church attendance, adult Sunday school attendance, church volunteerism, and Bible reading. There has been a decline in each of the areas over the past 20 years: attendance down 15% from 55%, adult Sunday school attendance down 7% from 20%, church volunteerism down 9% from 30%, and Bible reading other than when attending church events is down 7% (Barna, 2011, Part Five). Since the five AME Churches in this research are situated in the Midwest, the assumption is that they are in decline in these areas as well. Again, I ask, is the image we are projecting of Christ and his disciples drawing others to commit, or is it pushing those who are in the church out and keeping those who are outside the church from coming in?

### **Overview of Dissertation**

In chapter two, I provide a review of the literature related to the components of disciple formation including transformation leadership, spiritual practices, and the importance of becoming a disciple for the individual and for the church as a whole. A description of theories used to form my conceptual framework for data analysis ends chapter two.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

I review the methodology in chapter three, describing the reason for adopting qualitative research. I also discuss the method of data collection as well as the methods used in the analysis.

In chapter four, I describe my findings of four major themes: 1) Discipleship Formation Is a Journey, 2) Discipleship Formation Journey Aids Inside the Church, 3) Discipleship Formation Journey Hindrances Inside the Church, and 4) Discipleship Formation Journey Aids Outside the Church.

Chapter Five provides an analysis of findings using four theories: rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred; critical pedagogy; black liberation theology; and finally transformational leadership. Also, included in chapter five are conclusions and recommendations.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### Chapter Two – Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature around discipleship formation. In addition, I assess what the research says on discipleship formation. I then describe several theories adopted to analyze my findings related to discipleship formation.

I reviewed scholarly literature in regard to discipleship formation in the Christian church and specifically in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. I used several questions to guide my search for and analysis of literature related to my topic. Are churches intentional when it comes to the discipleship formation process for their members – members new to the Christian faith or existing members who want to continue their development as disciples of Jesus Christ? What are some of the factors that play a role in the discipleship formation? What role does Christian education play in the discipleship formation process? What role does the church leadership play in this process? Does the individual have a role to play in her or his discipleship formation?

#### Topical Literature

I started my search for literature from the University of St. Thomas Library's home page looking for journal articles, dissertations, and books on the topic of discipleship. I first selected databases by the subjects, of theology and religion and then accessed the ATLA Religion database. I searched using these keywords: *Christian, religious education, African-American, discipleship, faith formation, spiritual formation, and spiritual growth*. Using the previous keywords, I refined the results by checking the Scholarly Peer Reviewed Journals to find scholarly articles on the topic. Another database I searched, using some of the same keywords, was ProQuest, a collection of dissertations and theses.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

I used Microsoft Word to help organize and group common themes found in the abstracts and the complete documents that I read. I created a list of themes from the journal articles, books, and dissertations. In tables, I listed words and phrases repeated in the literature reviewed. In the document, I recorded notes and page numbers of information relating to the theme. My objective was to remain open to additional themes that might arise from the literature.

Researchers have written many articles on various aspects of discipleship. I found research on discipleship for families, youth, children, men, small churches, mega churches, different denominations, discipleship for new members, curriculum designed for discipleship, mentoring as a means of discipleship, discipleship based on certain books of the Bible and certain characters of the Bible.

I identified several themes resulting from the literature review: 1) Church leadership's role in discipleship formation; 2) the role of spiritual practices in facilitating a person's discipleship process; 3) the importance of becoming a disciple for the individual and for the church as a whole; and 4) the role of critical thinking in discipleship formation in the church.

An article by Grace II (2011) was my first reminder that the issue of facilitating a person's discipleship process has been a topic of discussion in the church since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The literature revealed that this is not just an issue in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Dissertations (Hearn, 2006; Walters, 2011), articles (Vanden Berg, 2009; Grace II, 2011), and books (Scazzero, 2003; Hull, 2010; Camp, 2003) have all been written on this topic from the perspective of the Anabaptist, Protestant Reformation, Presbyterian, United Methodist, Southern Baptist, Pentecostals/Holiness and Nondenominational. Thus, this issue is not just a Black church concern, nor is it just a White church concern, nor is it an issue within a particular denomination; facilitating a person's discipleship process is an issue across the Christian church

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

community. Because of the imperative instruction from the Scripture of Matthew 28:19-20 to “go and make disciples” (NIV), this topic, discipleship formation, is being studied and written about across denominations.

### **Church leadership role in discipleship formation.**

Erskine (2004) showed the role the church plays in the spiritual maturation process of believers is critically important. The church is entrusted with the task of facilitating the discipleship process of individuals. A disciple is not just simply a convert. According to Erskine (2004) a disciple is someone who is eager to learn and apply the truths that Jesus Christ teaches in the Bible, which will result in ever-deepening commitments to a Christ-like lifestyle. Therefore, the discipleship process is multifaceted and purposeful. One aspect of the discipleship process is the role church leaders’ play.

As the Pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Stone’s (2008) focus was on leadership and the role it played in how effective a church is in facilitating a person’s discipleship process. For Stone, there was a gap between what he knew and what came out of his life and his leadership. He started the study by first working to transform himself. Stone’s focus was to find out why the knowledge that he had accumulated over these years had not made him a highly effective leader. Stone’s (2008) premise is that “a change in one part of a system, especially the part that plays a leadership role, affects all other parts, and that transformation does not depend on data and techniques but depends on the leader’s evolvment in maturity and integrity” (p. 6).

Stone (2008) used research from Edwin H. Friedman (1985, 1990, and 1999) and Robert E. Quinn (1996, 2000, 2004) that concluded leaders must examine their personal transformation before attempting to transform the organizations they lead. Quinn’s (2004) primary premise was that to transform an organization is to transform the leader, and the leader can then play the role

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

of a catalyst in an organizational change process. Stone decided to transform himself to take the proper leadership position within the system so that the rest of the system would have to reposition itself for healthy growth.

Hearn (2006) and Cathey (2006) each focused on a specific discipleship strategy. Hearn's (2006) was the three-strand approach to discipleship: the crowd, cell, and core (p. 110). He modeled it after Jesus' approach: the multitude, the 12 disciples, and Jesus' inner circle of Peter, James, and John. He implemented three fully functional strands of discipleship operating at New River Fellowship Church. Founded in 1998, New River Fellowship is located in Parker County, Texas. This community is just west of Fort Worth, Texas (p. 104). The success of this project was attributed to leadership involvement. Cathey (2006) created and implemented Orchard 101, a doorway to membership (p. 116). The findings showed that Orchard 101 helped people to grow as members and disciples. Full participation in Orchard 101 at the Orchard church is a requirement for every member (p. 12).

So whether it is Sunday school, Bible study, or a specific discipleship course, facilitating a person's discipleship process must be intentional. Researchers did not find that any of these approaches are perfect. They do state there has to be a discipleship strategy and strategies must be reviewed, evaluated, and revamped as needed. This is in line with Stewart III (2006) who believes that spiritual formation does not just happen. No matter the size of the church there has to be an intentional and specific emphasis of facilitating a person's discipleship process. Stewart III (2006) believes every church has the responsibility to take seriously the spiritual development and discipleship of each member. Stewart III (2006) stressed that being empowered by prayer and surrounded by the Holy Spirit every church can create and develop a plan to facilitate discipleship.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Walters' (2011) assumption was that the church he studied would not be effective in facilitating the discipleship process of its members, but what he found was just the opposite. As a matter of fact, he was challenged to deepen his own level of commitment and obedience as a disciple of Jesus Christ after researching Hyde Park United Methodist Church, UMC, in Tampa, Florida. Transformational leadership is seen as the key to Hyde Park UMC's success facilitating a person's discipleship process. The pastor(s), paid staff, and key volunteers embraced the very intentional transformation leadership style (Walters, 2011).

Two significant areas emerged as the cause of the transformation at Hyde Park and it was not just an increase in programming or a different approach to preaching. First, the members of the church spoke of a cultural change from a church where one would go before heading to the country club for lunch, to one where most members were committed to disciplines of generosity, study, service, and growth in faith. Though their reports may be exaggerated, the consistency of their stories and the evidence of the current nature of the church testify to substantive changes. Secondly, Walters (2011) became keenly aware that this church's success is the result of significant effort and longevity of leadership.

### **Spiritual practices' role in discipleship formation.**

Hull (2006) determined the discipleship process involves everything from pre-evangelism to leadership development. The discipleship process involves more than individuals accumulating skills and knowledge, or creating a department of the church: The entire church environment and gifts of the church should work together to produce the most balanced and best-trained Christians. Varriale (2008) noted the importance for Christian education in the Baptist churches is to maintain a theological connection between a decision for Christ and a life of on-going discipleship.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Spiritual practices do play a significant role in the spiritual growth process of a believer. For instance, Erskine (2004) found that Sunday school historically has been the cornerstone of churches for more than 100 years (p. 174). The influence of Sunday school on spiritual maturation is very high indicating the strength of Sunday school influences has not diminished over time. The general consensus is churches should make every effort to strengthen the ministry of Sunday school. Erskine (2004) concluded churches must respond to this tremendous opportunity and intentionally use Sunday school for greater impact rather than simply offer a “program” that may or may not meet the spiritual hunger and needs of their people. Being the most influential practice for a long time does not guarantee continued influence. Great care must be taken to continually evaluate the quality of transformational learning taking place in the classroom. Other spiritual practices found in the research were discipleship courses (Cathey, 2006; Brown, 2012), small group ministry (Brown, 2012; Benda 2012), preaching, and outreach opportunities (Henson, 1996; Dankis, 1996).

Brown’s study (2012) at First Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, stated that the cornerstone to discipleship is the New Members Class. There has been a shift in new members classes over the past decade from a one-day seminar to multiple classes spread-out over several weeks. The benefit is more time spent with the senior pastor and more time to forge relationships with other members. Cathy (2006) stated that attendance at Orchard 101 is required for membership at the Orchard Church. “The goal of the course is, in part, to clearly outline several key expectations for membership that are supported by scripture and seek to help create a healthy and dynamic congregation” (p. 116). The courses are intended to do more than grow the membership roll. Ideally the course content would ensure new members were making a

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

solid commitment that would benefit personal discipleship formation and advance God's kingdom.

Small groups are also sources of discipleship formations. Benda (2012) believes that small groups take on the characteristics of a small family. It is in this small group setting that people learn to love, encourage, and support one another as they pursue Jesus together. Brown (2012) put it this way, "Small groups are gathered communities of believers, who want to know God intimately, to grow together in Christ-like character, and to go in the power of the Holy Spirit" (p. 84). Small groups provide a community for discipleship formation; small groups aid in developing relationships and accountability.

Throughout the Bible, God called his people to proclaim his works and challenge the hearer to respond. Clines (1999) stated "The intention of preaching is to bring about life change" (p. 42). According to Clines, preaching for discipleship is an essential and often overlooked piece of a church's discipleship strategy. Preaching is a theological task in that it introduces God and his kingdom to listeners. Gillett (2013) pointed out "that preaching that is essential to the development of Christian Discipleship is more than just the act of one person standing before the people of God and proclaiming the word of God as a part of corporate worship" (p. 14). Gillett (2013) identified the process of sermon development that occurs behind the scenes through study, prayer, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as being essential components.

Outreach ministry is the opportunity for the church to show mercy because mercy has been shown to us. Henson (1996) said there is a need for the church to be more than just a place where the congregation worships. Disciples of Christ are to be more sensitive to the needs of the suffering community, inside and outside the church walls. Henson (1996) believes outreach ministry is of the "liberation theology motif" (p. 26). According to Dankis (1996), some people

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

view outreach simply as evangelism. Scripture does not speak of outreach in terms of church membership, rather in terms of disciple making. Dankis would say that outreach begins by identifying a need people have and then meeting that need. We serve others to share Christ's love and bring glory to God, not recognition and honor to ourselves.

Discipleship courses, small group ministry, preaching, and outreach opportunity each offer opportunities for those in the discipleship formation process to grow and mature as disciples. Erskine (2004) said there has to be a strategy for these spiritual practices. Research does not say that any of the strategies are perfect. What it does say is the church leaders must have a strategy.

A three and one-half year study conducted by The Search Institute (Benson & Elkins, 1990) in 1988 measured the effectiveness of Christian education upon the faith maturity of believers. The power of this study resides in the identification of the church's purpose and the need to quantify the effectiveness the church is having on fulfilling that purpose. In a feasibility study conducted for this project in 1986, leaders expressed a high level of concern about the health of Christian education (Benson & Elkins, 1990). The concerns included disinterest by adults in adult education programs, the failure to maintain the involvement of youth after eighth grade, the increasing difficulty of finding and keeping volunteer teachers, the apparent disinterest of clergy in education, the inability to draw parents into the educational process, and the failure of current programs and educational methods to address the changing needs and interests of adults, adolescents, and children (Benson & Elkins, 1990).

Benson and Elkins (1990) defined Formal Christian education, the primary focus of the study, as "the programs and events a congregation intentionally offer to teach the faith to children, teenagers, and adults" (p. 2). This included Sunday school, Bible studies, confirmation,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

camping, retreats, workshops, youth ministry, Vacation Bible School, new member classes, and religious plays and dramas, among others. Informal education was also given attention. Informal education included values, symbols, culture, and patterns of interaction that help describe congregational life.

Benson and Elkins (1990) found, “Christian education represents a case of low dosage exposure, with most people spending 30-40 hours a year, at best, in this endeavor” (p. 2). However, even though adults and adolescents spend relatively little time in Christian education, of all the areas of congregational life the study examined, involvement in an effective Christian education program has the strongest tie to a person’s growth in faith and to loyalty to one’s congregation and denomination.

Christian education, done well, has the potential to deepen faith and commitment. Results of the study by Benson and Elkins (1990) proved that there is much work to be done. Those adults and adolescents who choose to participate in Christian education often were not exposed to particularly effective programming. The report (Benson & Elkins, 1990) documented 18 major conclusions. The top three for adults and youth included: 1) faith is under-developed; 2) family religiousness and the amount of exposure to Christian education have major impacts on faith maturity; 3) effective education requires definable processes, content, and administrative foundations (pp. 3-4).

Cathey’s (2006) findings showed that very little is expected of the members of the Orchard United Methodist Church (UMC). The Christian Church’s “Great Commission” found Matthew 28:16-20 says to “make disciples” which means to go and make “committed followers” (p. 50). The United Methodist Church, in their Book of Discipline, has a definition of membership. The AME Church does not. An intentional effort to facilitate the discipleship

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

process makes a difference. Discipleship courses like Orchard 101 developed and used in Cathey's study (2006), do make a difference.

Cathey (2006) showed that the church must have an intentional strategy in place for facilitating a person's discipleship process. The leadership must have high expectations of the members as far as living out their faith. In my experience at the AME Church, there are no expectations of members from leadership. It is up to a member whether or not to start and continue the process of becoming a disciple.

### **Personal and corporate discipleship formation.**

“Spiritual maturation occurs best when a ‘balanced approach’ is utilized. In other words, for a church to be highly successful at developing faith in the lives of believers, it must incorporate both personal and corporate discipleship into their [sic] strategy” (Brown, 2012, p. 82). Corporate discipleship includes Bible study, preaching, Sunday school and other seminars and trainings (Brown, 2012). Churches tend to have the programs in place, but most often they are insufficient by themselves to produce the desired results. Personal discipleship is the other component that balances out the approach. Brown (2012) said personal discipleship is vitally needed but frequently neglected. The hallmark of personal discipleship is “investing in a few so that the world may be reached” (p. 89). Personal discipleship is mentoring or coaching. It is a concentrated focus, the intentional investment of oneself, into the life of another. “It is deliberately choosing to walk beside a brother or sister, to encourage, correct and challenge them to be more like Jesus” (p. 90). Based on Brown's research, the individual and the church would benefit from this balanced approach of personal and corporate discipleship formation.

Brown (2012) further stated “Personal discipleship is vitally needed but frequently neglected and corporate discipleship is needed, but typically insufficient by itself to produce the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

desired results” (p. 83). The following studies do not directly use the terms personal and corporate but they are implied. Gallup and Jones’ (1992) study asked individuals about their personal discipleship formation, and Miller (1994) spoke to the church’s role in personal and corporate discipleship formation.

George H. Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, in their 1992 book, *The Saints among Us*, conducted a study in which they set out to “find Americans for whom God is a vibrant reality” (p. 11). This was a national study that went across generational, ethnic, denominational and regional boundaries, asking twelve questions of over 1,000 Americans. Gallup, Jr. and Jones found that only 13% of those surveyed either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with God being a vibrant reality for them. My question is do these numbers really represent people who have experienced personal or corporate discipleship formation, individuals with a faith that represents life transformation reflected in their daily behavior.

A concern with the Gallup, Jr. and Jones (1992) study is that it focuses on self-perception of the respondents and not on actual behavior. So, even though this study is national in scope and varied demographically, more is needed to help evaluate the impact that the church is having on transforming lives or facilitating a person’s discipleship process, personal or corporate.

The church is called to “make disciples.” She must not become distracted by any other activities, no matter how noble they may be. “Job one of the church is not pastoral care, or helping the needy, or changing societal/governmental structures, or missions. The first business of the church is to help people connect with God and grow spiritually” (Miller, 1994, p. 34).

These studies (Brown 2012; Gallup and Jones 1992; Miller 1994) are insightful and confirm that there is an issue in the church concerning members/pew-warmers versus disciples/spiritually-charged faithful. Are the behaviors of church-goers characteristic of a

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

maturing disciple? Another issue around membership versus discipleship is the effectiveness of educational techniques employed to assist members in becoming disciples.

According to the African Methodist Episcopal Church *Book of Discipline* (2008), the goal of Christian education in the AME Church is “to develop a comprehensive and unified program of Christian education which shall lead to knowledge of Holy Scriptures, the Christian Religion, and the Christian Church, and an implementation of these values in daily living” (p. 188). Yet if minimal life change is taking place, what impact is a Christian educator’s teaching having upon the discipleship of church members? What educational techniques are helping to impact people for discipleship and what educational techniques are only filling time?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Theories are tools adding to a researcher’s ability to understand data. My view of theories is that they can describe what is happening, even though the people involved are almost never aware of the fact that what they are doing has a name. I remember saying to myself after reading about a theory, “so that’s what you call what we have been doing?” Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define a theoretical framework as a way of looking at the world, the assumptions people have about what is important, and what makes the world work. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated, “Good researchers are aware of their theoretical base and use it to help collect and analyze data.” (p. 24). Theories help researchers to assess and refine their goals (Maxwell, 2005). I used the following theoretical concepts to inform my research: critical pedagogy; Black liberation theology; myth, rituals, habits and the sacred; and transformational leadership.

#### **Critical pedagogy and the church.**

Critical pedagogy provides foundational concepts about habits of thoughts, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning; requires a commitment to dialogue and

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

to have critical reflection; and is primarily concerned with the kind of educational theories and practices that encourage students and teachers to critically re-examine the relationship between power and ideology. This theoretical framework requires individuals to be reflective thinkers and agents of change.

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education described by Henry Giroux (1994) as an "educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (p. 30). Giroux description of critical pedagogy can be used towards making changes within the church so that the church becomes an institution that is not just directed internally, but rather an institution that moves towards offering congregants options on how to deal with things outside the church as well. Therefore, I used the lens of critical pedagogy to critically examine the spiritual practices the AME Church uses in moving congregants to becoming disciples. I looked at: 1) whether congregants are taught how to critically examine scripture for application in their lives inside and outside the church and 2) whether congregants examine traditions to know if they are serving the purpose originally intended or if a change is required?

Boys (1999) advocated engaged pedagogies, a way of teaching to stimulate persons to participate in creating collaborative learning communities that deal intelligently with vital matters. Engaged pedagogies require a commitment to dialogue and to critical reflection. Boys (1999) stated that dialogue represents a "continuous, developmental communicative interchange through which we stand to gain a fuller apprehension of the world, ourselves, and one another" (p. 130). Is engaged pedagogy an option in the 21st Century in the AME Church? Other

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

pedagogies that may play a role in the discipleship process of the five churches are banking education, critical consciousness, and critical thinking.

***Banking education and critical consciousness.***

Freirean pedagogies of banking education and critical consciousness are two subtopics of the critical pedagogy lens I used to examine the five AME Churches in this study. Freire's (1970) definition of literacy is what drew me to his theories. Freire defined literacy as the process of learning skills and developing tools to change lives. In this study I examined whether the skills and tools to help church members change their lives and become disciples are suppressed or have become suppressed over the years. In Freire's (1970) model, church members would be invited to learn interactively and not be funneled into the banking model of teaching.

In his now classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the late Brazilian Paulo Freire critiqued an educational system mired in the "banking method" in which "the teacher deposits facts, truths, and knowledge into passive students" (p. 72). Freire argued that a liberating education is grounded in dialogue; both teacher and students engage in problem posing, that is, in probing into the realities of the worlds in which they live. The question I asked is has dialogue been smothered in the church and the banking system taken over?

Teaching should also be learning. Educating should not be a one-way system. No one educates herself or himself. We teach each other in the context of the world. The relationship between the teacher and the student requires openness and dialogue otherwise people get stuck.

According to Freire (1974), critical consciousness through education is the only way to unstuck people. Paulo Freire developed the concept of critical consciousness primarily in his books *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and *Education for Critical Consciousness* (1974).

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Freire's critical consciousness lens focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of perceived social and political contradictions.

Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding. Is critical thinking a lost art in the church?

Without this critical consciousness, the world looks like it cannot be changed. Freire (1996) realized early in his life that things can and need to change. The world needs to be fixed. An awareness of world conditions via critical thinking, dialogue, reflection, and action is a form of literacy that allows people to grow. If the church views its current environment through the Freire's lens, what might the results be?

***Critical thinking in the church.***

To quote Stephen Covey (1989), "Each of us tends to think we see things as they are, that we are objective. But this is not the case. We see the world, not as it is, but as we are – as we are conditioned to see it" (p. 28). Our perceptions of reality have been socially constructed to a certain degree—including each Christian's view of reality, each church's view of reality, and each pastor's view of reality.

People, churches, and pastors can change and grow, but it is not something that happens automatically. It takes a conscious effort and a teachable heart. Church members have to be willing to challenge the status quo by asking some tough questions of the leadership about the on-going traditions of the church and the effectiveness of its programs. This involves critical thinking on the part of the disciples. Is critical thinking in the church a lost art? For example, the runaway slaves who met in the fields critically analyzed the liberatory function of the Word of God. They did not just take the master's interpretation of the Scriptures.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

In fact, “Two activities are central to critical thinking... (1) Identifying and challenging assumptions and (2) exploring and imagining alternatives” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 15). Gangel and Sullivan (1994) offered this definition for critical thinking skills: “The ability to identify and challenge assumptions, to image and explore alternatives, based on the understanding that absolute truth does undergird our lives” (p. 65). Gangel and Sullivan’s definition emphasizes the fact that critical thinking does not divorce the need for Scriptural content. In addition, the word “critical” should not be interpreted to mean a negative form of thinking. “Critical means not only a questioning but a more proactive form of thought. In essence, it is the search for more satisfactory insight or resolution” (Garrison, 1991, p. 289).

The relationship between critical thinking and the process of discipleship is an approach I investigate in my research. Brookfield (1988) stated, “Central to the effective facilitation of learning is the development of powers of critical reflection” (p. 101). According to Brookfield (2008), teachers have to model publicly their engagement in learning.

One of the most important teaching services we can provide for them [students]... is demonstrating the ways we are in constant formation, particularly how we are continually forced to question and rethink beliefs and actions with which we have grown comfortable (pp. 12-13)

Are church members encouraged to question and rethink the scriptures and traditions of the church?

We maintain that if we are to ask students to contemplate biblical interpretations or pastoral practices that challenge their taken-for-granted notions of ministry, then we need to be able to show them how we also grapple with ideas and activities that cause us to question who we are and how we work. (Brookfield, 2008, p. 13)

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

In my experience, the idea of questioning beliefs and actions of church practices are not encouraged in the AME Church.

The teacher must be authentic in modeling critical thinking. When teachers share their struggles and discomforts they have to be real and genuine ones. It is important that the teacher be perceived as authentic. “In an authentic pedagogy this mirror is one that students as well as the teacher can peer into so that the connections between the teacher’s inner ruminations and her external actions are made public knowledge” (Brookfield, 2008, p. 14).

The theory and practice of critical thinking is vitally important to the process of discipleship in the local church. It is amazing and enlightening to know that Scripture speaks about critical thinking. The Bible clearly promotes and encourages it. The Scripture is fully equipped with words that indicate the need to think reflectively as well as commanding Christians to do so. Scripture contains words such as: *consider, discern, mind, observe, reason, think, test, understand, and wonder*. God himself invites all people to think critically when He urges, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18, NIV).

### **Black liberation theology.**

Black liberation theology (Cone, 1997, p. xvi) was created by black theologians and preachers who rejected this white teaching about the meek, long-suffering Jesus. Cone explained that at the core of Black liberation theology is an effort—in a White-dominated society, in which Black has been defined as evil—to make the gospel relevant to the life and struggles of American Blacks, and to help Black people learn to love themselves. Black liberation theology is based on Christian Scripture and how Blacks in the church are treated. Black liberation theology as defined by James Cone (1997) is a concept that helps to make the gospel relevant to

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

the life and struggles of American Blacks, and helps to allow Black people learn to love themselves.

Cone is an ordained minister in the AME Church. His current position is a Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He grew up in Beardon, Arkansas (1997, p. 1). According to Cone (1975), church, school, and home all laid the foundation for him to become somebody. At church on Sunday, Blacks experienced a reality that they were all God's children and not somebody's maid, or field hand (Cone, 1975). It affirmed that African Americans are somebody.

It was the White "Christian" church that took the lead in establishing slavery as an institution and segregation as a pattern in society by sanctioning all-White congregations. Cone and Wilmore (1993) stated, "Before the little signs—'White Only' and 'Colored'—appeared in the public utilities they appeared in the church" (p. 73). The supposed place of freedom was used to enslave.

There was a time when the people had no choice but to depend on the pastor or a certain person for reading and interpreting the Bible because of the literacy rate of the general public. Only a few could read so the general membership was dependent on the priest, scribes, and others to read the Scriptures for them. The greatest motivation for education among the enslaved was the realization that slave owners distorted religious teachings to support oppressive social structures. Therefore, the values attached to education have always been magnified within the African American community.

The AME denomination came into being as a liberation movement and a protest against segregation and racism in the Christian Church and the world (Cone & Wilmore, 1993). Richard Allen, the founder of the AME denomination, lived almost two centuries before Cone and his

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

development of a Black liberation theology. The formation of the Free African society, organized in 1787, constituted the first serious attempt of oppressed Black people in the United States of America to organize for the purpose of liberating their souls, minds, and bodies from the oppressive and dehumanizing effects of slavery (Cone & Wilmore, 1993, p. 250).

Cone (1997) stated, “The slave masters’ intention was to present a Jesus who would make the slave obedient and docile. Jesus was supposed to make the Black people better slaves, that is, faithful servants to their White masters” (p. 29). The slaves were able to reject this view because it was not in line with their African heritage or the witness of Scripture. The God of the Bible is a liberator, a deliverer. Cone (1997) also believed that was the reason Richard Allen, founder of the AME denomination, and his contemporaries walked out of St. George AME Church in 1787 as a protest against segregated worship (p. 29). Is the leadership of the AME Church projecting the White slave master image of the Gospel? For example, are AME members being told what the Scriptures are saying about and to them instead of being allowed and encouraged to search the Scriptures for themselves? One cannot study the scriptures and remain simply a member of the church.

Not only did Christianity fail to offer the then called Negro hope of freedom in this world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him tended to degrade him (Cone & Wilmore, 1993). The Negro was taught his enslavement was a curse from God (Cone and Wilmore, 1993). His very color was a sign of the curse that he had received as a descendant of Ham. Genesis chapter 9 verses 18 to 29 tells the story of Noah’s son Ham being cursed by his father. This is what Black liberation theology is up against that Black people were cursed. It explains part of the real problem. This story has led to internalized racism; everything from skin color of being very dark or very light (with the ability to pass for white), to the issue of different

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

hair textures/types: kinky, nappy, straight and everything in between. This Scripture narrative of Noah cursing his son, Ham, has been a tool used by the dominate whites culture to influence internalized racism, to lower Black self-esteem and to promote white supremacy.

Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the Negro should be the servant of the White man and that he would always be a “hewer of wood and a drawer of water” (Cone & Wilmore, 1993, p. 74). Black liberation theology is used to focus on the structures people use to think about themselves and live their daily lives. This theory can help confront a narrative such as the story of Ham that people in the church are not even aware of but it leads to all kinds of internalized racism and it bolsters notions of white superiority. Black liberation theology fleshes out the relationship between God and Black people and it helps them to see that they are valued by God.

Cone and Wilmore (1993) said, “The task of theology is to criticize, and revise the language of the church. This includes not only language as uttered speech but the language of radical involvement in the world” (p. 80). This means that the church is in the world and that its speech and what it does are in line with the Scripture and Jesus’ teaching. The church’s language about God is relevant to every new generation and its problems. This description by Cone aids in defining the distinction between members and disciples. As disciples’ of Christ, our concern would be for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century society. Cone (2010) said “It is appropriate and necessary to define the Christian Community as the community which joins with Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind” (p. 3). Again, the task of theology is to analyze and develop in detail the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred.**

Rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred while not formal theories deserve attention since they influence the practices of the AME Church. The AME denomination and its local churches have numerous traditions, rituals, myths, and habits that have been in place for centuries. When congregants go against those traditions it is often seen as problematic. The framework of rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred draws from the work of Lincoln (1989) and Fasching and deChant (2008) to provide insight into the history of the AME Church. It also provides insight to the contemporary struggles of AME clergy, leaders, and congregants in the formal, non-formal and informal education of the church.

In many cases the church is politically structured to reinforce rituals, tradition, myths, and habits both socially and financially. In this study, I looked at who has the power and the myth that “good parishioners don’t question” the leadership or tradition. Tradition says the AME Church has a good system. A leader or parishioner who asks why the church’s mission statement and budget do not line up is often seen as a troublemaker or rebel. Lincoln (1989) and Fasching and deChant (2008) describe the power of these rituals, myths and habits.

Lincoln (1989) said rituals and myths are powerful instruments that can sustain or undermine society. Via these venues social borders are established separating one group from another. “Estrangement” reflects feeling of “distance, separation, otherness and alienation” (pp. 9-10). The stories that are told, the places people sit, the ways committee assignments are made, and other processes contribute to the strength or vulnerability of a member to move down the path of discipleship. Lincoln (1989) offers hope to institutions that have become bogged down in the bureaucracy of “social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

patterns of behavior” (p. 3). Such bureaucracy can be deconstructed and reconstructed into something more responsive to the needs of the congregation.

The AME Church’s rituals, myths, and habits have become sacred which means they matter more than anything else. Fasching and deChant (2008) provide definitions for both myth and ritual.

Myth is a symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world, which relates them to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny and explains to them what these powers expect of them. Ritual is the symbolic enactment of these stories whereby they are passed on from one generation to the next. (p. 12)

For Fasching and deChant (2008), myth and rituals are usually linked to the important days of a religious tradition. The celebration of holy days and festivals every year can “tell a story of who you are, where you came from, and where you are going” (p. 12). For example, Founder’s Day is one of the most important days in AME denomination. During the AME Church’s Founder Day, we re-tell the story of the founder, Richard Allen, and other leaders whose exodus from the mainline Methodist denomination to start their own modified version of Methodism in the AME denomination. This story has been passed down from generation to generation. Founder Day has rituals associated with it and this time is considered sacred.

Fasching and deChant (2008) said “To say that something is sacred is to say it is what matters most” (p. 14). In many religious and tribal societies, like religious and tribal, the customs are sacred and unchangeable; they are beyond question. To violate them is sacrilegious. The sacred is defined as what matters more than anything else. The sacred is embedded in the culture, protected by the culture, and defined by the majority. The holy is an individual or community of individuals who are willing to call the sacred into question.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Abraham Lincoln, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Martin Luther and Nelson Mandela were each involved in a major social movement in their country and they played significant roles as leaders who were willing to question the sacred. They were willing to speak truth to power. They each carried the weight of being at the forefront of questioning the sacred. Each of these gentlemen would represent the holy.

It can be dangerous to question the sacred. Socrates was put on trial and executed for “impiety towards the gods” and for “corrupting the youth” because he dared to question the sacred way of life of Athenian Society (Fasching & deChant, 2008, pp. 15-16).

My research could fall into the category of questioning the sacred in the AME Churches around discipleship formation. Is the AME Church willing to look at the sacred elements at work in their churches that may have an impact on this issue of making members versus disciples in the church today? The holy (Fasching & deChant, 2008) seem to have the capacity to call forth the courage to doubt and question the rituals and myths created by the sacred. The distinction between the sacred and the holy is a model to help sort out human experiences and behaviors as these five churches consider their discipleship formation process for new and/or existing members.

### **Transformational leadership theory.**

Leadership theory has many components: naturalistic, functional, autocratic, participative, moral, transactional, and transformational. I used transformational leadership theory in my research. James MacGregor Burns first brought the concept of transformational leadership to prominence in his book *Leadership* (1978). Transformational leadership theory “outlines an ongoing process by which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (p. 20).

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

James MacGregor Burns (2003) coined the term transformational leadership. Burns defined the difference between the verbs “change” and “transform.” Based on Burns’ definition of change and transform, discipleship formation leads to transformation versus a change. Transformation is a more profound change in appearance, character, condition or function whereas change is to substitute one thing for another.

Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), as cited in the *Encyclopedia of Leadership* (2004), listed individualized consideration as a critical facet in the transformational process. A leader must get to know followers’ needs, capabilities, aspirations, and desires to challenge the followers and to develop them into leaders. Bass (as cited in the *Encyclopedia of Leadership*, 2004) described the second main component of transformational leadership as intellectual stimulation, in which the leader challenges followers’ basic thinking, assumptions, and models upon which such stimulation is based to get followers to think about new ways to perform their work.

Preskill and Brookfield’s (2009) view of leadership is radically different from conventional models. They claim leadership can be practiced by anyone in any kind of movement, community, organization, or institution. I agree with their thought that “leadership is not necessarily a function of a hierarchy or bureaucracy; nor does a single person in a position of authority have to exercise it” (p. 3). Explored here, leadership encourages change, even pushes for it, especially when the status quo demeans people or fails to give them opportunities to employ fully their experience and talents.

Preskill and Brookfield (2009) emphasized the relational component of James MacGregor Burns’ (2003) original formulation of transforming leadership. “Transforming leadership signifies a long-term relationship between leaders and followers that produces significant change, raises leaders and followers to higher levels of motivation and morality, and

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

encourages followers to assume leadership roles themselves” (Preskill and Brookfield, 2009, p. 7). Like the discipleship process, everyone - leaders and followers - are on a growth continuum.

Is this the type of leadership evident in the discipleship process of the AME Churches in this study? Learning as a way of leading is the essence of Preskill and Brookfield’s (2009) approach to leading. Leadership in this form is seen as a relational and collective process in which collaboration and shared understanding are deemed obvious or self-evident to getting things done. In the case of discipleship formation process, all church members continue to grow and develop as Disciples of Christ.

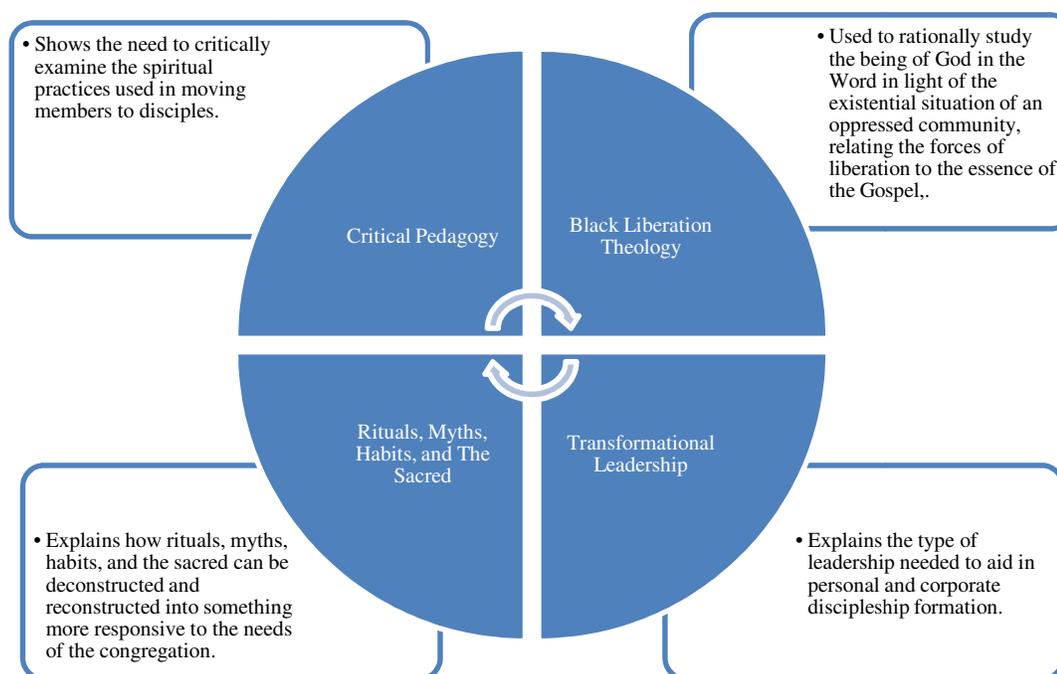


Figure 1. Four theories to review, evaluate and revamp discipleship formation

As indicated by the arrows in the Figure 1, the four theoretical frameworks are intertwined. Each framework can be used independently as a lens looking into the discipleship formation process. Using all four theories would be more thorough in reviewing and evaluating the discipleship formation process. Looking at discipleship formation through the lens of these

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

four frameworks can help a member of the local church see a different view of their environment.

In summary, this chapter reviewed literature related to discipleship formation. I uncovered the following three themes in the literature: church leadership role in discipleship formation, spiritual practices' role in discipleship formation – Sunday school and Bible study, and individual and corporate discipleship formation. I also, identified four interconnected theoretical frameworks in the literature: 1) critical pedagogy; 2) black liberation theology; 3) transformational leadership; 4) ritual, myths, habits, and the sacred. I used these theories to inform my analysis of the discipleship formation process in five AME local churches in the Midwest.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Chapter Three – Research Methods**

A qualitative research approach ideally suited my study for many reasons. The personal interviews and focus groups I conducted allowed me to better understand the participants' experiences within their individual churches. Participants spoke freely during personal interviews and during the focus groups. I also collected data during observations of worship services, Sunday school hours, Bible studies, and teacher meetings. A qualitative approach helped me get beyond the usual quantitative collecting of numbers and statistics; it forced me to look for patterns in the data; it gave me more insight into these churches' discipleship formation processes; it helped me see how people make meaning within their congregation.

I structured my research as a case study. Using a case study as my framework provided an opportunity to investigate five AME Churches in a Midwestern Metropolitan area. My research investigated the experiences of people in five congregations focusing on the issue of the discipleship formation process for themselves and that of the church to which they currently belonged. The case study approach allowed me the opportunity to view these churches' discipleship formation process for members new to the Christian faith, new to the denomination, or church members already on a continuum of discipleship formation.

#### **Description of Case - History: National and Specific Local Congregations**

Participants in this case study were members from five AME Churches in a Midwestern metropolitan area. The churches in the study range from five years of existence to 150 years of existence. Their congregations' memberships range from 70 to over 350. Four of the five churches are in an urban setting and one is in a suburb.

The following general description of the AME Church is based on the official AME website, [www.ame-church.com](http://www.ame-church.com). The AME Church is made up of 21 Episcopal Districts around

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

the world. At the quadrennial General Conference, The Episcopal Committee assigns a Bishop to govern each of these Episcopal Districts. The five churches I studied are a part of the AME Fourth Episcopal District made up of Canada, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan, and India. India was added to the Fourth Episcopal District at the 2012 General Conference.

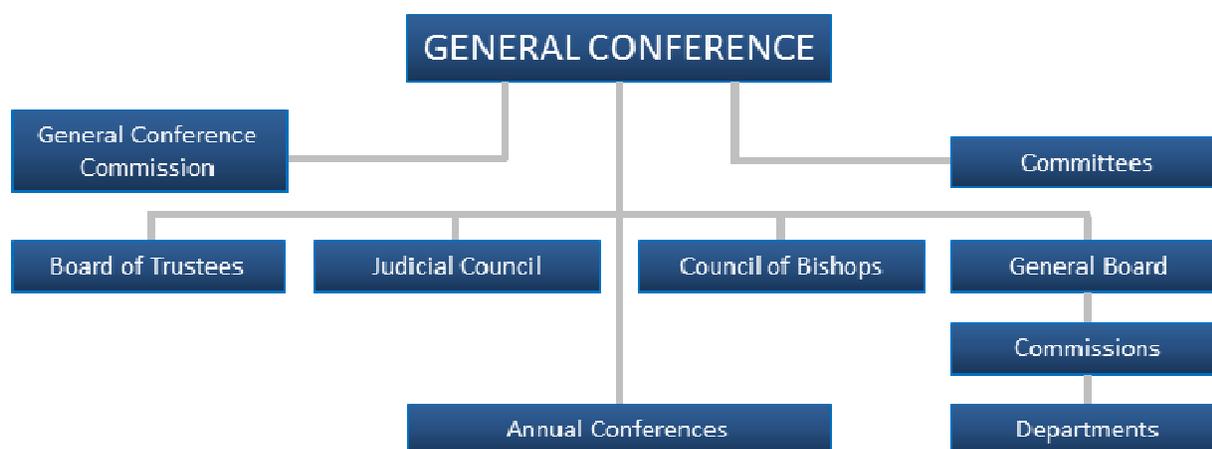


Figure 2. The AME Church's Present Organizational Structure

The AME Church is a connectional organization; as a Connectional Church, the AME Church has a very specific structure, see figure 2 above. A Connectional church blends features of hierarchical and congregational church government. Hierarchies govern, oversee, and rule over the affairs of the local church. Pastors are appointed by overseeing bodies; “local” congregations do not “call” their pastors. Each local church is a part of the larger connection. The Bishops are the Chief Officers of the Connectional Organization elected for life by a majority vote of the General Conference. Bishops, bound by the laws of the church, must retire upon the General Conference nearest their 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In the Connectional Church, the Presiding Elders are the assistants to the Bishops, like middle management. The Bishops appoint a Presiding Elder to supervise the preachers appointed to the local churches in a Presiding Elder's District. A Presiding Elder District is one

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

portion of an Annual Conference, which in turn is one part of the Episcopal District over which a Bishop presides. In the Presiding Elder District, the appointed Presiding Elder meets with the local churches that comprise the District, at least once every three months for a Quarterly Conference. The Presiding Elder also presides over a District Conference and a Sunday School Convention in his or her District. At the end of an Annual Conference year, the Presiding Elder reports to the Bishop at the Annual Conference and makes recommendations for pastoral appointments.

Pastors receive a yearly appointment to a charge (local church) in the Connectional Organization on the recommendation of the Presiding Elder and with the approval and final appointment of the Bishop. The pastor is in full charge of the church and is an ex-official member of all boards, organizations, and clubs of that church.

The General Conference is the supreme body of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It is composed of the Bishops, as ex-officio presidents according to the rank of election, and an equal number of ministerial and lay delegates elected by each of the Annual Conferences and the Lay Electoral Colleges of the Annual Conferences. Other ex-officio members are: the General Officers, College Presidents, Deans/Presidents of Theological Seminaries; and Chaplains in the Regular Armed Forces of the U.S.A. The General Conference meets every quadrennial (every four years), but the A.M.E. Church may have extra sessions in certain emergencies.

The Council of Bishops is the Executive Branch of the Connectional Organization. It has the general oversight of the church during the interim of General Conferences. In compliance with *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (2012),

The council of Bishops shall meet annually at such time and place as the majority of the Council shall determine and also at such other times as may be deemed necessary in the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

discharging its responsibility as the Executive Branch of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Council of Bishops shall hold at least two public sessions at each annual meeting. At the first, complaints and petitions against a Bishop shall be heard, at the second, the decisions of the Council shall be made public. All decisions shall be in writing. (pp. 122-123)

In the Connectional Organization, the Board of Incorporators, also known as the General Board of Trustees, has the supervision, In Trust, of all Connectional property of the church and is vested with authority to act in behalf of the Connectional Church wherever necessary.

The General Board in the Connectional Organization is, in many respects, the administrative body and is comprised of various departmental Commissions made up of the respective Executive-Director, the General Secretary of the AME Church, the Chief Financial Officer, the members of the various Commissions, and one Bishop as presiding officer with the other Bishops associating. The Judicial Council is the highest judicatory body of the AME Church. It is an appellate court, elected by the General Conference, and is amenable to it. See Figure 1 for an organizational chart of the General Governmental Division and authority.

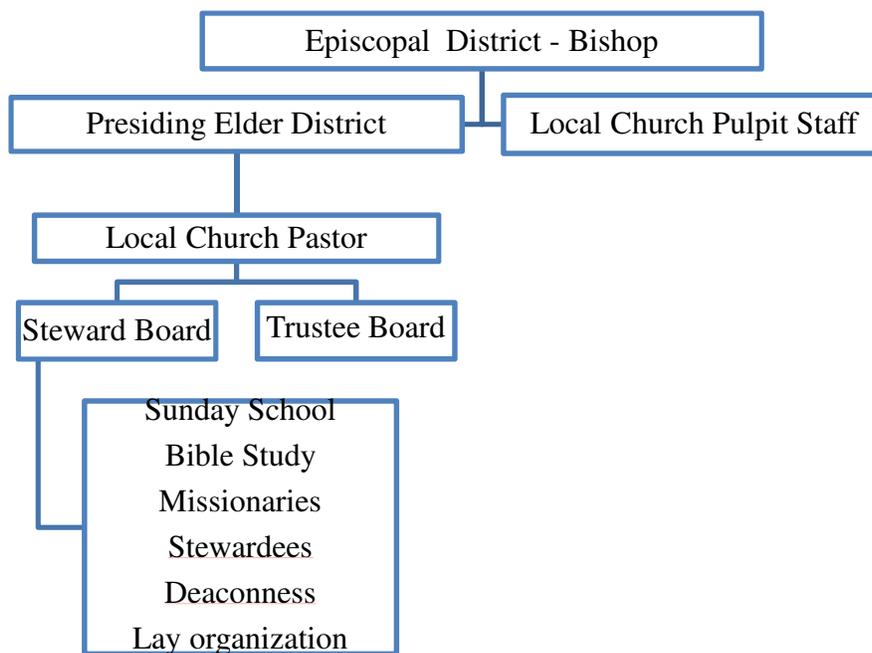
Today, the African Methodist Episcopal Church has membership in twenty-one Episcopal Districts in thirty-nine countries on five continents. Twenty-one active bishops and nine General Officers manage the departments of the Church and administer the work of the Church.

The five churches in my study are a part of the Chicago Annual Conference that is a part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Episcopal District. There are 72 churches in the Chicago Annual Conference. The research sample is a good representation of the 72 churches in that both (the five sample churches in the Chicago Annual Conference) include churches that are: inner-city, suburban, new

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

work (less than five years existing), over 100 years in existence, congregations of 50 or less and congregations of over 200.

The hierarchical structure for the local AME Church is the same across all five sample churches. The senior pastor is at the top of the hierarchy. A pastor may serve one year, 50 years, or more. According to The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (2012) the local church organization consists of Boards, Workers, Organizations, and Auxiliaries. No pictorial organization chart was available so I created figure 3 below. The hierarchy of the local AME church aligns like this: Pastor, Steward Board, Trustee Board, Stewardesses, Deaconesses, Licensed Missionary Workers, and Organizations. Organizations consist of: Class Leaders, Choir (s), Sunday/Church School, Allen Christian Fellowship (ACF), Lay Organization, and Women's Missionary Society/Young People's Division. (Please note the ordained clergy serving in the local churches are not listed in the hierarchy because they report directly to the Bishop of their Episcopal District with a dotted line to the pastor.)



## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Figure 3. AME Local Church Organization Structure

In the AME Church hierarchy, the members of the Steward Board are appointed annually by the pastor and are next in line to the pastor. Stewards are the spiritual leaders of the church. They are responsible for all aspects of the church needs: spiritual, physical, and financial. The Trustee Board is elected annually. The Trustees manage all the temporal concerns of the church. The Stewardesses assist the Stewards in the discharge of their duties relative to the rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper. A Deaconess order is not compulsory but if warranted, a pastor may organize a board of Deaconesses. This board consists of women who ordinarily should be widows or unmarried women of good repute. Their duties are to encourage, foster, and improve the general interests of the church and to promote the mission of the AME Church. There are no licensed Missionary Workers in any of the five churches in this study. In addition to the list in the previous paragraph, other organizations that make up a local church's hierarchy could possibly include six commissions: Stewardship and Finance, Public Relations, Mission and Welfare, Christian Education, Social Action and Membership and Evangelism. I included representation from each of these areas along with the ones in the previous paragraph in my research sample.

### **Research AME church #1.**

The oldest of the five churches celebrated its sesquicentennial in 2013. Its present pastor, assigned to this charge in 2002, is the first female pastor in its 150 years existence. Approximately 91 members currently worship in a building built in 1956. Sunday school, worship service and Bible study are the staple activities of the local church. The Sunday school superintendent coordinates the school classes held every Sunday morning at 9:30. Sunday school is followed by 11:00 worship service. Bible study is on Wednesday nights at 7:00. The

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

pastor is the primary teacher of Bible study but will often bring in other clergy and non-clergy to teach a lesson or a series of lessons. Other meetings and events may happen throughout the month. Also, several outreach programs have been established under the leadership of this pastor:

- Camp (for children ages 6-12)
- Alpha Ministry (Bible study and discussion group)
- Family Healing & Restoration Network (County Partnership)
- Youth Leadership Development and Life Purpose Exploration

### **Research AME church #2.**

The youngest of the five churches is five years old and considered a “new work.” A new work is not assessed for a portion of the Connectional Church Budget. The organization of a new congregation must first have the approval of the presiding bishop of the Episcopal District in which the proposed new church is to be located. Church #2, located in the suburbs of the metropolitan area, has approximately 71 members. The founding pastor, a male, has been reappointed each year since its inception. His wife is also an ordained clergy so they share a lot of the church responsibilities. This church, primarily African American, rents and shares space with two other churches - the primary Christian denomination (Lutherans) and a Hispanic Christian non-denomination. Church #2’s Sunday service is at 5:00 p.m. Sunday school is held at 3:30 before the main worship service. Bible study is on Thursday nights at 7:00. These three churches collaborate to do several outreach projects, for example: Newborn kit to Tanzania; Packet it up for Soldiers; Bible on a stick (memory stick) to soldiers and their families; Dwelling Place (a Bible study and fellowship of the women from all three churches); and Thanksgiving baskets supported by Thrivent Financial and 360 Organization.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Research AME church #3.**

Church #3 is 136 years old. Like four of the five churches, someone started the congregation in his or her home. Its current membership is an estimated 115 members. The building they worship in now, completed in the late 1950s, seats about 700. Sunday school is every Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. followed by 11:00 a.m. worship service. Bible study is Wednesday nights at 6:30. Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts have troops whose home base is at this church. Church #3 has had a change in leadership since this research was completed. Their first female pastor was assigned in October of 2013.

### **Research AME church #4.**

Church #4 is 134 years old and currently has 60 members who worship in facilities completed in the early 1960s. This congregation has never had a female clergy as a pastor. Sunday school is every Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. followed by 10:00 a.m. worship service. Bible study is on Wednesdays at 12:00 and 7:00 p.m. This church also has had a change in leadership since I completed my research. Members were without a senior pastor for about nine months and their current pastor was assigned in October of 2012. The pastor's wife is also an ordained clergy in the AME Church.

### **Research AME church #5.**

Church #5, in existence for 95 years, has 364 members who currently worship in a facility completed in 1963. The current pastor has led this local church for 29 years. There are two worship services on Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m. and at 11:00 a.m. Sunday school is at 9:30 for one hour. There are numerous Bible studies throughout the week: Tuesday night (women); Wednesday noon (mostly retirees); Wednesday evening (Bible study/prayer meeting); and Saturday morning (men). There has never been a female pastor assigned to this local church.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Data Collection**

I included sixty individuals from the five AME Churches in this study. I divided the 60 individuals into two groups: Group #1) 15 clergy including pastors, non-pastors, evangelists, and exhorters; and, Group #2) 45 non-clergy including youth church workers, Sunday school teachers, Sunday school superintendents, Christian education directors, Trustees (property managers), Stewards (spiritual leaders), Ushers, Choir members and some regular, non-leadership, not active in church ministry work congregants. The volunteer participants were 99.9% African Americans ranging in age from 27 to 104 years of age. Thirty-eight females and 22 males comprised the group of 60. (See table 1.1 for summary of participants.)

Table 1.1 *Overview of all participants*

Participants Summary	# of	Total Participants	Males	Females
Churches	5	60	22	38
Focus Groups/Non-clergy	6	45	14	31
Clergy	15	15	8	7

I asked the Presiding Elder of this geographical District in the Midwest if he would be willing to allow five churches in his district to participate in a research project centered on the discipleship formation process of its members. He welcomed the opportunity. I scheduled a meeting with each of the pastors and each agreed to be involved. Each church provided me with a letter of consent stating their support and willingness to be a part of this doctoral research. The University of St. Thomas's Internal Review Board (IRB) approved the five AME Churches to be a part of this study.

The pastors scheduled a time for me to come and talk to their congregations about the doctoral work project. I asked for volunteers willing to be interviewed in a one-on-one session (clergy) or to be a part of a focus group session (non-clergy). I held focus groups, with five to

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

seven volunteers from the congregation at each church. I conducted two focus groups at church #5 because there were so many members who wanted to participate. At least one week prior to the one-on-one interview or the focus group's scheduled time, I gave participants the research questions and the IRB approved consent form for review.

A typical and convenient sampling representative of members from all areas of the church's structure volunteered to participate. I used interview questions (Appendix A) to collect the data from the fifteen one-on-one interviews and the six focus groups. I utilized observation forms (Appendix B) to collect data from the following events: a worship service, the Sunday school hour, teachers' meetings, and Bible study time. Categories of questions for the different interview groups and a guide for the observations provided a means of identifying elements of discipleship formation in line with the four theoretical frameworks: critical pedagogy, Black liberation theology, transformational leadership, and rituals, myths, habits and the Sacred.

My questions for clergy and non-clergy (see Appendix A) attempted to uncover a model of critical pedagogy that equips the congregants with habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning. Are there existing programs used to help members and leaders commit to dialogue and to critical reflections that lead to: unlearn, learn, and relearn; reflection on and evaluation of Scripture and the process of becoming a disciple?

I used observation guidelines (Appendix B) to observe and collect data at the educational practices of Sunday school hour, Bible studies, teachers' meetings, and worship services. I looked for images, clothing of clergy and congregants, rituals, and symbols in the sanctuary and in the classroom settings of the educational sessions and the worship services. As I observed the churches' educational practices, I looked to see if teaching is a two way system where the teacher and the students teach each other or if the banking model of education is used where the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

teacher deposits facts, truths, and knowledge into the students and the students receive, retain, and return the teacher's words.

I gathered documents from the five AME Churches including bulletins, church histories, websites, and The Book of Discipline for analysis of the existing discipleship formation process in these local churches. I viewed these documents along with the transcribed interviews and focus groups through the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy, Black liberation theology, rituals, myths, habits and the Sacred, and transformational leadership.

Tables #2.1 through Table #9.1 below give more details on the six participating focus group members including gender, years at the church and their current position(s). I interviewed a total of 45 in the six focus groups, 31 females and 14 males. Their ages ranged from mid to late thirties to mid-nineties. Years of service at their current church ranged from one year to over 50 years. In my findings section, I use pseudonyms and the title Rev. when referring to clergy to identify the quotes from participants. Including 60 participants in my study provided me with rich data. Based on the structure of the AME Church, and the tables 2 – 7 below, every stakeholder in the five churches was represented in this study. Forty-five of the 60 participants participated in the focus groups.

*Table 2.1 Description of focus group #1 participants*

Focus Group Table #1			
AMEC Focus Group #01	Female/Male	Year At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC01F#1	Female	5	First Lady/Sunday School Superintendent/ Missionary Society
FGAMEC01M#1	Male		Choir Member
FGAMEC01F#2	Female	3	Sunday School Teacher/ Missionary Society
FGAMEC01M#2	Male	40	Sunday School Teacher/Steward
FGAMEC01F#3	Female		Missionary Society/Choir Member
FGAMEC01M#3	Male	35	Choir Member
10 Pages			

*Table 3.1 Description of focus group #2 participants.*

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Focus Group Table #2			
AMEC Focus Group #02	Female/Male	Years At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC02M#3	Male	20	Trustee/Choir Member
FGAMEC02F#2	Female		Christian Education Director/Member of Missionary Society
FGAMEC02F#4	Female	50	Evangelist/Member of Missionary Society
FGAMEC02M#1	Male	10	Steward/Media Ministry
FGAMEC02F#5	Female	50	Sunday School Superintendent/Sunday School Teacher/Steward
FGAMEC02M#2	Male	30	Steward
FGAMEC02F#6	Female	15	Member
FGAMEC02F#1	Female	10	Member of Missionary
FGAMEC02F#7	Female	20	Member
FGAMEC02M#3	Male		President of Lay Organization
FGAMEC02M#4	Male	1	Transfer From Baptist
FGAMEC02F#3	Female	25	Evangelist/Usher
37 Pages			

Table 4.1 Description of focus group #3 participants

AMEC Focus Group #03	Female/Male	Years At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC03F#1	Female #1	5	Trustee
FGAMEC03F#2	Female #2	1	Member
FGAMEC03F#3	Female #3	5	Trustee
FGAMEC03F#4	Female #4	5	Steward/ Missionary Society
FGAMEC03F#5	Female #5	3	Steward/ Missionary Society
28 Pages			

Table 5.1 Description of focus group #4 participants

AMEC Focus Group #04	Female/Male	Years At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC04M#2	Male	3	Trustee/Media
FGAMEC04F#3	Female	10	Stewardess/Missionary Society
FGAMEC04F#5	Female	8	Member
FGAMEC04F#1	Female	20	Sunday School Teacher
FGAMEC04F#4	Female	14	Children's Church Leader
FGAMEC04F#2	Female	25	Nurse's Guild
FGAMEC04M#1	Male	2	Member
34 Pages			

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Table 6.1 *Description of focus group #5 participants*

AMEC Focus Group #05	Female/Male	Years At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC05F#1	Female	10	Christian Education Director/Member of Missionary Society
FGAMEC05F#2	Female	5	Children Church Worker/Member of Missionary Society
FGAMEC05M#1	Male	10	Sunday School Teacher/Member of Choir
FGAMEC05F#4	Female	22	Sunday School Teacher/Steward/Class Leader/Choir member
FGAMEC05M#2	Male	15	Trustee/Van Driver
FGAMEC05F#3	Female	22	Finance/Bible Study Teacher
29 Pages			

Table 7.1 *Description of focus group #6 participants*

AMEC Focus Group #06	Female/Male	Years At This Church	Current Position(s)
FGAMEC06F#1	Female		Member
FGAMEC06F#2	Female		member
FGAMEC06F#3	Female	40	Steward/Choir Member
FGAMEC06F#4	Female	35	Steward/Christian Education/Choir Member
FGAMEC06M#1	Male	30	Sunday School Teacher
FGAMEC06F#5	Female		
FGAMEC06F#6	Female	38	Church Secretary
FGAMEC06M#2	Male		Member
12 Pages			

Fifteen of the participants were from the one-on-one interviews with clergy: pastors, and non-pastors. (See tables 8.1 and table 9.1 below.)

Table 8.1 *Description of clergy assigned to pastor of the local church*

AMEC One-On-One Interviews	Female/Male	Position	Years at Current Church	Years of Service as Clergy
IAMEP02F#1	Female	Clergy/Pastor	11	27
IAMEPM#1	Male	Clergy/Pastor	5	7
IAMEPM#2	Male	Clergy/Pastor	3	7
IAMEPM#3	Male	Clergy/Pastor	28	52
IAMEPM#4	Male	Clergy/Pastor	4	20
IAMEPM#5	Male	Clergy/Pastor	2	7

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Table 9.1 *Description of clergy non-pastors serving in one of the local churches*

AMEC One-On-One Interviews	Female/Male	Position	Years of Service as Clergy	Years of Service at This Church
IAMENPM#1	Male	Clergy/Non-Pastor	50	7
IAMENPF#1	Female	Clergy/Non-Pastor/Evangelist/Bible Study Teacher/Member Missionary Society	15	10
IAMENPF#2	Female	Clergy/Exhorter/Sunday School Teacher/Choir Member	7	10
IAMENPF#3	Female	Clergy/Non-Pastor	10	20
IAMENPM#2	Male	Clergy/Non-Pastor	10	25
IAMENPF#4	Female	Clergy/Non-Pastor/Youth Church	10	25
IAMENPF#5	Female	Clergy/Non-Pastor/First Lady/Sunday School Teacher/Member of Missionary Society	4	7
IAMENPM#3	Male	Clergy/Non-Pastor	10	6
IAMENPF#6	Female	Clergy/Non-Pastor	10	4

**Data Analysis**

In this qualitative study, I utilized the design of a case study. The purpose of a case study is to study a “bounded system” (Creswell, 2007, p. 244). In this design, the process studied was the discipleship formation process of clergy and non-clergy in five AME churches.

Once I completed the interviews and focus group sessions, I transcribed five of the one-on-one interviews with clergy who were pastors. For the focus group and the ten non-pastor clergy transcription, I utilized the services of a transcriber. The transcriber signed the official University of St. Thomas Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement Form (see Appendix C for a sample). The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Focus groups lasted one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. With added observation comments and field notes, I ended up with a total of 509 transcribed pages. Part of the data collection was also observations. At each of the five churches I completed one observation form for each of the following: a worship service, a

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Sunday school hour, a mid-week Bible study, and a teacher meeting. Only one of the five churches had teacher meetings and they were held monthly.

I used the transcriptions and the observation forms as my major sources of data for analysis. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described data analysis as “the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings” (p. 159).

Initially I read all of the transcripts highlighting words and/or phrases that were repeated or implied reference to discipleship formation. Based on the highlights, using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I recorded a list of coding categories from the data collected. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that there are several steps to developing a coding system: “You search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics your data covers, and then you write down words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns” (p. 173).

I used coding techniques described in Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Creswell (2007) to transcribe and then analyze the interview data. Creswell (2007) used a figure of a “data analysis spiral to describe the process of circling the data multiple times, organizing the data in different ways and pulling out different codes for analysis” (p. 150). After multiple times of reading through the data, creating codes for the data, and recoding the data, the themes and subthemes brought forth in the data became clear. I carefully reviewed transcripts and identified codes likely related to discipleship formation: the definition of disciple, the discipleship formation journey, people who influenced the discipleship formation journey, and specific programs that impacted the discipleship formation journey.

Some of the categories and patterns that emerged were specifically in line with the research question and some were not. An example of a category that came from specific

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

research questions is the theme “Discipleship Formation Is a Journey.” I asked each participant, whether in a one-on-one interview or focus group, to share their discipleship journey. A theme that emerged not associated with a specific research question, “Discipleship Formation and Role Models,” came from stories about their journeys. Every participant talked about someone who made an impact on his or her journey. The role models may or may not have been aware that they were role models. The impact that the role model(s) had on the participant’s discipleship formation was sometimes positive and sometimes negative.

I analyzed the data collected looking for themes that shed light on the realities of discipleship formation in these five AME Churches. What do the data collected from the observations, interviews, and focus groups tell about the AME Church’s discipleship formation process in the light of the four theoretical lenses? Are there elements of critical pedagogy, black liberation theology, transformational leadership and rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred that impact the process of a person’s discipleship formation?

Using the four theoretical lenses mentioned above, what do the data say about the journey of the participants, role model(s) in the life of the participants, the role of Christian education and the role of church leadership in the discipleship formation process? Participants shared their experiences of being involved in one of the five AME Churches and how this overall experience has impacted their discipleship formation.

### **Ethics, Validity, and Generalizability**

In the following sections, I present information regarding ethical considerations and I describe measures I took to keep data confidential. In addition, I describe how I addressed validity and generalizability.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Ethics and confidentiality.**

In this research, I treated all participants in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of St. Thomas' Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in this study was voluntary. Potential risks I shared with participants were: 1) the research would be probing for sensitive information about their faith. 2) They may be sharing personal views on the church. 3) There was the potential for them to feel obligated to participate because I am an ordained clergy in their denomination. 4) At the initial recruiting meeting, the pastor would be in the room so it may feel like coercion. 5) There was a risk of loss of privacy in focus groups.

Before each focus group or one-on-one interview, each participant signed a University of St. Thomas (UST) Internal Review Board (IRB) approved consent form (see Appendix C for a sample of the form). The consent form detailed the following information for prospective participants: general information statement about the study; my name, research advisor's name, background information, procedures, risks and benefits of being in the study, confidentiality process, voluntary nature of the study, and a place for the participants' signature if they decided to be a part of the study. Church members could refuse to participate or the opportunity was given to drop out of the study. No one I contacted refused to participate and no one dropped out of the study once they agreed to participate.

In addition to the consent form, all focus group participants signed a Promise of Confidentiality form (see Appendix C for sample). This form is intended to protect the confidentiality of what members of this focus group say during the course of this study. Participants were asked to read the Promise of Confidentiality form and to sign their names, indicating that they agreed to comply.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

I transcribed five of the audio recordings of the one-on-one interviews and a transcriber service was used for all the other transcriptions: one-on-one interviews and the focus groups. I entered the transcriptions along with any of my written notes into my password-protected personal computer.

### **Validity.**

Merriam (1998) stated “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 198). I used two strategies to enhance validity of my research: personal reflection on my biases and triangulation.

### ***Personal reflection on bias.***

Qualitative research is based on the premise that “researchers bring their own worldview, paradigms, or set of beliefs to the research project” (Creswell, 2007, p.15). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) stated “No matter how much you try, you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value” (p. 38). Therefore as an Ordained Itinerant Elder in one of the five AME churches in the case study I affected my research. My role as a female clergy for 16 years and my experiences as a member for 10 years prior to that provided me with insight as the researcher on this study. My experiences as a member and as a clergy person helped to direct me in developing the research questions and in understanding church language used by participants.

Along with insight and understanding, my experiences brought bias and I had to be careful of its influence. Bias is the “subjectivity of the researcher” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 105). Because a human is the primary instrument in qualitative research, “all observations, and analyses are filtered through that human being’s worldview, values, and perspective” (Merriam,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

1998, p. 22). Because of my involvement in one of these five churches, in the following paragraphs I share some of my biases around discipleship formation.

As a person with a long history with the church and as the ordained clergy who conducted research on this topic of discipleship formation, my biases were evident. In 1983, I joined and became a member of one of the five churches in the study. I was a member of the church and served in many leadership positions over the years: I was the announcing clerk; I served on the finance team (counted money and paid bills); I ushered; I was a Sunday school teacher and a Sunday school superintendent; I served on the Steward Board; I taught women's Bible study. My biases come because I have held many of the positions the study participants are currently holding. So I know what it is like to hold prominent positions in the church.

As a member of the local church, I was faithful to Bible study and Sunday school yet these teaching areas of the church did not help me in making a lifestyle change. It was my exposure to some Christian experiences – workshops, teachings, retreats, institutes, and Bible studies – outside of my local church and sometime outside of my denomination that propelled me towards a lifestyle change.

In 1994, I announced my call to the ordained ministry thus beginning the ordination process in the AME church. In October of 1996, I was ordained an Itinerant Deacon, the first level of ordination in the AME church. This meant that I could conduct marriages, burials, and baptisms. I could even be assigned a church, though it is rare for an Itinerant Deacon to be assigned a church. In October of 2000, I was ordained an Itinerant Elder, the second and final level of ordination one can receive in the AME church.

Before ending this section let me share about my journey with an outside para church organization Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) which some of the research participants were a part

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

of as well. My own journey involved BSF beginning in 1988. I needed more. I was hungry for more. I knew there had to be more so I started talking to everyone I knew about their spiritual growth. I was asking lots of questions. What are you doing to grow as a disciple? What is your Bible study like? While at a women's retreat with another denomination, Baptist, I met someone who invited me to BSF. I went and it was the best thing that I could have done for myself. BSF played a major role in helping me to grow as a woman of God. The lessons were more in-depth than anything I had ever experienced before. The leaders held the participants accountable. If participants had not studied the lesson and completed the questions for the week, the leaders asked that they not participate in the discussion, but only listen. Participants were also required to spend time praying, reading, and studying the lesson to share how the Holy Spirit had ministered to them via the lesson. I grew in leaps and bounds. For five years, I participated every Monday night. My case as well gives evidence that although my inside journey included Bible study, Sunday school etc in the local church, I too had a hunger for more and added outside programs.

While the research topic came out of my own experience in discipleship formation, I used research methodology, as described earlier to make sure I did not just find answers to agree with my experience. In the findings, there are examples of when the data conformed to what I thought and examples of when it did not conform to what I thought. In the church trappings section, I was aware of the focus on fundraising for church events like Men's Day, Women's Day, Church Anniversary, and others. What the findings showed is that those events are an opportunity for discipleship formation as well as fundraising. In one sense this finding conformed to what I thought but it also added insight of having the potential of being used for discipleship formation. An example of a finding conforming to my bias is in the section on the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

role of Christian education. There the data proved true to my preconceived notion that Bible study and Sunday school are not well attended though they are considered the conerstone of discipleship formation.

***Triangulation.***

In addition to addressing biases, triangulation is another strategy used to assist with validity. In triangulation researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell 2007). One method of triangulation I used included one-on-one interviews of clergy (pastors and non-pastors) and focus groups that included a variety of members holding different positions. In addition, the interview and focus group participants came from five different AME churches. The clergy I interviewed gave me a broad look at people's discipleship formation from members who had become clergy. Some of the clergy were Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and Bible study teachers. The focus groups gave me a broad perspective of discipleship formation from non-clergy members which included: Bible study teachers, youth church workers, Sunday school teachers, Sunday school superintendents, Christian education directors, Stewards (spiritual leader of the church), Trustees (property managers) choir members, ushers, nurse's guild, and others. All of these factors contribute to the validity of this research.

Another means of triangulation is the four different lenses this research was viewed through: critical pedagogy; black liberation theology; rituals, myths, habits and the sacred; and transformational leadership. These four lens forced me to look at these data from four different theoretical angles which I believe makes the data analysis even stronger.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Generalizability.**

Generalizability refers to the applicability of study findings from one particular setting and specified group of participants to other settings and people, in order to understand the “general scheme of things” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 36). Maxwell (2005) distinguished between internal and external generalizability. Internal generalizability refers to the ability to generalize findings within a group of people or setting; external generalizability, on the other hand, is generalizability beyond a certain group of people or setting (Maxwell, 2005).

I believe that internal and external generalizability is a factor in this study. Sixty people from five AME churches in a Midwestern metropolitan area participated in this study. The participants, clergy and non-clergy, were involved in all levels of ministry within the churches. So, based on that, there were some internal generalizations that could be drawn. Because these 60 participants, from the five Midwestern AME churches, could be representative of 60 people, from any five churches in the A. M.E. denomination, I think there are some external generalizations that could be drawn from this study. If nothing else, reader or user generalizability (Merriam 1998) could apply. This method involves leaving the extent to which a study’s findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situation and in this case in other churches.

### **Summary Chapter 3**

In Chapter three I presented a methodology of this study. I used qualitative research to study the discipleship formation process in five AME Churches in a major Midwestern metropolitan and suburb area. I selected a case study approach to explore the experiences of discipleship formation in the lives of the clergy and non-clergy in these churches. Included in this chapter are sources of data, data collection processes and analysis methods. Lastly, I discussed the ethics, validity, and generalizability of my study.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### Chapter Four – Findings

I conducted a qualitative case study investigating the process of discipleship formation currently existing in the study participants' lives and the five AME churches. In this chapter, I provide the findings from 15 one-on-one interviews; six focus groups; and observations of a Sunday worship service, Sunday school class, Bible Study, and teachers' meetings conducted in each of the five churches.

After a brief explanation of how participants came to be members of the churches, I define the term disciple based on the participants' responses. Secondly, I discuss the major theme of discipleship formation as a journey. Third, I present the findings for discipleship formation journey aids inside the church. Fourth, I share information on discipleship formation hindrances inside the church. The final section of findings focuses on discipleship formation journey aids outside the church. Figure 4 below is pictorial view of the multi-dimension discipleship formation journey flow.

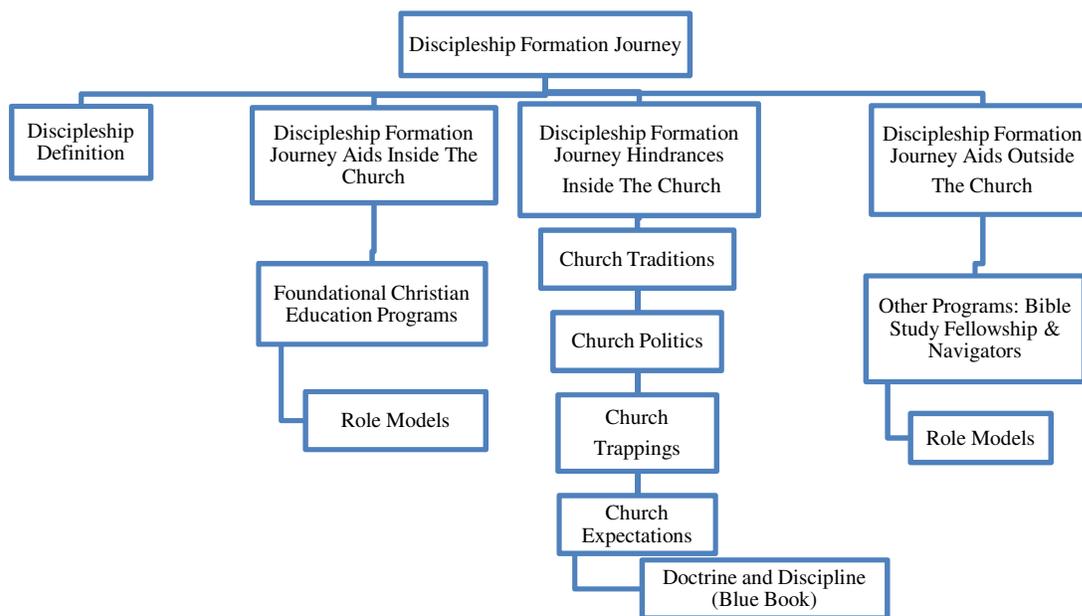


Figure 4. Discipleship Formation Journey Flow

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Definition of Discipleship**

Ninety percent of the participants (54 out of 60) were born into the culture of the church. However, being born in the culture of the church is different from being raised in the church and different from becoming a disciple in the church. Being born in the culture of the church is like being born into one's natural family. It is all you know because you have not experienced any other church culture. The birth into the church culture starts when you join that church which can be as a child or an adult. Being raised in the church starts when you are a child. You are taught the scriptures; you have heard many sermons; you have attended Sunday school; you have been in church all your life; you are religious by habit. Finally, becoming a disciple in the church is the goal. The other two statements, being raised in the church and being born in the culture of the church may aid you in becoming a disciple, but they do not guarantee it.

Following is the definition of discipleship based on my analysis of data from the one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

Study participants discussed situations and happenings on their journey to discipleship that facilitated thinking more deeply about their relationship with Jesus Christ and what it means to follow Him. Over 54 of the 60 participants grew up in the church as members of the church body, and members of the church family. "My membership was always a part of my reality that I was a member of this church. The fact that I belonged was important to me as a young Christian woman," stated Rev. Julia. Being valued as a member of the church was one of the ways people stayed connected to church though this did not ensure a move to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. The participants' move to a deeper place occurred either while they were within the local church or outside of the local church.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Even though 54 of the 60 participants were raised in a church culture, AME or some other denomination, 48 of the 60 participants drifted away from the church as they became adults and came back only later in life. Rev. Rhoda stated, “I was just in church all my life. But when I turned 18 and I went away to college, I no longer went to church. There was a sense of burn out.” Barnabas said, “As a young person I moved to a predominately white town. There was not any black church institutions so that gave me a reason not to go to church.” The discipleship process continued later in life when the participants returned to the AME Church or they joined the AME Church from another denomination.

So, did the churches have an intentional process or a plan for individuals to develop as followers of Jesus Christ? In most cases, yes, although no one named it discipleship formation. The churches had certain opportunities in place to facilitate a person’s discipleship formation journey if the individual chose to access them. For example, churches provided a new members class, weekly Sunday school, Bible studies and worship services. These elements were all inside the local churches I studied and will be expanded on later in the chapter.

Since I wanted to discover how participants viewed discipleship formation, I first asked them, clergy and non-clergy, to define the term disciple. Even though every church member knows the terms disciple and discipleship, they most often used the terms member and membership. Church folks do not generally make the distinction between member and disciple. To them, a member is a disciple. For most church folks, the terms are interchangeable or are one and the same. I as the researcher believe there is a distinction to be made between these terms and recognizing the distinction is one of the main issues of my research. In the interviews and focus groups, a general understanding participants carry around with them emerged as the defining characteristics of being a disciple and/or discipleship formation. All of the participants

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

were familiar with the standard book definition of disciple and most started out with that as they answered the question: “In your own words, how would you describe a disciple of Christ?” Many of the same terms emerged over and over in the participants’ description of disciple: a lifelong learner, a follower, an imitator of Christ, a student, an example, and a witness. I discovered similar definitions of discipleship from both clergy and non-clergy. Rev. Haman defined disciple as “a follower of the practices that Christ set forth in the biblical canon.” Barak said, “I would say that of being a model. Christ is a loving person. Christ was a teaching person. Christ forgave people. So the things that Christ did are the things that you should do in turn.” Christ modeled how we are to live our lives as his disciples. Rachel explained, “For me to be a disciple of Christ is to be a follower of Christ plus it is also to be able to teach others and to lead others to Christ. Spreading the Gospel, and using Christ as a role model.” Rev. Gabriel defined disciple as one who “represents Jesus in all aspects.” Rev. Phoebe said, “I would just say anyone who is a follower or a believer in Jesus and tries to do what He has called us to do.” Rev. Susanna put it this way, “When I think about being a disciple for Christ, I think about a chapter in Matthew, I think it is Matthew 28, where he tells his disciples to go out and make disciples. Living in the image of Christ.”

Some definitions stood out as unique. For example, Rev. Earnest stated,

I understand our purpose in life as worshipers of God and understanding that God is our creator and that we have been created to worship God, and that being the case, what does that mean. And that is what discipleship is, is a study of what that really means.

These definitions take the meaning of disciple to a more practical level. Rev. Julia put it this way, “Because I live in a culture impacted by racism, for me a disciple of Christ is also about living out justice and living justly.” Barnabas talked about the fear of being a disciple. “Admit

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

that you are terrified at the thought of being a disciple of Christ.” Rev. Susanna echoed the fear of being a disciple. “Being a disciple of Christ is scary.” I was surprised by these terms of terrified and scared associated with being a disciple of Christ. When I asked why he used the term terrified, Barnabas stated, “The life of Christ dealt with rejections from family and friends, conflict within the disciples and the church, and physical suffering.” When the same question was posed to Rev. Susanna, she quoted the scripture from Matthew 8:20: “Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’” Rev. Tabitha used a unique definition to define discipleship. “A disciple is someone who first falls in love with Jesus. You start to spend time with Him. You become familiar with His likes and dislikes.”

Two components emerged from the clergy and non-clergy participants as important to being a disciple of Christ. Disciples must know Christ’s teachings and practice them in their daily lives and not just when they are at church. Christ models how to live out his principles of love and treating others the way you would want to be treated. Therefore, you have to know the Scriptures and give evidence in your life of the teaching of Christ. Elizabeth said a disciple will “follow the teaching of Christ, his principles and his directives applying them in my life and sharing them with others.” Cyrus said “When I started studying the word and trying to apply it, my life started changing little by little.” Rev. Julia said “we have to move the Word of God 18 inches from our head, intellect, into our hearts, action of living it.” The two components of knowing the Word of God and applying it to our life circumstance go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other to be a disciple of Christ. Scripture helps us to see how Christ lived out his ministry here on earth then we try our best to follow that example.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Some clergy and non-clergy descriptions of a disciple of Christ used the exact same words and some used similar words. The following statements were used by both clergy and non-clergy in defining disciple of Christ: follower of Jesus, student of the Bible, be an example of Christ, relationship with God, share the love of Christ, and make other disciples. The similar statements used to define disciple of Christ were obey Christ commands (laity) versus follower of the practices of Christ (clergy); learner (laity) versus lifelong learner (clergy); testify to other (laity) versus be a witness (clergy).

There were three definitions that stood out as stated by clergy or someone who had been to seminary: 1) "A follower of the practices that Christ set for in the biblical cannon" 2) "I understand our purpose in life as worshipers of God and understanding that God is our creator, that we have been created to worship God, and that being the case, what does that mean. And that is what discipleship is, is a study of what that really means." 3) "Because I live in a culture impacted by racism, for me a disciple of Christ is also about living out justice and living justly."

These three definitions stood out to me because they went beyond the normal two to four words used to describe disciple. The language is more specific and thought provoking indicating that disciples study the biblical cannon to learn how to follow Christ, learn that we were created to worship God, and learn our responsibility to live justice in a racist culture.

As I looked across the definitions of disciple from the 60 clergy and non-clergy, my summary definition would read like this: A disciple of Christ seeks an ongoing life of growth in knowing the teachings of Christ and applying them to day-to-day life which includes loving and treating others the way Christ would.

Most, if not all of the clergy and non-clergy interviewed, were familiar with the standard definition of a disciple as "a learner" or "a follower of Jesus;" from the definition, each

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

proceeded to talk about his/her own journey on the road to becoming a disciple. Of course, everyone's journey was unique; like our fingerprints, no two were the same. The journey of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ can start even before entering a church. Perhaps there are even greater numbers of people outside of the church trying to learn about God. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6 NIV).

### **Discipleship Formation as a Journey**

The American Heritage Dictionary (1981) defines journey as "travel from one place to another." As I read the interview and focus group transcripts, participants' journeys turned out to be the most significant finding for my research. The journey held the keys to the themes and subthemes of the research. Each of the 60 clergy and non-clergy who participated in the one-on-one interviews or focus groups was given the opportunity to share his or her story. The responses of the 60 research participants clearly showed a person does not just become a disciple overnight. It is not a one-time decision but a lifelong process, a journey. There is a path. When I replay in my mind the story of each individual's journey, unique is the word that comes to mind. Though there are some similarities, each person's story had components unique to them. For these research participants, over time, discipleship formation developed no matter the starting point in life, whether in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood.

In my research, I found two views of the discipleship journey: 1) the journey begins when an individual accepts Jesus Christ as her/his Lord and Savior - "If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9 NIV); 2) the journey begins as life happens all along the way to making the public confession of "Jesus is Lord" based on the Romans 10:9 passage. In this section of my findings, I describe both views. Specific quotes from over 75% or 45 of the 60 participants

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

share specific statements: “I was raised in the church” or “I grew up in a Christian home” or “basically like everyone at the table, I grew up in the church, and there is not a time when I can say that I have never been in the church.” Being raised in the church or growing up in the church did not make the research participant a disciple, but each admitted it was a building block to her or his foundation as a disciple of Christ. Several of the participants started attending church in adulthood. Cyrus stated, “I started going to church because the girl I was dating was going to church.” Salome started attending church after attending a funeral of a dear friend. It appears the journey can start at any time in life and that the journey has no end; it is life-long. Rev. Vashti said, “I didn’t even start going to church or a traditional church until I was twenty one.”

Based on participants’ narration of their journeys, the journey is life-long. The local church offered programs to aid in the journey. Each participant’s journey was unique to her or his life experiences and situations.

From listening to the participants share their discipleship formation process, I discovered no two roads traveled on this journey were exactly alike. One of the unique components of the journey is that it started at different times in people’s lives. It did not matter if the participants were male or female, young or old, educated or not, raised in the church or not, the journey could start at any point and time during their lives. Rachel said, “My journey started when I was young.” Rachel also said, “We were learning about Jesus. I could not understand who Jesus was and how they knew Jesus. How could anybody know Him when they couldn’t see Him or talk to Him?” Rev. Earnest put it this way, “I have never been able to identify a specific point where I say I turned a corner and realized that there was something for me to pursue in terms of discipleship as opposed to membership.” Rev. Julia shared that her transformation from just being a member to discipleship formation began in college. “I don’t know that there was ever a

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

process that was intentional or planned but certainly there were things that happened in college that helped facilitate my discipleship formation.” In the stories, it was evident participants wanted to know answers to two important questions: Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? This quest for purpose sends many individuals on the hunt for an answer to the question, why am I here?

Cyprus stated,

I have to examine my life every day when it comes to my discipleship process. One of the issues is taking time out to evaluate your journey. Are you still growing? Have you become stagnant? Does my life reflect the characteristics of Christ?

Evaluating and examining the discipleship formation process is an area of opportunity for the churches to be more intentional about how to ask if and how the church helps its members grow in their relationship with Christ.

The discipleship journey takes many different routes. The journey to discipleship for the majority of the research participants, clergy and non-clergy, started inside the church. The majority of the interviewees and the focus group participants were raised in the church; they attended church with their families or were sent to church by their parents. Participants were very familiar with attending church on Sundays and for some that meant all day. According to participants, this journey of attending church regularly did not necessarily lead to the transformed life of a disciple. Barnabas talked about his rough journey.

I had to go to church and Sunday school every Sunday. After a while I became rebellious. It is hard to make the transition to being a disciple after you've seen so much of the backsliding and underhandedness that goes on in the church, not just from the members but from the pulpits and it rocks you so as a young man.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Participants experienced a disconnect from the lessons being taught in the Bible and what they saw being lived out. One of the younger participants, Dorcas, stated, “As I worked in ministry inside the local church, I felt really cared for. At the same time as the years progressed I found out that being cared for and supported weren’t really enough for me as I was growing.” The local church did have programs for the participants’ discipleship formation – worship service/sermon, Sunday school, Bible study, and new member classes – but these programs, in their existing format and content, did not guarantee a path to discipleship.

Other research participants entered the doors of these local churches as visitors from other denominations and as existing members returning after a time of separation from the church. There were no new members, as in new to the Christian faith, in this study. The interaction between members in the local church played a part in the discipleship formation process. How they were treated by those they encountered had a great impact on their journey and whether or not they decided to continue on their journey at that church, or someplace else, or not at all. For example, Rev. Phoebe commented, “Every person wants to feel like somebody cares about what happens to them.” Martha said, “We have to reach out and show love and kindness, not only by talking and saying I’m glad to see you, but show me that you’re glad to see me.” Sapphira agreed with the previous quote. “Just make sure we get to know them, get their name and just really sincerely embrace them.” This is in line with the old adage you only get one time to make a first impression. The local church wants anyone entering the church doors to be welcomed, encouraged, and experience the love of Christ whether they are a first-time visitor or a regular attendee of the Sunday morning worship.

In summary, the journey inside the church is how existing members experience discipleship formation. Developing relationships is a key component of the journey. A longtime

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

member of the church, Elisabeth stated, “My interaction with other members of the church at times seemed so fake. I do not want to engage in that fakeness.” There are very few new converts to the Christian faith in these local churches, none in this study. The majority are adults who are moving from one AME Church to another or from another denomination to the AME denomination. The interaction of existing members comes mostly through the ministries inside the church: fellowship after Sunday worship, Sunday school classes, Bible study classes, and new member classes. All of these programs are inside the local church and are considered foundational to discipleship formation. The programs are not required, but members are certainly encouraged to attend for their spiritual growth.

### **Discipleship Formation Journey Aids inside the Church**

This section will focus on the aids to the discipleship formation journey inside the church. Clergy and non-clergy participants considered four ministries in the church to be foundational Christian education programs to discipleship formation: Sunday worship/sermons, Sunday school, Bible study, and new members class. These ministries are in place in each of the five churches. The data tell me these programs do play a part in discipleship formation but they are not as effective as the participants, clergy and non-clergy, would like for them to be. In addition to hearing the stories of participants’ discipleship formation journeys, I also observed, inside of each local church, the four ministries considered foundational to the discipleship formation process.

#### **Sunday worship service/sermons.**

Each church had a Sunday morning worship service. One of the church’s offered two services on Sunday morning: an 8:00 a.m. service lasting one hour and an 11:00 a.m. service lasting one and one half to two hours. Because of sharing space for worship, one church had

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Sunday service at 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. All five churches offered a traditional or standard AME Sunday service; this A. M. E. order of service always included a call to worship, prayer by clergy, reading of scripture, congregational songs, songs led by the choir, announcements, a sermon, and an invitation to Christian discipleship. In each of the five local churches studied, the majority of the members attended the traditional Sunday service for their church.

Sermons/preaching is one of the local church's foundational components of Christian education that aid in discipleship formation. Sermons are the cornerstone of the church and particularly in the Black church. Rev. Harman explained, "Preaching without substantive teaching is a waste of time. Teaching is the area that allows us to reinforce the preaching." Teaching, which generally occurs during Bible study and Sunday school, allows the opportunity for dialogue. There is no dialogue during the Sunday sermon, when there is just one person speaking. Sermons are monologs, maybe even very entertaining monologs; they may be very spiritually touching monologs, but monologs nonetheless. Teaching becomes a dialogue, becomes a conversation where questions can be asked and things not understood can be clarified; this helps in learning what it means to be a disciple. Rev. Isaac noted,

When I started paying attention to the Word of God as it was preached is when I started becoming a disciple. I also did some reading and studying, but I began to listen to the sermon to hear what Christ did, and what Christ said. I determined to learn all I could.

Based on my observation of each of the local churches, the weekly sermon has the greatest potential for discipleship formation because the largest attendance is during this time on Sunday. The joyful services offered members freedom of expression to clap their hands, to say amen, to sing aloud, to come to the altar for prayer, to engage in fellowship with other believers, and to cry. The preaching of the sermon by the pastor or one of the other ordained clergy who

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

may be speaking on a particular Sunday is the time when the Scripture is expounded on. This is the opportunity for those in attendance, visitors and members, to listen for what God may be saying to them through the sermon with the help of the Holy Spirit who has ministered to the preacher as he prepared during his study and prayer time. Now, those in the pew are listening for how the sermon based on a certain Scripture relates to what may be going on in their everyday lives.

### **Sunday school.**

Each church's Sunday time together includes Sunday school, classroom instructional time of the Bible generally held before the main service. One hour classes are set up by age groups (adults, youth, and children) and involve lessons about Scripture with the additional ideas of how to apply those lessons to life today. Another name used in most recent years is the term "church school." The reason for the change is "church school" can be on any day of the week whereas Sunday school denotes it is on Sunday. All of the five churches in this study still basically use the term Sunday school and offer classes on Sundays before the main service. In each of the five churches, the adult class had the largest attendance. On the Sundays I attended and observed these classes, most of the other age groups had very few or no one attending. The age brackets were: Preschool, Primary Class (1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> grades), Junior (4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) Junior High (7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades), High School (9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade) and the Adult class (everyone from high school graduates and up). In my study of the five churches, I observed the adult Sunday school class in each church. Before the class, there was a time of devotion before class started; there was a song, scripture, and a prayer at the minimum. Three of the adult classes I observed were held in the church sanctuary. Students sat in the pews and the teachers stood up front. Sunday school books were distributed to those who did not have one. Two of the adult

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Sunday school classes I observed were held in a conference room around a table. The teacher sat at the table with the students. The flow of all five classes was basically the same.

Once the devotion was completed, the teacher asked for a volunteer to read a portion of the scripture lesson and a discussion followed. A question from the teacher or from one of the students fueled the discussion. Then the next set of verses would be read and discussion would follow. This process continued until all the verses had been read and discussed. Time ran out at two of the churches before the class got through all the verses. The questions at the end of the lesson for thought and discussion were not used in any of the five churches. Teacher and students came up with their own questions. The questions were impromptu. There are elements here that are really positive: the students were inspired and felt the freedom to pose their own questions rather than only answer the questions the lesson provided; so, at times teacher and students engaged in effective dialogue. Then, some discussions did not go anywhere, for example, when the teacher or the students asked a question that could not be answered and only called for speculation at best. One example of a question like that was “What would have happened if Adam and Eve had not eaten from the tree of good and evil, in the garden?” The result of a question like that is the dialogue is stagnant rather than dynamic.

The teacher is considered the expert so what they say is considered gospel and is often not questioned. This is an example of Freire’s banking education theory where the teacher deposits into the student what they need to know. Because the teacher has been assigned the role to teach, the assumption is that they are qualified and know more than and/or have been equipped to teach which may or may not be the case.

Rev. Julia commented, “I don’t see teachers being prepared nor having thought through their lesson in a way that it is real and fits the group they’re teaching. And I think that can be

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

very detrimental.” In my observation of Sunday school and Bible study the conversation is at a very superficial level. An example would be talking about the Scripture lesson as a story that happened to the people in the Bible without being mindful of how it relates to the lives of those who are present in the class. Rev. Julia also said, “I think Sunday morning Sunday school is a lot of fill-in time and this is just from my church experience.” Most of the time is spent discussing questions that no one can answer, for example, what would have happened if Eve had eaten the fruit and Adam had not.

The AME *Improved Adult Teacher Sunday School Quarterly* was used to teach the adult class (see sample lesson in Appendix D). The scripture lesson for the week is printed in the King James Version (KJV) and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. Each week’s lesson includes: the printed text, a key verse from the printed text, home daily bible readings (one for each day of the week), an introduction to the lesson, a section titled Bible story which gives details on the printed text, a life application section, a summary, questions for thought and discussion and a closing prayer. The entire lesson was contained in four or five pages. Supplemental Sunday school materials were used in four of the five churches. Some teachers used other supplemental Sunday school materials as well (see details later in this section).

The *Standard Lesson Commentary*, from 2012-2013 published by Standard Publishing, was used in three of the five churches. Not every student had this optional book. The *Standard Lesson Commentary* contains the international Sunday school lessons for the year. While many denominations use it, the AME Publishing House is not the publisher. The book covers the months from September through August and has a theme for each quarter. Each quarter is made up of three units and the units are made up of the four or five Sundays of that month. The Sunday and unit themes tie back to the quarter’s theme. Each Sunday’s lesson has the following:

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

- The printed text for the week
- A daily Scripture reading for the week
- Lesson aims
- Lesson outline which included: an introduction, lesson background, how to say it (how to pronounce words), and a commentary on each verse of the printed text with some “What Do You Think?” And “Talking Points for Your Discussion,” dispersed throughout the lesson commentary,
- There is a conclusion, closing prayer, and thought to remember.
- Also included is a section titled “Involvement Learning.” These three sections are a way to get adults involved in thinking about the lesson. The three sections are titled: Into the Lesson, into the Word and Into Life. The Standard Lesson Commentary include ways to enhance your lessons via a website, [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com), visuals for these lessons, and reproducible activity pages.

Each Sunday school classroom had one teacher and in a few cases, a backup teacher.

The curriculum combined a mixture of the AME Church Sunday school literature and at least one other curriculum source. Two Sunday school teachers, Sapphira and Rev. Vashti, implied that the AME Sunday school materials were lacking in content, shallow in their presentation in developing the Scripture when compared to the other curricula available. In each church the Pastor agreed to the use of additional resources outside of the AME Sunday school materials. Teachers received no help when it came to preparing their lessons. Cyrus stated, “I was asked to be a teacher for the junior high school class. I was given a teacher’s book and a student’s book and that was it. It was up to me from that point forward.” Only one of the churches even had teachers’ meetings. Once a month the church school superintendent and the teachers met to talk

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

about the lessons for the month. It was not a teaching session for the teachers but a time to discuss the lesson and/or plan other events and activities for the Sunday school hour. The meeting I observed involved only two people, the Sunday school superintendent and one teacher. According to the superintendent, this was the norm. Out of his six teachers, only one or two showed up for the meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup> Friday of the month. I have since heard that they no longer have their meetings.

Across the five churches, my observation of Sunday school attendance counted that 30 of the 60 participants attended Sunday school and of the 30, 24 were retirees and/or empty nesters. The adults/families who have young children/youth at home generally do not attend Sunday school. They come to church in time for the main service, generally 11:00 a.m. As children and youth, clergy and non-clergy study participants were required to attend Sunday school and 11:00 service every Sunday. Many parents today give their children/youth a choice as to whether or not they want to attend Sunday school and church, and most choose not to come. Others have activities that conflict with Sunday morning church, for example, participation in sports activities. Rev. Susanna stated, “My sons are in a traveling basketball league and their schedule often conflicts with Sunday morning church. My husband and I split up: one goes with the boys and one comes to church.”

I found, through my research, Sunday school was a part of almost everyone’s journey. Parents required them to attend every Sunday. No one focused on specifically what they learned or gained from going to Sunday school, just that they went. It was expected. It was what everyone did. Rev. Phoebe said,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Most of Sunday school is listening to the story and trying to make spiritual and human sense out of what happened, what was said and what was done. I don't always see people finding out the real connection to their current life.

My assumption is, as children, seeds from the Word of God were planted in the hearts and minds of the clergy and non-clergy participants in this study. Proverbs 22:6 "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (NIV). Participants who were required to attend Sunday school as children, returned to the church at some point in their adult lives.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Sunday school is offered for one hour before the main service and classes are available for all age groups pre-school to adults. Based on my observation, the adult classes have the best attendance in all of the local churches. Sunday school, one of the foundational programs of Christian education for the church, is not well attended by adults or children/youth in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This is telling church leadership that the lack of attendance means a lack of receiving what the church intends to impart through Sunday school to assist a member with discipleship formation.

### **Bible study.**

Bible study was held at each local church sometime during the week. Bible Study is considered one of the foundational components of Christian Education and thus discipleship formation, yet the attendance was low for each of the local churches. The membership of the five churches ranged from 71 to 364. The largest attendance at any of the Bible studies, during the week I observed, was fifteen people and this was at the largest of the five churches with 364 members on its roll, 15 or 4% attended. If Bible study is considered one of the mainstays of discipleship formation, not many people are being reach based on the attendance numbers.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

When I attended the mid-week Bible study at each church, I paid particular attention to the teacher, the curriculum, who attended, and length of time spent. Most churches held the study, for adults only, mid-week on Wednesday night; the time frame ranged from one to two hours, and attendance was relatively small, five to 15 maximum present.

One church conducted their study on Tuesday nights. Another church, offered Bible study four times a week: a women's Bible study on Tuesday, a Wednesday noonday Bible study, a Wednesday evening Bible study/prayer meeting, and a Saturday men's Bible study. In every instance of the mid-week studies, the pastor of each church was the teacher. If the pastors were not available, they assigned the responsibility of teaching the lesson for that night to others. The format was to read scripture and then discuss its meaning and application. Two of the pastors used books everyone was to read and come prepared to discuss. One pastor used the book *Growing Kingdom Character* and the other pastor used the book *Experiencing God*. Both pastors used discussion questions at the end of each chapter to generate dialogue.

The Bible studies for each church were held in the church sanctuary. The attendees were in the pew and the pastor/teacher stood in front. Two of the churches used a specific book to facilitate their Bible study. Each of the participants had a copy of the book being studied so he or she could underline, highlight, and make notes in their copy. The other three churches' Bible study consisted in walking the participants through a book of the Bible. There were no handouts. In these Bible studies, the pastor reviewed the previous week's chapters and then he proceeded to lecture on Scripture text for the week. If participants had questions, they could stop the pastor and ask them at any time during the evening.

As an example of Freire's banking education model, where the teacher deposits into the student what they need to know, Rev. Isaac stated,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

We never challenge the teacher. I have been in the men's Bible study for four years and I've only challenged the teacher once. It is not encouraged. You don't want to start an argument. You don't want to make the teacher look bad or embarrass them.

Rev. Festus said, "The role of Christian education is very important in a person becoming a disciple, but the issue is we do not take the time, energy, and finance to educate our members in the role of discipleship."

Of the 15 clergy who participated in the study, nine actually attended Bible study and of these nine, six were the teachers of the weekly Bible study in their church. The other six clergy attended Bible study sporadically or not at all. Non-clergy participation in Bible study was as follows, twenty of the forty-five non-clergy research participants attended Bible study on a regular basis. The teachers at each Bible study allowed those attending to ask questions so in that sense dialogue could and did happen. However, those attending Bible study may have been deterred from asking questions for a couple of reasons: 1) they did not want to give the appearance of not knowing about a particular topic; 2) they viewed the teacher as the expert so what he was saying was "gospel" and who were they to question; or 3) they do not want to embarrass themselves or the teacher. So in that sense, Freire's banking education was in play. The teachers would share with those attending Bible study their thoughts, insights, and feeling on the passage of scripture being used for the evening.

My observations of Sunday school and Bible study support my conclusion that these two programs do not seem to be important or valued by members. The members simply do not attend. Families do not attend. These two ministries, Sunday school and Bible study, are attended by adults with no children, empty nesters. Families come in time for the main service

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

on Sundays; sermons therefore must be applicable for an audience of toddlers to senior citizens – a real challenge for the pastor.

### **New members class.**

The new member class serves the following groups of people who have joined one of the local churches: 1) those new to the Christian faith, 2) those new to the AME Church, and 3) those moving their membership from another AME Church. *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church* (2012) states all new members regardless of which group they are in “shall be received for nurturing and discipleship training for a period of three months without the denial of sacramental rites of the Kingdom of God and shall be placed under the special care of the pastor in charge or his or her designee” (pp. 58-59).

In these five churches, the new members class was for adults only, those 18 year of age and older. None of the churches had anything in place for children and/or youth. In four of the five participating churches, the pastor taught the new members class. The classes were anywhere from four to eight weeks in length. According to *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church* (2012) all new members are to be given at least the following areas of study:

1. The Assurance of Salvation
2. The Articles of Religion
3. A History of the AME Church
4. Introduction to Christian Stewardship, to include, but not restricted to, Bible study and personal prayer
5. Rules and Regulations of the AME Church as described in *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*.
6. Introduction to the Bible

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### 7. History and Ministries of the Local Church

### 8. Catechism on Faith (p. 59)

Materials used should be developed by the AME Church whenever possible. Four of the five local churches developed their own curriculum for new member class. One church used *The S. A. T. Manual on African Methodism – The Spiritual Aptitude Test* (2011) by Bishop Gregory G. M. Ingram. Bishop Ingram presides over the First Episcopal District of the AME Church.

I did not have the opportunity to observe any of the churches new members' classes. The information I am sharing is based on what the pastors told me about how they handle the new members' class. Rev. Julia believes there should be others in the local church who teach the new members class; right now she is the only one who teaches it. Rev. Julia stated,

I do it all on a one-to-one basis. We do not have a whole group of people come because we do not have that many people joining so we set the time for them to come. Those who have gone through the new member class and have a relationship with the pastor seem to integrate into the life of the church and get busy more consistently than those who have not.

The local church I attend uses *The S. A. T. Manual on African Methodism – The Spiritual Aptitude Test* (2011) by Bishop Gregory G. M. Ingram as the curriculum for its new member class. There are eight chapters:

Chapter 1 – First Things First: Salvation

Chapter 2 – Second To None Christianity

Chapter 3 – What African Methodists Believe

Chapter 4 – What You Should Know About African Methodism

Chapter 5 – What You Should Know About Our Structure and Composition

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Chapter 6 – What You Should Know about Christian Stewardship

Chapter 7 – The Church at Worship

Chapter 8 – The Church at Work

There is a spiritual aptitude test, 75 questions at the end of the book. The new member ministry team has broken them down based on the chapter in the book. Each new member class participant receives a copy of the book and the questions. Each week a chapter is discussed and the questions are used to help generate dialogue. Make up classes are offered if needed. When the eight chapters are completed, the AME has a ceremony of reading participants into full membership. The other three church pastors did not go into details about their new member curriculum only that they, the pastor, taught it and it included the history of the AME was included.

### **Role models.**

A role model is someone who people aspire to be like. Their values, attitudes, and behaviors serve as examples for others. Sanders (1997) defined role models as:

People who exhibit socially and professionally acceptable behaviors that others want to emulate (strive to equal or excel). Role models can have impact on three levels: individual, interpersonal, and organizational. On the individual level, role modeling enhances personal development; on the interpersonal level, it provides interchange of valuable knowledge and behavior; and on the organizational level it represents a pool of valuable resources accessed through formal and informal relationships. (p. 185)

The use of role models to motivate us, teach us in specific ways to uncover our true potential, and overcome our barriers is increasingly recognized: in different cultures, in business, in religion, in education, in social service programs, in government, and many other segments of

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

society. Slavok (2012) stated, “People who are constantly striving to improve themselves will tell you one thing for sure, one thing they all have in common is having role models in their lives” (p. 1).

McCullough (2013) stated that when definitions for role model are offered, there is some disagreement about the nature of the relationship being examined. For example, some researchers have explicitly stated an active relationship between the role model and observer must exist (Gilbert, Gallessich, & Evans, 1983), while others have stated that an interpersonal relationship between observer and model is not required (Johnson, Rose, & Schlosser, 2007). The data collected for this research indicate the participants’ role models sometimes were present in their lives, and sometimes the participants had not personally met them.

However, in either case, these research participants appreciated the value of role models. Rev. Felix commented, “I started getting more and more drawn into the church, but it was primarily, I think, because I really like the pastor. He made it so interesting to hear about Christ. It was a real heart-to-heart discussion about those things in real life, and how Christ is in our lives.” Rachel talked about her relationship with her grandfather. “I remember every day almost I would talk to grandpa about God and he was so patient and answered so many questions.” Scripture directs us to emulate others. Paul speaking to the Philippian church said, “Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you” (Philippian 3:17 NIV). Again in First Corinthians 11:1 (NIV) Paul says, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.”

The relationship factor, that interaction with other members of the church, is key for informal education. Rev. Vashti said, “The relationship factor was beneficial for me. It encouraged me to go to Bible study, and Sunday school, to really listen to the sermons then I

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

could talk about the sermon, the Sunday school lesson and/or the Bible study topic to the people that I know at the church.” Rev. Julia said, “Christian education is about relationships.”

Role models played a very important role in the participants’ discipleship formation journeys. All participants, clergy and non-clergy, talked about the role models in their lives and how they influenced them on their journeys. In some cases, the role models were positive influences and in some case they were negative influences. Rev. Gabriel shared a statement from his daughter who had recently returned to church after many years. She said, “I am struggling, Dad, because the attitude of the people in the church is no different than the people on the street.” As I looked at the transcribed data, the role models mentioned consisted of Christ, other biblical characters, family, and friends.

### *Discipleship role modeling in the life of Christ.*

Christ and the life He lived is the primary role model for those desiring to be his disciples. Jesus Christ comes asking disciples to follow Him—not merely accept Him, not merely believe in Him, not merely worship Him, but to follow Him. The life of Christ was the number one example participants used in defining role model. Rev. Haman defined Christ as his role model by describing “Christ [as purpose] centered and others focused.” Rev. Julia explained,

Jesus lived a life that was counter culture. The expectation of the church or role model of Christ is that they would live a life that is in direct opposition to pop culture. Relating and identifying with the larger community is what Christ did. Reaching out to the disenfranchised, and outcast of this world and community in which He lived.

Rev. Felix and Rev. Haman stated, “Literally follow the example of Christ,” and “follow the practices that Christ set forth in the biblical Canon.” Hannah and Salome said disciples are those

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

“following the teachings of Christ” and Seth said, “You have to demonstrate Christ’s example in word and deed.” These participants presented Christ as a role model.

The participants see Christ as the ultimate role model for them. Just like the participants, Christ dealt with everyday life issues in the church and outside the church. The stories of Jesus’ life in scripture show his encounter with people from all walks of life. Christians today also interact with people from all walks of life and those encounters come at work, home, church and community.

*Discipleship role modeling an influence of lifestyle change.*

Becoming a disciple of Christ requires a lifestyle change and the data show role models influence that change. This theme was evident with clergy and non-clergy. Rev. Earnest stated, “I was in church but did not have a personal relationship with God. I had not really committed myself to Christ.” Going to church on Sunday was expected. It is the right thing to do. It was evident the participant did not have a role model to help him build a relationship with God. Salome said, “I simply learned and followed what was tradition in my family. Attending church definitely has a role in the journey but is only one part of the journey.” Tradition influenced this participant, as the family role modeled going to church regularly so Salome followed suit. How does one move beyond just attending church? One of the keys is in addition to seeing a role model attending church regularly, seeing a change in their characteristics. Their actions and interactions are kinder, more patient, and compassionate so there is a combination of outward change and inward change.

Part of the answer is in having role models who are living the life of Disciples of Christ. In addition, most of the participants’ families have always gone to church and they realize that becoming a disciple is more than going in and out of the church building on Sunday for worship

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

and Wednesday for Bible study. It was implied that having a role model could have made a difference though it was not directly said; for example, the pastor's daughter stated that she was struggling because she did not see a difference in those living a street life and those who were in the church. The AME Church designed the class leader system to help in this area. When a person becomes a member of the church, she/he is assigned to a class leader. The class leader is responsible for mentoring the new member.

The class leader system is a means of keeping in touch with the disciples to see how they are doing, encouraging them, praying for them, informing them of church activities and work, seeking their support of the ministry and mission, and keeping them abreast of needs, achievements. *The Doctrine and Discipline of the AME Church* (2012), stipulates the minister appointed to a local church will choose class leaders annually. It also lists guidelines for how often the class leader and class member should meet. All five of the churches are working to revive and/or implement a class leader system.

Although each church has at least one discipleship formation program, one of the struggles for leadership is finding time to focus on the program(s). Rev. Julia stated, "Leadership has to be in the process in order to give strength and momentum to discipleship formation. You have to carve out room for and time for prioritizing around the things that are going to support your congregation's discipleship." The day-to-day operation of the church consumes the leadership with busy work. Rev. Julia also said at another point, "I spend more time contemplating getting ready for the next meeting than I am contemplating discipleship formation." The leadership role in discipleship formation is, in the words of Rev. Julia, "distracted by the trappings of ministry, for example, meetings and fundraising." The general

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

findings/observations and participants' statements attest to the need for more time to evaluate and develop programs for discipleship formation.

This lifestyle change from simple membership to discipleship requires personal surrender and personal commitment. A disciple surrenders to the lifestyle and to the journey. In other words, according to Rev. Isaiah, a disciple must say, "Lord I surrender and I am committing my life to you." The place to start, according to Rev. Tabitha is to first "fall in love with Jesus. This helps to quiet the fears of the unknowns of this new life as a disciple of Christ." These comments show the significance role models can play in the discipleship lifestyle change.

***Discipleship role modeling in the biological family and church family.***

In the African American community, specifically the Baby Boomers generation, it is not uncommon for the majority of families to be brought up in the church. If your family did not take you to church, they sent you to church every Sunday. Of the 60 participants, 90% grew up going to church on a regular bases. Barnabas stated, "I grew up with parents that were into the church. Father was a minister; mother was a missionary. I had to go to church every Sunday. I had to go to Sunday school every Sunday." This was the mantra of the majority of those who participated in my study. Rachel explained, "I had a grandfather that was a deacon in the Baptist church and I went to church with him every Sunday." These families were doing what the Scriptures instructed them to do in Proverbs 22:6 (NIV): "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." So, the parents and family members of these participants modeled the tradition of attending church, but just attending church did not necessarily lead to the desire for a deeper walk with God.

When you see that deeper walk in others, it is inviting, it looks good, and you want more. From that you begin to hunger, thirst, and seek more for yourself. There is a longing for

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

more that goes beyond just attending church on a regular basis. Dinah talked about her “amazing aunt, a former nun, who loved all of us kids. And the coolest thing about her was she always had stories and they always were around Jesus. I had not created a relationship with Christ at that point but definitely an interest.” As a child, Dinah saw her aunt was a model for sharing Christ with others. Deborah noted “As a child you do it [go to church] because your parents make you. I was in my 40s before I actually started to live as a disciple of Christ.” Deborah’s parents believed it was important for her to attend church. She came back to church because of her parent’s early training of attending church.

I believe their regular church attendance as children planted seeds of faith in these research participants. These seeds would later help them to return church in their adult life seeking God at a deeper level. Scripture says that “those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6 NIV). Also, Scripture says, “If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all of your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13 NIV). There has to be a strategy to get to that deeper level. Just participating in the activities of the church is not enough to get a disciple to a deeper level.

### **Summary of Discipleship Journey Aids Inside the Church**

Christian education in these local churches is thought of as new members classes, Sunday school, Bible study, and sermons. My observations showed the components to teach the congregants about discipleship are in place: Sunday school, Bible study, and sermons. Each local church had at least one Bible study during the week and in some cases several. Each local church had a weekly Sunday school hour in place. And sermons, which are the cornerstone of the church, happen every Sunday, and it is this Sunday morning service the majority of the membership attends.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Of these Christian education tools, in place in the local churches, Sunday school is not well attended by the clergy and non-clergy. Out of the 60 participants, approximately 25% (15 people) actually attended Sunday school or Bible study as an adult even though they were regular attendees when they were children and youth in the church.

The lack of participation in the Christian education programs in the local church says something, but the question is what does it say? In the words of Carter G. Woodson (2006) in his book, *The Mis-Education of The Negro*, “The mere imparting of education is not enough. Above all things, the effort must result in making a man think and do for himself just as the Jews have done in spite of universal persecution” (p. 2). Going through the Bible for knowledge is not enough. Disciples must apply what they are reading and studying in their day-to-day lives thus bringing transformation in the way that they think, speak, and act. This beckons the question as to whether the members of these churches, who are working on their discipleship formation, are being equipped to live their lives according to the scripture. This research looked at what churches currently have in place in the area of Christian education: New Members Class, Bible study, Sunday school, sermons, class leaders, and outreach activities to help disciples equip themselves to live their lives in line with scripture.

Ninety percent of the individuals talked about their attendance in Sunday school as children and the value of it setting the foundation for their Christian life. Less than 25% of the participants attend Sunday school as an adult. This was true for clergy and non-clergy. Carter G Woodson (2006) stated, “When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions” (p. 4). As it related to Woodson’s quote if you control a man’s thinking you don’t have to worry about him revolting, going against the status quo, and questioning leadership. The

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

tragedy is that this perhaps has stifled discipleship formation. Based on my research, the church may need to review their current Christian education programs for effectiveness.

Discipleship formation journey inside the five local churches studied included foundational Christian education programs and role models. According to research participants, role models played a valuable part in their discipleship formation. Role models encouraged and influenced participants on their journey. All five churches had a program in place, class leaders, whose purpose was to develop a relationship with disciples who were assigned to them. All five churches were working to revive their class leaders program because it provided an intentional way of assigning role models to aid the discipleship formation journey inside the church.

### **Discipleship Formation Journey Hindrances inside the Church**

Participants identified some areas within the church that hinder discipleship formation—things that slow down the process, take searchers on detours, and roadblocks that can deter and even stop the quest for a deeper walk with God. Some of these things are self-imposed and others are thrown at the searchers from different directions within the church, and within their families. The hindrances described by participants were church traditions, church politics, church trappings, and church expectations.

#### **Church Traditions.**

Traditions have important roles in our lives. Whether in our family, work, community, or church, traditions contribute to our sense of belonging and understandings of who we are. Traditions are a group of oral or written laws or rituals often passed down from generation to generation, often without question. Traditions are not necessarily a bad thing. Rev. Rhoda stated, “They, members, are so steeped in traditions. As long as they fulfill those traditions, they think they are doing what the Lord has called them to do.”

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

The Sunday school in the local church is a tradition that could use a revamping. Sapphira stated, “Sunday school on Sunday mornings is just filler time, a place holder. I think it needs a major revamp because no one comes, children or adults.” Rev. Julia put it this way “Many denominations have gone to a Christian education hour at midweek. Sunday mornings Sunday school is not working for us anymore.” Tradition is a good thing because it gives us foundation and direction but when tradition becomes just a matter of repeating words over and over without any meaning it may be time for a change. The order of service came as a topic of contention in the area of traditions. Dan shared his experience of asking his pastor and his presiding elder about making a change to the order of service. The pastor’s response was adamant that “there was no way he would change the order of service.” According to Dan, there was no discussion on changing the order of service, why he wanted to change it or what changes he might suggest. Even though the order of service is based on scripture and scripture is used throughout, for Dan and others it has lost its flavor, it is no longer salty. Rev. Julia commented, “Even though we have a wonderful call to worship and an introit that focuses on God and the purpose is worship, because it is rote, people do not get that meaning and so it needs to be looked at.”

These comments implied hindrances regarding people’s journeys. It seemed clear the approach to Sunday school hinders attendance and therefore hinders entering into or maintaining the journey. Some participants perceived colloquial Christian words and phrases are perceived as empty or shallow and a hindrance to a journey with depth and believability. Some perceived the order of service as an intended inflexible routine and a hindrance to a journey with fresh and new moves of the Spirit through new and flexible liturgical approaches.

Traditions must be evaluated or challenged periodically to see if they are still helpful to people on their discipleship journey. People need to know why they practice certain traditions so

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

they can know that they are not engaging in behavior because “it has always been done.” There is a need to investigate their own traditions practiced at home, church and in all areas of their lives. In the church, traditions should not become more important than their relationship with Jesus Christ and their discipleship formation.

### **Church Politics.**

Politics in the church is not new with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; it is an age-old concern in the Christian community. There are two elements of church politics: administrative busy work and a lack of real clergy/laity unity. As the head of a major ministry, Elisabeth stated, “There is so much politics that you have to deal with in the church in order to do ministry. I just want to do the work.” Based on this participant’s passionate comment, politics, stated and unstated, makes it difficult to do the work of the church. Inquiring further for more details, Elisabeth shared that “the paperwork involved in being a ministry head is time consuming and unnecessary. Unnecessary because no one looks at it for planning, evaluation or budgeting so it is frustrating and a waste of my time.” The hindrance to discipleship formation is ministers are doing great ministry work but then there is this administrative paper work which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is not being used so it is unnecessary and a waste of time. As the politics of the church are played out Rev. Tabitha said,

It is more about being a part of a ministry than it was about serving Christ. It starts to become apparent, at least in my journey, that we weren’t evangelizing the people or people weren’t really becoming followers of Christ; they were becoming a follower of man or the church/denomination.

As it relates to a lack of real clergy/laity unity, there are competing interests pointed out by Rev. Julia. She lamented “over the competing interest between the laity and the clergy in the life of

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

the church.” These two groups (laity & clergy) should be working together building the Kingdom of God but are divided by competing interests. Homosexuality in the church is one example of a competing interest. The church, clergy and laity, have no plan, no ministry, and no approach on how to reach out to those in their congregations who are living an alternative lifestyle. Each group, clergy/laity, is waiting for the other one to take the lead. No one knows what to do so no one does anything. The hindrance is that there is not help in the church for how to handle a difficult, and controversial topic or situation; therefore, nothing is done. I do not think that is the example Jesus’ disciples should set. The hindrance is the wrong focus. Instead of the two groups focusing on a solution to the problem at hand, each group thinks the other one should be doing the work, and nothing is being done.

There is no ministry in the local church without the laity. The work of the local church is supposed to be a shared ministry between the clergy and the laity. The structure in *The Doctrine and Discipline* (2012) of the AME Church allows for this shared ministry at all levels of the church: connectional, Episcopal District, Annual Conference, District Conference and the local church. The committees functioning at each level are made up of clergy and laity. Although these committees are made up of the two groups, no one is responsible for making sure that both groups participate. At the annual conference level, the finance committee is the only one that I saw where the laity and clergy were working together. Rev. Julia commented, “The laity have so much more authority than they realize.” The relationship between the clergy and the laity is one of “you do what I say.” The laity sees the pastor as the ultimate authority, what they say goes. This may not be true in actuality but the culture of the church is that this is true. So the hindrance is the relationship between the clergy and the laity as perceived by each group. The

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

laity sees the clergy as holding all the power and authority: the image projected is of a dictatorship even though the official AME church structure creates a shared clergy/laity ministry.

**Church Trappings.**

Some church components meant to aid discipleship formation, have become trappings or at least some church members view them as trappings – accessories, trimmings, frills – by church members. Raising money for the church budget, outreach, expenses, etc., seem to be first and foremost in the members' minds. Each church event participants mentioned such as Men's Day, Women's Day, church anniversary, and the annual choir concert focused on raising money sometimes causing tension between the members, and between the members and the clergy. Discipleship formation was not an obvious component to these events when maybe it could have been. Because people volunteer to participate in different events to help organize and plan, the church has many opportunities to impact discipleship formation no matter what the event might be. Each of these events happen once a year, at a designated time, month, and Sunday. One or two fundraisers are associated with the event with the finale being a Sunday worship service.

Rev. Rhoda's example was, "We focus our special days and programs on raising funds to make the budget. We get so wrapped up in the budget that we cannot focus on anything else." Therefore those who are responsible for the local church budget and the connectional budget focus all of their attention on raising funds to meet the budgets. Seth stated that members should "stop being afraid. Do not be afraid to tear down the altars that we've built around our special days and programs." Is there a way for the special days and programs to have a discipleship component to them? Rev. Julia laments over the fact that she feels "the laity does not participate enough in the life of the church so that they can articulate what they fuss about all the time, the focus on the budget and fundraising." A dialogue between the clergy and laity on this topic

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

could be a starting point. This would create an opportunity for clergy and laity to do an event together then talk about how the experience related to their faith.

Another example of trappings stifling discipleship is emotionalism. Emotionalism is a false precept plaguing the church. Rev. Earnest said,

You can bring em in so that they get that good feeling. I mean, you know, they get just elated and they get emotional and they get to sweating and shouting and stomping and everything else and don't have anything that is going to sustain them through even the slightest of storms in their lives.

The worship service is a time of rejoicing in the presence of God. Praising him for His transforming work in the life of a member/disciple. The idea is disciples are to take the Scriptures, joys from worship, and in practical ways apply the principle from the passage, story, and/or service to their everyday situations, practical application. The intent is not emotionalism but it is the result. Cain said "I can work up my own emotions. I need some practical help for how to live the life of a disciple."

The focus on finances turn members off from pursuing a relationship with God. The sense is that raising money is more important than having a relationship with God thus missing the point that a relationship with God is number one in a person's discipleship formation. The second example of the church trapping, emotionalism, is not all bad. Emotions are from God. They are included in the make-up of who we are. Emotions by themselves are not enough to help us in our discipleship formation. They have to be coupled with our knowledge of God's word, our life experiences, traditions, and intellect.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Church Expectations.**

The church has lowered its standards over the years. The expectation of the church today is members will attend Sunday worship, give generously, that is, pay their ten percent or tithe and offering, plus say yes when asked to volunteer to work on some project, ministry, or task. Holy living is not required. Members are not held accountable to a higher standard of living. Rev. Isaac put it this way, “The church is much more accepting of things today that they would have been horrified about 50 to 75 years ago; for example, children out of wedlock, couples living together not married, the way people dress, selling in the church on Sunday, etc.” Sapphira stated, “My turning point was when the church set standards. Prior to that I was in church, but there were no standards, no expectations, and no accountability. At that point for me, it became more than just going to church.” Rev. Rhoda remembered,

I saw a lot of things in church at that time. It was a lot of rudeness, a lot of people that were adults at the time and in charge and doing things who really didn't have Christ in their heart. I thought at that time, I don't think I want to do that. If this is what really going to church is, I don't think so.

A fear of losing members takes priority over holding individuals accountable to expectations, specifically a tithing member. Some church authorities seem willing to overlook or look the other way when one of the church's middle-class or upper middle-class members behaves inappropriately. It is a tough conversation to have with a member who is living an immoral life when he/she gives a lot of money to the church. If that member leaves, there will be a financial impact on the church's budget. In addition, families make up the majority of church membership; so, there is the possibility, if a member leaves, the church could lose an entire family.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Doctrine and Discipline (the blue book).**

The AME Church has its own set of additional laws found in the *Doctrines and Disciplines of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (2012). Rev. Rhoda complained, “I knew more about this blue book, The Book of Discipline, than about what was in the Holy Scripture.” The participant spoke as though the Blue Book, because of the emphasis on the church structure and operations versus the application of the Scripture to everyday life, was a hindrance to her deeper walk with God. Many participants, clergy and non-clergy commented that they knew more about the Book of Discipline and the structure of the church than about God. The Book of Discipline is used to teach members and officers their role in the church. Unfortunately it does not necessarily help with a deeper relationship with God and, in fact, it can hinder that relationship.

The Book of Discipline includes over 700 pages of rules and regulations for each level of the AME Church. While the average church member does not own one, it is available for purchase to all members. Those who do have a copy use it when it is advantageous for them to do so. It works both ways in that clergy use it to lord it over the laity and the laity can also use it to keep the clergy in check. So, a tool, meant to provide guidelines to help the church be a better religious institution is instead being used to keep the clergy and/or laity in check. Rev. Rhoda stated the pastor used the Book of Discipline to teach her what she needed to know about the role of a steward.

I learned to be a steward. I learned what stewards did. I was taught all of the other things about what a steward does. But I did not realize that stewards were the spiritual arm of the church. The focus of the teaching was on the mechanics of being a steward.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

The pastor taught the spiritual leaders of the church about the role of a steward, but did not include the importance of having a relationship with God, having a prayer life, going to Bible study and Sunday school, the basics to discipleship formation. The steward is taught the role and responsibilities of a steward but not the discipleship formation component of being a steward.

The Book of Discipline is to be used as a guide for the structure of the AME Church. However, according to Rev. Julia “Some members and pastors feel very threatened and feel like you are attacking the church when you try and critique or make any changes to what they feel the Book of Discipline means.” Mariam experienced frustration when inquiring about making changes to how the stewards function and when the pastor said “We will do it this way because that is what the discipline says.” Mariam went on to say “I used to get so tired of that.” Changes to the discipline occur at the General Conference every four years. Legislative committees made up of clergy and laity from each Episcopal district prepares and submits legislation for consideration at the General Conference. Is the Book of Discipline to be a guide or is it to be followed to the letter? Rev. Julia said, “People go to the discipline before they go to the Bible. How do you help them see the Bible as the foundational book and the discipline as the process book?” The hindrance is that the Book of Discipline is not equal to nor should it take priority over the Bible; it is a compliment to the Bible.

A similar issue is documented in the New Testament Scriptures when the Pharisees added an additional 600 laws to the laws and commands that God had given his people. The Gospels state “By your own rules, which you teach people you are rejecting what God said. And you do many things like that” Mark 7:13 (New Century Version, NCV).

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### **Discipleship Formation Journey Aids Outside the Church**

The essence for developing as a disciple of Jesus Christ is not always in the expected place, like the local church. Thirty one percent (19) of the 60 participants went outside of their local churches in search of growing and developing as a disciple of Jesus Christ: in seminary, retreats, outside Bible studies, Christian seminars, Bible institutes, and the like. It is interesting to note 33% or 5 of the 15 clergy participants' search for a deeper walk began before they accepted their call to the ordained ministry and before they entered the ordination process which requires attending seminary. This willingness and openness to go outside of their local church searching for that deeper walk with God is not peculiar to ordained clergy; non-clergy did it as well. However, none of the participants could describe exactly what sent them looking for more than what was currently being experienced in their life as a disciple.

#### **Bible study fellowship.**

Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) and The Navigators are two programs clergy and non-clergy mentioned as means by which they added value to their individual discipleship formation process. The premise of these programs is to assist participants in going deeper in their growth as disciples. Neither program is associated with the AME denomination. Both are non-denominational.

Ten of the 60 participants, 17%, had been through the BSF program. The BSF website ([www.bsfindernational.org](http://www.bsfindernational.org)) provided the following details of this ministry. Founded more than fifty years ago by the late China missionary Audrey Wetherell Johnson, BSF, a Nondenominational International Bible Study, meets one day a week and conducts more than 1,000 classes in 38 countries, on six continents. BSF designs sessions to meet the needs of women, men, and singles separately. BSF includes five tiers of learning: Participants must 1)

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

complete the weekly lesson questions on their own; 2) be present and participate in weekly small group discussion of responses to the questions; 3) attend large group worship and lectures on the weekly lesson; 4) accept a hand-out after the lecture of detailed notes of the lesson, 5) attend a weekly leaders' only preparation session, if the participant is a small group leader. In the first years of the BFS, participants committed to completing a study of the Bible in five years; however, because of its popularity and the interest in more coverage of some books of the Bible, the commitment is now nine years. Rev. Phoebe commented,

I was raised in the church but my real discipleship journey started at BSF, which was not associated with any church in particular. A friend of mine asked me to go with her. I said, "Oh, yes, I would go." I was not intending to go anywhere. I am so sorry to put this out there but it the truth. Then I got in and the next week we started. There it just got a hold of me because the Word came alive to me.

Elisabeth's response to BSF was, "I go to BSF because I feel like at least for now, it feeds that spiritual piece that I need in terms of a more indepth study of Scripture that is Bible based." The local church is offering that "sense of belonging" as a member but is lacking in the feeding of participants' spiritual lives.

**Navigators.**

The Navigators program, another outside the local church program, had an impact on research participants. Rev. Julia mentioned, "Navigators made a major difference in my growth as a disciple of Christ." Navigators is a college campus ministry at least this is how Rev. Julia became familiar with it. Her participation in it had a great impact on her life. As stated on the Navigators' website ([www.navigators.org](http://www.navigators.org))

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

We help people “navigate” life by establishing life-on-life mentoring—or discipling—relationships with them, equipping them to make an impact on those around them for God's glory. What can be life-changing relationships, are formed on college campuses, on military installations, in neighborhoods, churches, and even high-rise apartment buildings. Navigator’s mission is taken from the Bible, God's Word. Desiring to fulfill 2 Timothy 2:2, Navigators seek to forward the grace and teachings of Christ from one believer to the next—what we call “generational multiplication.” “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2 New International Version).

According to Rev. Rhoda, it was the Navigators Program that helped her move to a deeper level in her discipleship formation.

They were based here at the university I was attending and it was a summer program where you met and lived with other young adults who were wanting to be Disciples of Christ. There was woman to woman time, small group, and small group Bible study. We had devotion time. It was regimented and it facilitated my opportunity to just really focus on God, focus on what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We did all of the activities together - scripture memory, we lived in the house together, about 40 people, and then we had times when we would go out and witness, and we’d come back and process with each other to help us reflect and think about our experience.

According to 30 individuals or 50% of the participants, clergy and non-clergy, the discipleship formation programs inside the local church—Sunday school, Bible study, and sermons—were not enough. Rev. Julia stated, “My participation in Bible Study, Sunday school, the teaching ministries of the church caused me to want to go deeper into ministry and from

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

there, I found myself in Bible College.” Rev. Phoebe said, “I did not know what to do or where to go to find the information I needed to do the teaching that was needed.” With seven participants, five women and two men, the teachings and trainings being offered at the local church were not enough. Neither the preparedness of the trainers/teachers nor the content of the training was adequate to fulfill the needs of these seven individuals at this point in their journey. Moving beyond their local church to get what they needed to grow as disciples of Christ seemed to be the path for some of the interview and focus group participants.

### **Role models in Christian community.**

I discussed the importance of role models in the section on discipleship journey aids inside the church. Role models outside the local church are sometimes equally important and can come from other churches and/or denominations (local, national or international), family members, friends, historical characters, and the ministry.

Just like the participants, Christ dealt with everyday life issues in the church and outside the church. The stories of Jesus’ life in scripture show his encounter with people from all walks of life. Christians today also interact with people from all walks of life and those encounters come via social media, on-line ministries, work, home, church and community. Rev. Rhoda called one cable television preacher her “second pastor.” The content of his preaching was at a deeper level than what she experienced at church. Participants are not limited to what is provided through their local church for their discipleship formation. Anna explained “I traveled twice a year for about eight years to Rev. Cherry’s church for his Pastors and Leaders Institute in the summer and their women’s retreats in the fall. It was worth every penny I spent.” Anna talked about how the preaching and teaching were more insightful than what she was receiving at her local church on how to live as a Christian woman. The participants did not stop attending

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

their local churches. They sought out additional means of learning to be a disciple of Christ via other teachers and preachers.

With television and the Internet, church members have access to sermons and ministry models from around the globe. Clergy and non-clergy participants watched some of the well-known television evangelists, for example, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyers, Joseph Prince, and Bishop T. D. Jakes. These as well as others serve as role models. A role model can be local, national or international.

Discipleship aids outside the church do have an impact on a person's discipleship formation. There are other faith-based programs that are available to help develop the characteristics of Christ in the life of a believer. Formal Christian education, certificate and degree programs are other outside aids to discipleship formation. Role models outside the church, living and dead, can have an impact on discipleship formation.

In summary, in Chapter 4, I describe four categories that emerged from the study's findings: 1) discipleship as a journey, 2) discipleship formation journey aids inside the church, 3) discipleship formation hindrance inside the church, and 4) describes the discipleship formation journey aids outside the church.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

## Chapter Five –Analysis, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Analysis

My study explored the discipleship formation process of clergy and non-clergy in five AME Churches in a Midwestern metropolitan area. The findings uncovered discipleship formation as multi-dimensional (see figure 4). The major theme of discipleship journey has four components: definition of disciple, discipleship formation journey aids inside the church, discipleship formation journey hindrances inside the church, and discipleship formation journey aids outside the church.

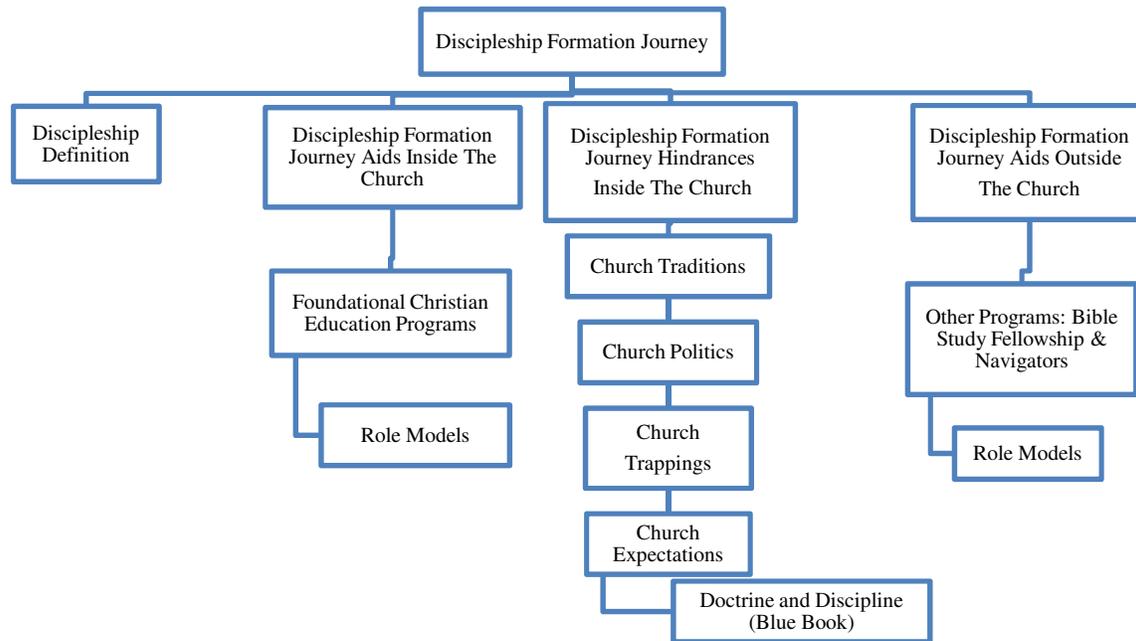


Figure 4. Discipleship Formation Journey Finding Flow

I used a qualitative case study to determine whether the five churches were intentional in their discipleship formation process for new and existing church members. I based the findings on data collected from research participants in one-on-one interviews with clergy, focus groups with non-clergy, and observations of church educational activities. The purpose of this analysis chapter is to examine the findings through the theoretical lens of: rituals, myths, habits and the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

sacred; critical pedagogy (particularly critical thinking, banking education and critical consciousness); black liberation theology; and transformational leadership. The theoretical lens are depicted in Figure 1.

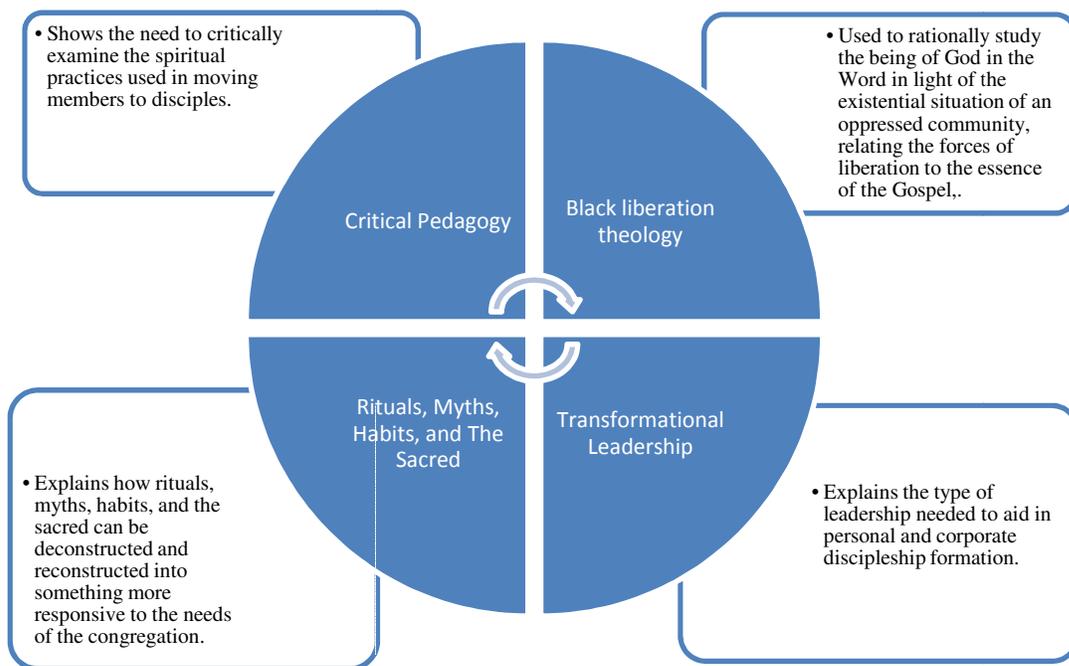


Figure 1. Four theories to review, evaluate and revamp discipleship formation

### **Discipleship formation journey – rituals, myths, habits, and the sacred.**

The most frequently talked about dimension of discipleship formation was the journey. I used the theoretical framework of rituals, myths, habits and the sacred to unpack the participants' narratives of their journey. Lincoln (1989) said that rituals could sustained or undermined a society, in this case of my research, a religious society. The ritual of going to church sustained the discipleship formation journey because for the majority of the research participants, going to church was a family ritual started in their childhood and carried into adulthood. Even though, they would stop going to church during their journey, eventually, research participants ended up going back to church.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Research participants participated in the ritual of church attendance, which was required by their parents when they were children. The focus was not on becoming a disciple of Christ. Even in adulthood, the ritual of church attendance was more of a ritual carried forward from childhood. About half of the participants rebelled against the attendance ritual as adults and stopped attending church for a period of time. Though all ended up back in church, it took some time for them to move from ritual and habit to actually working toward discipleship formation.

Attending church is what Fasching and deChant (2005) would call the sacred, meaning it mattered more than anything else. It was not becoming a disciple that was sacred but the act of attending church, attending Sunday school, attending the special day's program, and other church functions. Fasching and deChant (2005) connect myths and rituals with important days of a religious tradition. For these churches, that included the sacred days of Men's Day, Women's Day, Church Anniversary, Annual Choir Concert, Appreciation Days (Pastor Appreciation, Annual Ushers Day, etc.). My research showed that in these churches regular attendance to Sunday school, Bible study, weekly worship, and annual days is both ritual and sacred. Church attendance is ritual in the sense that attending church is an established routine, and attendance is sacred because attendance itself mattered more than whether that attendance aided in the discipleship formation journey.

For the church, attendance at these sacred days mattered because it was the number one money-maker and people drawer. Celebration of these days has taken priority and they are not being linked to what role they can play in an individual's discipleship formation. In fact, it was a myth to think that the programs were shaping discipleship formation. The Holy, according to Fasching and deChant (2005), offers hope to these AME Churches. Because the Holy calls the sacred into question; it offers hope. Questioning the sacred can be chancy but if successful can

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

provide insight into how well the sacred is doing or not doing at facilitating new and existing members in their discipleship formation and what might possibly need to change.

These sacred days (Men's Day, Women's Day, church Anniversary, Annual Choir Concert, etc.) have not been called into question as to the value they add in people's discipleship formation journey. Historically, a means of financial revenue has been their purpose. It is important for the churches to look for a way that discipleship formation could be a component of these annual days. In the planning of these annual days, the planning team could consider adding a discipleship goal to the outcomes along with a financial goal. This would be essential if they are to play a part in discipleship formation. The sacred opportunity is imbedded in the culture of these churches and the culture protects them.

### **Discipleship formation journey – critical pedagogy.**

The lens of critical pedagogy, which requires individuals to be reflective thinkers and agents of change, helped me to critically examine the discipleship formation process in the five churches based on the data from the one-on-one interviews and the focus groups. Only two clergy spoke of reviewing their existing programs and then having time for dialogue with the church leaders to see what, if any, action needed to be taken.

In my findings, I noted that research participants considered Christian education to be one of the key dimensions in discipleship formation. Christian education in this study consists mainly of two programs: Sunday school and Bible study. The majority, 90%, of the respondents talked about their experience in Sunday school and Bible study. The two programs have not been evaluated for effectiveness in years.

Research participants, while required to attend Sunday school as children, did not choose to continue to attend as adults. Research from Erskine (2004) showed that historically Sunday

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

school has been the foundation of a Christian's growth. However, based on the responses of clergy and non-clergy, there has been no effort to strengthen this vital ministry of the church, in reality the lack of attendance indicates it is not worthwhile for them to attend.

Sunday school is the place where members have the opportunity to critically re-examine scripture and traditions to help them know, what, if any, action should be taken in their own life or the life of the church. Interaction between the Sunday school teacher, fellow students and the scripture lesson could be an example of engaged pedagogy. This method would help teachers and student get passed limitations and biases. Engaged pedagogy eliminates the one-way teaching environment. Teachers learn from students, students learn from teacher, and both are informed by the Scripture lesson.

Engaged pedagogy has two components. The first being the dialogue or conversation; ensuring that all voices are heard or at least have the opportunity to share their perspective or critique of the issue. Whether the issue is a personal concern going on in your life, an issue internal to church policy and doctrine, or an issue external to the church. The church could use the theory of engaged pedagogy as a way to talk about the different instructional methodologies that the church ought to consider in the non-formal classes of Sunday school and Bible study. The second component is the engagement with critiquing the power structure and mechanism of oppression in the church. Thus, challenging the leadership to include personal engagement related to political, economic, and social critique both inside and outside the church.

Freire (1970), in his pedagogy, talked of the importance of engaging the experiential reality of the individual learner in the process in order to achieve a transformative learning experience for the individual and society as a whole. In contrast Freire (1970) described "banking education" where the narrator (the teacher) leads the students to memorize mechanically the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

narrated content. Freire says of banking education that “it turns students into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher... education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students save the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 72).

This may be why adults, even though raised in the church with regular Sunday school attendance no longer consider it to be a viable or worthy of their time commitment. Freire’s pedagogy proposed abandoning the “banking education” concept and replacing it with the “problem-posing” education concept. This means that teacher and student learn from each other as they dialogue, producing an atmosphere of hope, love, humility, and trust.

My observation of Sunday school and Bible study showed elements of banking education. Teachers are considered the experts in the Bible/Scripture. The assumption is that the reason you have the job of Bible study or Sunday school teacher is because you know more than everyone else. Therefore those attending often do not feel comfortable asking questions of the expert. They come to receive from the expert what they need to know. Secondly, a reason why those attending do not ask questions is they do not want to appear as not knowing something. Although, it is often said, “there is no dumb question” people do not feel free to speak up and ask questions. I believe it is because most have been around the church and Sunday school a long time so they think they should know even if they do not. Thirdly, asking questions can be seen as challenging the teacher which tradition says you do not want to do. You do not want to embarrass yourself or the teacher.

Is engaged pedagogy an option in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the AME church? I believe the answer is yes. The reason I say yes is because, to some extent, it is already happening. My observations of Sunday school classes in these five churches demonstrated that dialogue currently exists between the teachers and the students. There just needs to be an intentional effort in the local

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

church to train teachers more in the art of teaching and engaging students. This training would need to include a component discussion on the relevance of the scripture lesson to peoples' day-to-day lives. Discipleship formation is about how to live out the example of Christ in everyday life.

The two major modes used to educate Christians about the Bible and how it relates to their life is Sunday school and Bible study, yet the attendance at these programs is a very small percentage of these five churches' congregations. This is where critical thinking could play a major role in identifying and challenging assumptions and exploring and imagining alternatives (Brookfield, 1987, p. 15). If Sunday school is a key component of discipleship formation, the low attendance demonstrates that only a very small portion of the membership receives what they need to help them on their journey, considering.

The Scriptures encourage critical thinking by using words like: consider, discern, observe, reason, think, test, wonder, etc. Using a concordance and the aforementioned keywords, I searched for scriptures on critical thinking whether implied or specifically mentioned. Below are some Scripture references I found based on the above keywords that are associated with critical thinking. All of the following Scriptures are quoted from the NIV:

- Psalm 19:12 who can discern his errors?
- Proverbs 14:6 the mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.
- Isaiah 1:18 Come now, let us reason together.
- Lamentations 3:40 Let us examine our ways and test them
- 1 John 4:1 do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

- Philippians 1: 9b-10 abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21 Test everything.

Is critical thinking a lost art in the church? I think the church just does not know how to do critical thinking when it comes to reviewing a church program or ministry. Church culture does not encourage challenging the status quo by asking some tough questions about on-going traditions and the effectiveness of its programs. With guidance and training in this area, I believe church members would welcome the approach of how the church can be better at taking a hard, honest look at current programs that impact discipleship formation.

If the church viewed its current environment through the Freire theory of banking education what might the results be? I believe the church would be surprised, even shocked, by the thought that its Christian education programs are operating according to the Freire lens. When I read about Freire's banking education theory, I recognized it as how the church is operating in its Sunday school and Bible study programs. I thought it has a name. There is some dialogue and engaged pedagogy but is it not consistent. Freire's theory helps to name and better understand what is happening in the Christian education programs of the church.

The fact that only 15% of clergy and non-clergy go to Sunday school confirm the contention by Benson & Elkins in their study (1990) that there is a disinterest by adults in adult education programs like Sunday school and the apparent disinterest of clergy in education. So, even though these five churches would all say that Christian education is foundational to discipleship formation, low attendance to these programs suggest otherwise; only 25% or less of the studied churches' membership is attending Sunday school.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Discipleship formation journey – black liberation theology.**

James Cone defined black liberation theology as an idea that makes the Gospel of Jesus Christ pertinent to the life and struggles of African Americans. Jesus used discipleship formation to prepare his disciples for understanding his response to the life and struggles of people he encountered every day. Richard Allen and the founding fathers of the AME Church made the first serious attempt to organize oppressed Black people in the United States of America for the purpose of liberating their souls, minds, and bodies. Even though there are over 100 years between Allen and Cone, there is an affinity between Allen and Cone's theology of liberation. "The liberation movement in the black community had its origin in the formation of the Black Church" (Cone 1993, p. 254). The AME Church was started out of an act of liberation of slaves from the white Methodist church. Under the leadership of Richard Allen and others, freedom to worship empowered them to take a stand against the unfair treatment of the dominant culture in church leading them to start their own.

The core of Black liberation theology is an effort to make the gospel relevant to the life and struggles of American Blacks. One of the problems is that people do not feel the foundational education programs in the church, Sunday school and Bible study, are very relevant to their lives and that is why attendance is low. Here is where the church could tie Black liberation theology into critical pedagogy. Incorporating more of Black people's relation to God and Black people's daily circumstances and issues they face that perhaps the church, through the Christian education programs (Sunday school and Bible study), can aid congregants on how to work through. Using these informal educational works would help congregants get to what Giroux (1994) talked about "the ability to take constructive action" (p. 30) on those circumstances.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

A life application component is needed from the Scripture lessons of each Sunday school and Bible study session. How does this lesson relate to discipleship formation of African Americans in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century? The disciples' of Christ need help in dealing with the struggles of African Americans who are working on their discipleship formation. This is where Cone and Freire's theories can work together putting forth a liberating pedagogy for the church's foundational education programs.

If the church used Freire's pedagogy to aid the educational work of their church it would be more relevant to the everyday lives of African Americans. It would help disciples' of Christ to better deal with the struggles of life that has disproportionately impacted African Americans: blended families, racism, taking care of self, the achievement gap in schools, the prison industrial complex with its components, politics of the day, unemployment, and the list goes. Some struggles are major and relate to the African American community as a whole. This is where the church, Disciples of Christ, can work together to make a difference just as it did with the yellow fever epidemic and with the civil rights movement.

Freire's theory of critical consciousness would be helpful in that it looks at a situation from the social, economic, and political perspective and determines what, if any, action needs to be taken. All aspects of church education – Sunday school, Bible study, sermons, and new member class – could use Freire's pedagogy to help the church be proactively aiding members with their discipleship formation. The discipleship formation journey is a struggle for those in the study. No matter when the journey began, childhood or adulthood, there is a struggle to stay the course. Black liberation theology sees the Bible through the eyes of those who struggle. The study participants found themselves in a struggle to grow and develop as Disciples of Christ. There were detours for those who were raised in the church. The detour took clergy and non-clergy

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

from the four walls of the church into the world. There were also hindrances in the church that fueled the departure from the church. The local church's primary focus was the financial needs of the church, meeting the budget, instead of focusing on helping members with their discipleship formation. Black liberation theology saw the AMEC as the place that would free the souls, minds, and bodies from oppression of slavery (Cone & Wilmore, 1993). Many AMEs believe disciples of Jesus Christ would bring this type of freedom because that is what Jesus did as part of His Jewish inheritance that came through Moses freeing the Israelites. In His own ministry He became known for freeing people enslaved by oppressive rulers, economic conditions, and physical or mental illnesses. When looking at the five AME Churches in this study, is that freedom experienced today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as clergy and non-clergy strive to develop as Disciples of Christ? Cone (1997) returned to Scripture for the liberating element of black liberation theology specifically the Israelite's exodus from Egypt and the life of Christ.

Cone (1997) put forth another idea when he said, "New times require new concepts and methods" (p.272). Leadership in the AME Church has not taken the time to analyze the needs of congregants in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a new time. Church leaders have to re-group and generate other means of discipleship formation for new and existing members in order to maintain the strength of the church and its effectiveness as an organization. The traditions of these AME Churches that have been in place for centuries must be deconstructed and reconstructed in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Discipleship formation journey – transformational leadership.**

Christ is our ultimate role model but Christ is not here and sometimes we have to look at the people who are here. We make the attempt to emulate them, please them, and not disappoint them. The participants in the study talked about the positive impact that role models had on their

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

life. The leaders in the church are often looked up to as role models. The leadership role at all levels of the local church must take on the style of transformational leadership. Burns (2010) said “The result of transforming leadership is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4).

Everyone’s discipleship formation grows in an environment of transformational leadership.

Stone (2008) in reference to Quinn stated “the primary premise to transform an organization is to transform the leader, and the leader can then play the role of a catalyst in an organizational change process” (p. 6). The pastor and stewards, the spiritual leaders of the church, should give discipleship formation a priority in their lives so that they can be role models for those joining the church. This means from the pastor to the ministry heads, there must be active participation in making sure that all desiring to continue to develop as Disciples of Christ have every opportunity. When this occurs, discipleship formation will be readily recognizable. That means going beyond the status quo of just keeping the existing programs running.

### **Conclusions**

Because of my own personal discipleship formation journey, I became interested in learning more about the AME Church’s discipleship formation process of its new and existing members. I wondered if churches are intentional in assisting new and existing members with their discipleship formation. My case study’s specific purpose was to study five churches in a Midwestern metropolitan area on the topic of clergy and non-clergy discipleship formation process. I provided 15 clergy and 45 non-clergy with an opportunity to share their personal faith formation journey and the faith formation process of their current local church. I hope these local churches can use this information to better their discipleship formation process for members new to the Christian faith and members looking to continue their faith formation

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

journey. This study answered the questions: How do clergy and non-clergy define disciple? Is the church intentional when it come to the discipleship formation of its members? What role does Christian education play in discipleship formation?

I organized the findings my study into four categories: 1) discipleship formation as a journey, 2) discipleship formation aids inside the church, 3) discipleship formation journey hindrances inside the church, and 4) discipleship formation journey aids outside the church.

In the following sections, I draw conclusions regarding the significance of the findings and analysis of the findings. In addition, I provide recommendations for actions the churches might take based on the findings. Lastly, I provide ideas for possible future research within the area of discipleship formation in the local church.

Guided by the research questions and based on the findings and analysis, I developed three conclusions: 1) The Christian education programs are struggling (Sunday school, Bible study, new members classes) in the local church and are not as effective as they could be in the discipleship formation process. 2) Role models play an important part in discipleship formation. 3) Church leaders (Stewards, Trustees, other officers) are lacking in discipleship formation thus they are unable to help others. In the following paragraphs, I provide a discussion of these three major conclusions.

### **Christian education programs are struggling: Sunday school, Bible study, and new member class.**

The first conclusion is the Christian education programs in place to help facilitate discipleship formation for members lack effectiveness. Sunday school considered the foundation for discipleship formation, in particular is poorly attended across all five of the churches. Even though 90% of the participants were required to attend Sunday school during their childhood,

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

only 15% of participants still attend today. Reasons for the poor attendance are that people do not feel it is relevant in their day-to-day life struggles and teachers need training in how to engage students. The foundational Christian education programs were present in all five of the local churches in the study. Each church considered them foundational to discipleship formation. However, my research uncovered a need to revisit them for a possible re-imagining for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Role models play an important part in discipleship formation.**

Role models emerged as an important factor in a person's discipleship formation process. I did not include a research question about role models in the process of discipleship formation yet in the stories of participants, role models were a key component of clergy and non-clergy discipleship. Clergy and non-clergy talked about the role models in their lives such as family members, church leaders, clergy, and TV evangelists.

Role models in this study, in most cases, were living examples of someone who was living the life of becoming a disciple of Christ. We have the Holy Scriptures and the life of Christ as our role model but there is something helpful and affirming to having someone to interact with periodically. Role models motivate individuals, and help them to uncover their true potential and overcome barriers. When a different perspective is needed, a role model can help uncover a new approach to a problem. Sometimes, role models have already struggled with a similar problem. Role models influence others by their life stories. Their stories may be fascinating, uplifting, and motivating. It is not unusual to have more than one role model. Individuals can look to people who have been successful in their careers, people who adopted views and understandings on the world that fascinate them, people whom they want to look like, people who represent examples when talking about personal life and taking care of the family.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Church leadership lacking discipleship formation.**

The church leadership, specifically, the stewards, who are the spiritual leaders of the church need help in discipleship formation before they can help others with their discipleship process. These lay leaders, stewards, were taught about their duties as stewards from the *AME Book of Discipline* (2012) but there was not an intentional process to help them with growing as Disciples of Christ. Some of the duties from the *Discipline* are: make an exact account of all money, negotiate the salary of the full time minister, make accurate reports of every expenditure of money, attend Quarterly conferences, register all baptisms, marriages, and deaths, once a year conduct a survey of the membership, etc. Only one statement in *The Book of Discipline* (2012) talked about training, “There shall be a training course for prospective stewards under the supervision of the pastor and senior stewards” (p. 62). Things like Bible study, Sunday school, having a prayer life, and connecting with a role model were not required as part of the steward’s duties nor was it part of their training for discipleship formation.

Because the stewards are the spiritual leaders of the church, there should be more of a focus on the spiritual life of these men and women. The Book of Discipline only lists specific duties as mentioned in the previous paragraph. There are nine pages in the *Book of Discipline* that talk about the role of stewards and in those nine pages there are only two sentences that deal with the spiritual aspect of their duties:

To be qualified for this office, one must be of solid piety, know and love the Word of God, the African Methodist Episcopal Church doctrine, and The Doctrine and discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He or she must be fruitful and of good natural or acquired ability to transact the spiritual and temporal business of the church. (p. 61)

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

This role of a steward is a very important role in the church; they are considered spiritual leaders; leaders whom others come to for spiritual guidance and direction. Stewards are used to carry out their responsibilities or duties. They are seldom used as spiritual guides because the membership does not see them as such. Being a role model is not part of a steward's assignment. There is also no requirement of stewards to regularly attend Sunday school and Bible study.

### **Recommendations**

I reviewed the conclusions looking for actionable recommendations. In the following section, I provide a description of three recommendations. These recommendations are: 1) Perform a study of the Christian education programs beginning with Sunday school. 2) Develop a discipleship formation curriculum for Stewards (the spiritual leaders of the church), and church officers. Include a discipleship component to the major days and outreach projects of the local church. 3) Expose members to outside programs and trainings that will help shape or contribute to their discipleship formation.

### **Christian education programs evaluation.**

The church needs to develop a strategy to strengthen the Sunday school ministry since, according to research, it has been the cornerstone for discipleship formation to churches for more than 100 years. Instead of reinventing the wheel and trying to come up with new programs for discipleship formation, the local church could start by looking at existing programs and their effectiveness in the discipleship formation process. Urban Ministries, Inc. (UMI) and D. C. Cook offer a variety of Christian education resources specifically for African American Churches. UMI is the largest independent, African American-owned and operated Christian media company. They publish Christian education resources, including Bible studies, Sunday school, and Vacation Bible School curriculum, books, movies, and websites designed for African

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

American churches and individuals seeking a Christ-centered perspective on faith and life issues.

D. C. Cook is a nonprofit discipleship resource provider. They offer a curriculum specifically for African Americans, Echoes curriculum. The Echoes curriculum provides a culturally-relevant Gospel presentation, is Bible-based and Christ-centered, follows the international Sunday school lesson outlines at the adult level, and is easy to prepare and teach.

Another option would be for the church to develop its own curriculum by using teachers and/or principals who currently are in or have retired from the academic school systems in the area. There would be multiple components to the curriculum: discipleship course(s), teacher training, desired outcomes, and periodic evaluations. If this evaluation process is new to the local church, a consultant may be brought in to assist.

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (1981) one definition of evaluation is to determine the significance, worth, or condition of an issue/program usually by careful appraisal and study. Evaluations are a part of many areas of life: non-profit organizations, corporations, employees, and schools to name a few. The church and its programs are no exception. In these five churches, the programs – Sunday school, Bible Study, new members classes, and the like – have been in place for centuries without time to evaluate. Are they still effective the way they are, or do we need to review for a possible change? Rev. Phoebe said, “There is not a system in place to measure the effectiveness of the discipleship formation ministries that are in place.”

I have been in the AME denomination since 1983 and I have not been aware of any type of process to evaluate the programs/ministries of the church. I recommend a five-part approach to start: design, pilot, implement/roll-out, and periodically review. Design stage: a team of lay and clergy would be selected to create the evaluation model that will be used. Since it has not been done before, the team would investigate some existing models via the Internet, and other

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

churches. The team would define an evaluation model to include expected outcomes. Pilot stage: the churches would try the evaluation model, or a selected number of churches and by a designated date, send in feedback (the feedback forms would be designed at the time of designing the evaluation process). The team would make modification based on feedback. Implementation/roll-out stage: the evaluation process would be rolled out to all churches in the final process. The final stage is the periodic review: the first year would include periodic examination throughout the year, for example, quarterly or every six months. During the initiation period, the original team of clergy and laity would manage the entire process.

Traditionally one does not question those in leadership; so, no one is asking the question, “Are the existing discipleship formation programs for members effective?” Rev. Isaac said, “We never challenge the teacher. I’ve been in the men’s Bible study for four years and I’ve only challenged the teacher once. It is not encouraged. You don’t want to start an argument. You don’t want to make the teacher look bad or embarrass them.” How do you know the program(s) are meeting the needs of the people? A periodic evaluation gives those involved, leaders and participants, an opportunity to examine the programs.

### **Stewards and church leader’s curriculum.**

Taking care of one’s own discipleship formation should be a priority for leaders in order to be role models/examples for those mentored, knowingly or unknowingly. Giving priority to a leader’s physical, spiritual and emotional self is not stressed within the church culture. Doing is the operative word in the church. Rev. Isaac stated, “Ever since the church started, Christians have been accused of being hypocrites. That is a common criticism because they are perceived as saying one thing and living another or doing another.” Rev. Earnest described it in metaphorical language. “We are falling short and I’ve just been on this treadmill, you know. I

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

am trying to get a church started. I hear the leaders (Presiding Elder and Bishop) telling me to get on this treadmill? I have a treadmill I have to get on.” Giving more attention to their own discipleship formation may be a way leaders can begin ridding themselves of the hypocritical image they are perceived as having and modeling for others the importance of the priority of their own discipleship formation in order to help others.

The challenge is finding the time in the leaders’ schedule to commit to their own discipleship formation. Pastors are already inundated with more work than they have time to do. Others leaders in the church are in the same situation so the challenge is to figure out what tasks can be deleted or delegated in order to make discipleship formation a priority for church leaders. My recommendation would be to include the leaders’ discipleship formation training component into the existing meetings already on the church’s calendar and the leader’s calendar. For example, Stewards have a monthly meeting and there is also an Official Board meeting monthly for church leaders. A portion of the time they are together at these meetings could be used to have dialogue about discipleship formation. The church leaders could develop their own curriculum, or research could be done to find an existing curriculum that could be used. I believe this would make a difference and improve the discipleship formation process for leaders.

Church leadership as defined in the AME Church includes the Pastor, Stewards, Trustees, and anyone holding an office, e.g., president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, or chaplain in any ministry in the church. This group of leaders works together to guide the church in living out its mission from scripture and the mission of the denomination; both missions should coincide. The church’s mission from scripture is Matthew 28:19 – 20, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is:

To minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy through a continuing program of:

1. preaching the gospel,
2. feeding the hungry,
3. clothing the naked,
4. housing the homeless,
5. cheering the fallen,
6. providing jobs for the jobless,
7. administering to the needs of those in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes; caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed,
8. encouraging thrift and economic advancement and
9. Bringing people back into church.

I suggest three related questions for the church leaders to consider when examining their role as facilitators of discipleship formation for others as well as themselves: 1) Does the church leadership know these mission statements? 2) Do they know their link to discipleship growth? 3) Do the leaders of the church have a responsibility to work with other local church leaders to

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

facilitate the discipleship growth and development of the general membership and their own?

This process involves several components of church activities including, but not limited to: their own discipleship formation, a specific program to aid in discipleship formation, and an on-going opportunity to evaluate the programs.

Now, let's consider answers to the three questions. Question #1) Does the church leadership know the biblical mission statements, "the great commission" from Matthew 28:18-20 and the AME Church mission statement? The Matthew 28:18-20 passage, "the great commission," is definitely known by the church leadership. They know bits and pieces of the AME mission statement, but it is doubtful that anyone knows it in its entirety. Question #2) Do they know their link to discipleship growth? As far as church leaders linking them to discipleship growth, yes, when it comes to "the great commission." But in regard to the AME Churches' mission I am not sure if church leaders think of it in terms of discipleship, even though it is definitely related. Question #3) Do the leaders of the church have a responsibility to work with other local church leaders to facilitate the discipleship growth and development of the general membership and their own? Church leaders working with other church leaders is happening somewhat within the local church but as far as reaching out to another local church, I do not think that is happening.

Leadership could play a role in utilizing the big events that happen every year in the life of the local church for more than just fundraisers. Given what I found, I think these big events such as Men's Day, Women's Day, Church Anniversary, among others, are opportunities that could be used for informal and non-formal discipleship formation learning. Seeing these events as opportunities could move them from just being habits and/or rituals in the life of the local church to raise money, to being a very strategic and purposeful events for the church not only to

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

raise funds, but also to assist the discipleship formation of the leadership team for that event. Therefore, the church could make these multi-purpose events as both fundraisers and discipleship formation learning. The literature review was clear in that no one approach to discipleship formation is perfect. There has to be a strategy because discipleship formation does not just happen. These events could be one way that the church could start to use existing programs for discipleship formation.

### **Exposure to outside discipleship formation aids.**

One last recommendation would be exposure to the discipleship formation aids outside the church, Bible Study Fellowship (BSF), and Navigators. Each of the participants who connected with these programs spoke of the major benefit to their discipleship formation. I know this is a tough one for the pastors to send their members outside the church for something that they feel their local church should be providing. Those who attended these outside programs did not ask permission to go. The pastor and others may have been aware of their attendance, but the approval of leadership was not sought out before attending.

If pastors made a comparison of people who have gone to one of the programs outside the local church versus people who had not, they would discover the advantages to people's discipleship formation journey when given access to programs like Bible Study Fellowship, Navigators, and other similar programs.

### **Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to find out the discipleship formation process for these five local churches. The question was whether or not these churches were intentional when it comes to discipleship formation. By intentional, I meant were there specific strategies or programs that were in place to aid a person seeking to develop as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I conducted this

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

study across five churches using clergy and non-clergy participants. A future study might include just studying one church so that efforts would be more focused and concentrated on their discipleship formation process. Another option would be address a specific area, Sunday school, and focus the study on best practices for discipleship formation.

### **Conclusion/Reflective Statement**

My research study was based on five churches in the AME Christian denomination. Christianity is currently the dominant religion in the United States. Christianity is based on the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A Christian's profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord starts them on a path of becoming a disciple of Christ and gives the believer access to eternal life after death. The Bible is the book Christians use to show historically how God interacted with his chosen people throughout time. Jesus Christ is our example in the Bible's Scriptures of how we are to live our lives as Disciples of Christ. Christians study the Scriptures via their education programs in the church, for example, Sunday school and Bible study. Weekly sermons are preached from the Bible to help believers hear from God and to know His will for their lives.

Christ commissioned all who accept Him as Savior and Lord to go and make disciples. Matthew 28:18 -20 is the scripture reference for "the great commission"

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Because of my own personal experience in discipleship formation as a Christian woman in the AME denomination, I was led to study discipleship formation in the AME Church in the

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

21<sup>st</sup> Century for my dissertation research. Making disciples is a direct command from Jesus Christ to his followers. The emphasis for the church today should be discipleship formation of everyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. A believer might be someone who is new to the Christian faith or who is on an on-going Christian faith journey.

The church tends to produce members who support the church, instead of disciples who impact their world. Jesus and his disciples impacted the world around them. Knowledge of the Bible and Christ is not enough to impact the world. The next step after gaining biblical knowledge is applying that knowledge to everyday life. Generally, Christians have far more spiritual knowledge than they apply. As one of the participants stated we have to move our biblical knowledge from our heads to our hearts and from our hearts to our hands. People in church have real problems and the church needs to be able to help with practical solutions to these problems from a biblical perspective.

Discipleship according to Jesus embodied a lifelong journey of commitment to Him in every area of life. Jesus of Nazareth always comes asking disciples to follow Him—not merely accept Him, not merely believe in Him, not merely worship Him, but to follow Him. A part of discipleship formation is to encourage, equip, and edify disciples to love and to think like Christ. Therefore we must assess our thoughts and beliefs and recognize whether they are moving us closer to conformity to Christ. The Christian life does not just evolve. It requires specific decisions and public commitments to deepen our faith and obedience on our discipleship formation journey.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

## References

- Barna, George. (2011). *State of the church series*. The Barna Group, April 2011. Retrieved from [www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group](http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group).
- Benda, Jeffrey T. (2012). *Achieving corporate and personal discipleship as a satellite campus pastor in the multi-site church* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3496425)
- Benson, P., & Eklin, C.H. (1990). *Effective Christian education: A national study of protestant congregations: A summary report on faith, loyalty, and congregational life*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*, 5th Edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bonhoeffer, D. (2003). *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4. Minneapolis: Fortress Press
- Boys, M. C. (1999). Engaged pedagogy dialogue and critical reflection. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, Vol. 2 no. 3, pp. 129-136.
- Boice, James M. (1986). *Christ's call to discipleship*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press.
- Boice, James M. (1986). The meaning of discipleship. *Moody Monthly (February)*: 34-37.
- The book of discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. (Published by Order of the Forty-Eighth General conference held in St. Louis, Missouri, July 4-11, 2008). Nashville, Tennessee: AMEC Sunday School Union.
- Brookfield S. D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Brookfield S. D. (1988). Understanding and facilitating adult learning. *School Library Media Quarterly* 16 (Winter): 99-105.
- Brookfield S. D. (2008). *Teaching reflectively in theological contexts: Promises and contradictions*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.
- Brookfield S. D. & Preskill S. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading: Lessons from the struggle for social justice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield Stephen D. & Holst, John D. (2011). *Radicalizing learning: Adult education for a just world*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

- Brown, Mark R. (2012). *By this they will know: Discipleship principles to transform the church* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 3540376)
- Burns J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Burns J. M. (2003). *Transforming leadership*. New York: Grove Press.
- Cathey, B. (2006). *Attendance to discipleship: A study of the Orchard 101 Course* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3238293)
- Camp, Lee C. (2003). *Mere discipleship: Radical Christianity in a rebellious world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Clines, Paul D. (1999). *Preaching for discipleship in an emerging postmodern culture* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 9930599)
- Cone, J. H. & Wilmore, G. S. (1993). *Black theology: A documentary history volume one: 1966-1979*, 2nd Edition. New York: Orbis Books.
- Cone, J. H. (1997). *God of the oppressed*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Covey, S. R. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Dankis, Mark J. (1996). *A strategy for discipleship and outreach ministries for mission congregations* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database. (UMI No. 9720743)
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). *The souls of Black folk: Essays and sketches*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co.
- Erskine, E. R. (2004). *The relationship between a church's discipleship practices and the development of maturing disciples*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No: 3128844).
- Fasching D. J. & deChant D. (2008). *Comparative religious ethics: A narrative approach*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

- Freire, P. (1974). *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope*. London: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on my life and work*. New York: Routledge
- Gallup, G. H., Jr., and Jones T. (1992). *The saints among us*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing.
- Gangel, K. O., and Sullivan C. \*(1994). Mind over management: The role of critical thinking in educational administration. *Christian Education Journal 15 (Fall): 64-73*.
- Garrison, D. R. (1991). Critical thinking and adult education: A conceptual model for developing critical thinking in adult learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education 10 (October-December): 287-303*.
- Gillett, Earl L. (2013). *Preaching as an element in developing Christian discipleship of pastor and congregation* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No.3568632)
- Giroux, H. (1994). *Disturbing pleasures: Learning popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Grace II, W. Madison (2011). True discipleship: Radical voices from the Swiss brethern to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to today. *Southwestern Journal of Theology Volume 53 Number 2 (Spring): 135-153*.
- Hartley, G. L. (2007). *A study of discipleship at Abundant Life Fellowship church*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3280065)
- Hearn, P. W. (2006). *The three-strand church: Understanding the scriptural values and Structural venues of a three-strand approach to discipleship*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3214728)
- Henson, Bennie T. (1996). *Engaging the African-American congregation in a shared process of outreach ministry* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 9928774)
- Hull, B. (2006). *The complete book of discipleship: On being and making followers of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress
- Hull, B. (2010). *The disciple-making church: Leading a body of believers on the journey of faith*. Grand Rapid, MI: BakerBooks
- Lincoln, Bruce. (1989). *Discourse and the construction of society: Comparative studies of myth, ritual, and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

- Maxwell, Joseph A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. California: Sage Publications.
- McCullough, Christine. (2013) *Do role models matter? Exploring the correlates of motivational and imitative role modeling by professionals*. (Doctor of Philosophy). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI Number: 3576031)
- Merriam, Sharan B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Miller, H. (1994). *Connecting with God: 14 ways churches can help people grow spiritually*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- National Park Service. U.S. Department of Interior Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement, 2014. Web. 13 October 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/a12.htm>
- Quadrennial theme fulfilling the great commission. African Methodist Episcopal Church – Official Website. Retrieved from <http://www.ame-church.com/>
- Scazzero, Peter. (2003). *The emotionally healthy church: A strategy for discipleship that actually changes lives*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Stewart III, Caryle F. (Ed.). (2006). *Growing the African American church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Stone, S. M. (2008). *Transformational leadership: cultivating an ethos of spiritual germination for fruitful discipleship*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3308653)
- The doctrine and discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (2012). AMEC Publishing House: Nashville, TN.
- Vanden Berg (2009). Bonhoeffer's discipleship: Theology for the purpose of Christian formation. *Christian Theological Journal* 44: 333-350.
- Varriale, R. A., Jr. (2008). *"I have decided to follow Jesus": A study of one congregation's understanding of the relationship between a decision for Christ and ongoing discipleship*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3312887)
- Vine, W. E., Unger, M. F., & White, Jr. W. (1985). *Vine's complete expository dictionary of old and new testament words*. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.
- Walters, W. B. (2011). *From nominal to radical discipleship: One church's approach to disciple*

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

*making*. (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3459269)

Wesley, C. H. (1935). *Richard Allen: Apostle of freedom*. Washington D. C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

### Appendix

#### Appendix A

#### Research Questions – Clergy

1. Tell me about your journey of discipleship formation.
2. Explain what you think it means to live for Christ?
  - a. How does one begin to live for Christ?
  - b. How would you define a disciple of Jesus Christ?
  - c. What are the characteristics of a disciple of Jesus Christ?
3. Does your church have a specific process/program to aid new converts and exiting members in their faith formation?
4. How effective is the church at living out its 8 point mission? The Book of Discipline of the A. M. E. Church, 2008, p. 16.: 1) Preaching the Gospel 2) Feeding the hungry, 3) Clothing the naked, 4) Housing the homeless, 5) Cheering the fallen, 6) Providing jobs for the jobless, 7) Administering the needs of those in prison, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes; caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed, and, 8) Encouraging thrift and economic advancement
  - a. Is the mission displayed in the church?
  - b. Is the church producing a community of disciples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who are equipped to carry out its mission? If yes, explain how and if no
5. What role does the areas of Christian education play in a member's process of becoming a disciple?
  - a. What specifically can be learned from church school, Bible study, sermons, etc. to develop disciples?
  - b. What educational techniques are helping us impact people for Christ and what educational techniques are only filling time?
  - c. Do teacher and student engage in probing into the realities of the worlds in which they live and how to live out their faith in their day to day lives? Explain how.
6. What would you say is the image that the church projects to the world through its disciples' of Christ?
7. As a pastor are you willing to critique traditions, spiritual practices, and leadership perspectives when it come making disciples? If yes, what would the critique look like?
8. Are leader and members encouraged to:
  - a. Identify and challenge assumptions
  - b. Explore and imagine alternatives ways of doing thing
  - c. Search for more satisfactory insight or resolution to posed problems.
  - d. Question and rethink the scriptures and traditions of the church?
  - e. To critically re-examine scripture and traditions to help them to know what, if any, action should be taken?

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Appendix A – Continued****Research Questions – Non-Clergy****Research Questions – Existing Members (member of church at least two years)**

1. In your own words, describe what it means to be a disciple of Christ.
2. Tell me about your journey of becoming a disciple.
3. Explain what you think it means to live for Christ.
  - a. How does one begin to live for Christ?
4. Do you know the mission statement of the A. M. E. Church?
5. How does the church help you connect with God and grow spiritually?
6. What in the church bulletin/worship guide helps you in your faith formation?
7. Has the church offered ministry opportunities locally to minister to and reach the community (i.e. block parties, food pantries, etc.)?
8. Does your church provide one on one mentoring relationships for new believers?
9. What other discipleship practices does your church engage in to help members mature in their relationship with the Lord, for example, long and short term mission trips, street ministry, etc.?



## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

## Appendix C: University of St. Thomas Forms

Institutional Review Board  
 UNIVERSITY of St. THOMAS

**TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.  
 Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

<b>Project Name</b>	Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church	<b>IRB Tracking Number</b>	330745-1
<b>Agreement</b>			
I agree to transcribe data for this study. I agree that I will:			
1	Keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the researcher who is the primary investigator of this study.		
2	Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while in my possession. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using closed headphones when transcribing audio taped interviews</li> <li>• keeping all transcript documents and digitized interviews in computer password-protected files</li> <li>• closing any transcription programs and documents when temporarily away from the computer</li> <li>• keeping any printed transcripts in a secure location such as a locked file cabinet</li> <li>• permanently deleting any e-mail communication containing the data</li> </ul>		
3	Give all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the primary investigator when I have completed the research tasks.		
4	Erase or destroy all research information in any form or format that is not returnable to the primary investigator (e.g., information stored on my computer hard drive) upon completion of the research tasks.		
<b>Statement of Consent</b>		By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I agree to the terms listed above.	
Signature of Transcriber <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Check to sign electronically		Date	
Print Name of Transcriber		Mary Dunn	
<b>Signature of Researcher</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Check to sign electronically*		Date	
Print Name of Researcher		Janet Johnson	

\*Electronic signatures certify that:  
 The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the policies on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Institutional Review Board



- The information provided in this form is true and accurate.
- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Promise of Confidentiality – Focus Group Participants**

This form is intended to protect the confidentiality of what members of this focus group say during the course of this study, Discipleship Formation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Please read the following statement and sign your name, indicating that you agree to comply.

I promise that I will not communicate or talk about information discussed during the course of these focus groups with anyone outside of my fellow focus group members and the facilitators.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Facilitator Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**CONSENT FORM****UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****[Insert Title of Study]****[Insert IRB log number when assigned]**

I am conducting a study about *[insert general statement about the study]*. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because *[explain how subject was identified]*. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: *[Indicate name of researcher, name of advisor, if applicable, Department affiliation]*.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is: *[Purpose of the research – provide a concise statement of 2-3 sentences. Research Methods and Questions – specify your research questions, hypotheses, and present specific methods you will use to address these hypotheses. You may also wish to explain the benefits of this research to people other than the subject]*

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: *[Be sure to state specifically what the subjects will be doing, including if they will be performing any tasks. Subjects should be told about assignment to study groups, length of time for participation, frequency of procedures, audio taping, etc.]*

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

The study has several risks. First [], Second, [] *[Does the research involve any possible risks or harms to subjects? Describe the precautions used to minimize risks. Be sure to include the likelihood of the risk(s) and provisions made to minimize the risk(s).]*

The direct benefits you will receive for participating are: *[List any anticipated direct benefits for subjects that participate in this research project. This does not include statements like “add to the existing knowledge.” If there are no benefits, state “None.” Explain only direct benefits to the subject]*

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

**Compensation:**

You will receive payment: *[Explain when disbursement will occur and conditions of payment. Omit this section if neither payment nor cost is involved.]*

*[If there is a physically invasive procedure, or an exercise component of this research, where there is even a slight risk of injury the following statement must be included in the consent form.]*

In the event that this research activity results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment and follow-up care as needed. Payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer if any (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.).

*[Omit this section if there is no risk involved in the study objective.]*

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include *[List each type of record they have (recordings, transcripts, master list, computer records) and explain what will happen to each item (where it will be stored, who will have access, when it will be destroyed). If tape recordings or videotapes are made, explain who will have access, and when they will be erased.]*

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with *[any cooperating agencies or institutions]* or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until *[state a specific date or time in the study]*. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you *[state whether or not you will use their data]*. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask *[state if and where there are any exceptions to this rule and include a rationale for these exceptions]*.

**Contacts and Questions**

My name is *[insert researcher's name]*. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at *[telephone number]*. *[If the researcher is a student, include advisor's name and telephone number here.]* You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6038 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. *[If additional permissions are needed (e.g. audio or video recording, accessing private student or medical records), include these here.]*

---

**Signature of Study Participant**

---

**Date**

---

**Print Name of Study Participant**

---

**Signature of Parent or Guardian**  
**(If applicable)**

---

**Date**

---

**Print Name of Parent or Guardian**  
**(If Applicable)**

---

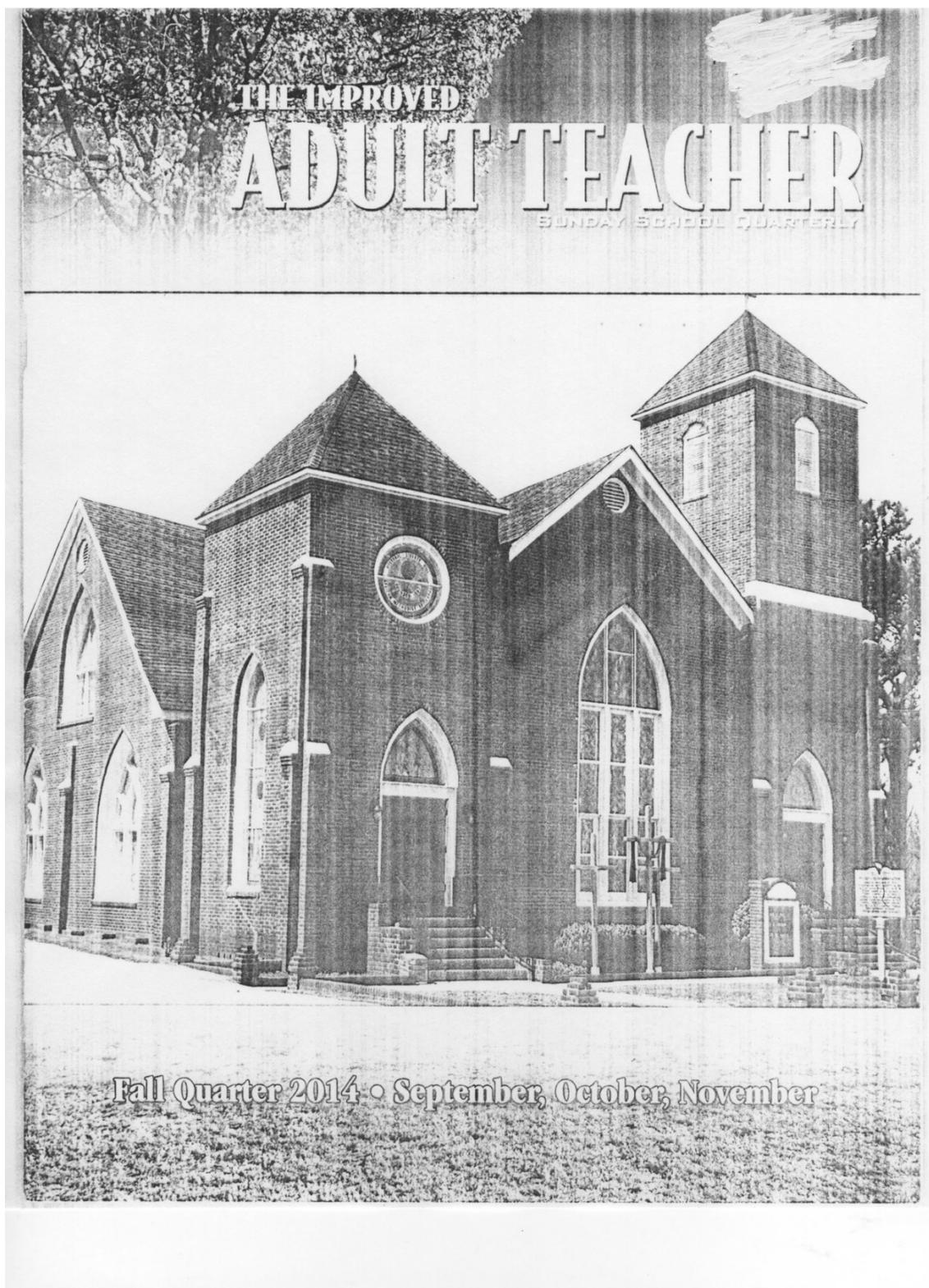
**Signature of Researcher**

---

**Date**

DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Appendix D – Sample AME Adult Quarterly Sunday school Lesson



## HOPE FOR TOMORROW

LESSON SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 31

PRINT: JEREMIAH 31:31-37

*Key Verse: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*

*Jeremiah 31:31 (NRSV)*

### JEREMIAH 31:31-37 (NRSV)

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

35 Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the Lord of hosts is his name:

36 If this fixed order were ever to cease from my presence, says the Lord, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before me forever.

37 Thus says the Lord: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel because of all they have done, says the Lord.

### JEREMIAH 31:31-37 (KJV)

31 Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah:

32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord:

33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

34 And they shall teach one another, every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

35 Thus saith the Lord, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The Lord of hosts is his name:

36 If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever.

37 Thus saith the Lord; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the Lord.

## DISCIPLESHIP FORMATION IN THE AME CHURCH

Lesson 2

September 14, 2014

**HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**

September 8 – September 14

<b>Monday</b>	Hebrews 8:1-7, 13 (A Better Covenant)
<b>Tuesday</b>	Hebrews 9:11-15 (Mediator of a New Covenant)
<b>Wednesday</b>	2 Corinthians 3:4-11 (Ministers of a New Covenant)
<b>Thursday</b>	Jeremiah 31:7-11 (I Will Gather Them)
<b>Friday</b>	Jeremiah 31:12-17 (Hope for Your Future)
<b>Saturday</b>	Jeremiah 31:18-25 (Set Up Road Markers)
<b>Sunday</b>	Jeremiah 31:31-37 (I Will Make a New Covenant)

**INTRODUCTION**

If given a choice most of us prefer something new compared to something old. We like new homes relative to older homes. We enjoy owning new cars compared to older cars. We make no apologies for wanting a new job with better pay and benefits compared to our incumbent professional position. A new place to live sometimes allows us to restart our career goals by helping us reach our creative potential. It's in our DNA; new is preferred to old.

Our preference for "new" things does not go unnoticed by God. Since God is omniscient it should come as no surprise that he knows our preference for new things. Our lesson today depicts God providing us with something new – a

new covenant. The existing covenant God provided the Jewish nation was filled with numerous contractual breaches of obedience, faith and spiritual fidelity by the Jewish Nation. A new covenant is promised that will offer hope and reconciliation. Like any enforceable contract both parties have to agree to specific terms and conditions. God has clearly articulated his terms and conditions. Do we reciprocate or continue down the path of underachievement and unfulfilled blessings due to disobedience, selfishness and sin? Jeremiah chapter 31 offers a roadmap to answer this fundamental question.

**BIBLE STORY**

God assures his people that he will again take them into covenant relation to himself. When brought very low, and difficulties appear, it is good to remember that it has been so with the church formerly. But it is hard under present frowns to take comfort from former smiles; yet it is the happiness of those who, through grace, are interested in the love of God, that it is an everlasting love, from everlasting in the counsels, to everlasting in the continuance. Those whom God loves with this love, he will draw to himself, by the influences of his Spirit upon their souls.

**Jeremiah 31:31-37  
A New Paradigm**

The words are addressed to a people in exile, far from home and bereft of hope. The covenant between God and Israel, the covenant made so long ago at Sinai, is (or seems to be) broken. God has not protected Israel from harm and they have been taken into exile. Into

**Lesson 2****September 14, 2014**

such a situation, the prophet speaks words of promise. But he frames those promises in terms of the very relationship in question. The prophet speaks of a covenant – like the one made at Sinai – between YHWH and Israel. “The days are surely coming, says YHWH, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31).

Just so, in this new covenant, God promises, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). The relationship is not new. Israel knows this God, and God knows this people. The promises Jeremiah speaks of build on a long and shared history between YHWH and Israel, a history marked by wavering on the part of the people and by faithfulness on the part of YHWH. God continues to love this wayward people; they continue to be God’s treasured possession. In this new covenant there is indeed continuity with what has come before.

The old covenant, written on stone tablets and scrolls, will be replaced by the new covenant, written on flesh. The first set of stone tablets was broken (Exodus 32:19), the second set written again (Exodus 34:1) and hidden away in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 10:5). The book of the law, containing the stipulations of the covenant, likewise was stored beside the Ark (Deuteronomy 31:24-26) and mostly forgotten until it was rediscovered in the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22), in the early days of Jeremiah’s prophetic career.

Unlike the old covenant, then, written on stone tablets that can be broken and

scrolls that can be lost, the new covenant will be written within the people, on their very hearts. No need for remedial religious education, because everyone will know YHWH, from the king to the stable boy, from the oldest elder to the youngest child.

And it will all be YHWH’s doing. “I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more.” The people have not demonstrated a great aptitude for faithfulness during the many years of the old covenant, so this time YHWH will do it differently. This time, the covenant relies solely on YHWH’s mercy, YHWH’s ever-present grace in forgiving a disobedient people and calling them back into relationship with him.

**LIFE APPLICATION**

“Out with the old, in with the new.” This popular expression captures the zeitgeist for most young people. The old is seen as inefficient, time-consuming technology resisters to change. Old ways and habits are not receptive to change and this can create friction and discord among those eager for a different (read: new direction) course of action. Peter F. Drucker, renowned business management expert, once stated, “If you want something new, you have to stop doing something old.” Doing something new involves risk. We like doing “old” things because there is less risk and greater familiarity with the “old.” However, we forfeit rewards when we eschew risk. A fundamental law in financial economics teaches that prudent risk is associated with stable long-term rewards. This is why people invest in the stock market. In our Christian experi-

**Lesson 2****September 14, 2014**

ence we encounter risk when we develop and implement evangelism programs. Doing things the "old" way can sometimes result in forfeiting blessings and opportunities God has promised us. Everything "old" is not necessarily bad. Likewise, everything new should not be rejected simply because we have no prior experience with the alternative. Resisting new approaches and ways to normalize our daily decision-making activities can diminish our opportunity set. God desires us to reach for the stars to maximize our God-given talents and abilities. Nobody can reach for the stars with their hands in the pockets of their pants.

**African American Inspirational Quote for Today:** "Strive to make something of yourselves, then strive to make the most of yourselves." Alexander Crummel (Clergyman)

**SUMMARY**

We hope for tomorrow because we have confidence that God will enable us to see tomorrow. Our hope for tomorrow is based on the specific relationship we have with God. That relationship may have to undergo a spiritual make-over if we are not properly aligned with God's will. The new covenant described by Jeremiah in chapter 31:31-37 outlines an interpersonal relationship defined by specific terms and conditions. The old covenant promulgated in Exodus chapter 20 emphasized an interpersonal relationship with humanity demonstrating fidelity to God by adherence to a set of rules and regulations. This did not pro-

duce the results God was seeking thus a "new" covenant based on godly fidelity with the heart supersedes the "old covenant." God's new covenant in Jeremiah's prophecy is perfectly fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus (John 13:34). Embracing the new covenant requires a spiritual make-over. We need a new attitude and a "heart transplant" to benefit from the new covenant. The old way of doing things is no longer acceptable by God. The new covenant comes with joy, hope and peace. Resistance to this covenant is futile!

**Questions for Thought and Discussion**

1. What is your favorite "old" habit?
2. How do you think Jeremiah's kinsmen felt when he talked about a "new covenant"?
3. What are you hoping to see ten (10) years from now? Twenty (20) years from now?
4. Is your local A.M.E. church receptive to a new way of doing things? Why or why not?

**PRAYER**

Heavenly Father, give us the wisdom and the courage to see, understand and accept new things that uplift your glory and honor. Empower us with the ability to help those we come into contact with to embrace your new covenant in their lives. We pray for strength and your guidance to keep us humble and prevent us from vacillating from the specifics you have promised us in your Holy Word. In Jesus we ask this, Amen!