




## Through-Life discipleship – Following Christ through the ages and changes of life

### Life stages and discipleship

It is true that the message of the Christian faith remain the same throughout our whole lives; nevertheless we are very aware that how this looks and is lived out can vary a great deal depending on the specific circumstances people find themselves in. Through our lives, our circumstances change, and as such our faith and our involvement in church changes and can often vary depending on whether we have just left school, have just become a parent or have recently retired. This session aims to give you an opportunity to reflect on what we mean by 'discipleship' and will go on to explore how growing up and growing older is changing these days and how your church can best serve people at all stages of their lives.

#### **Starter activity** (5 min)

 Discuss with your neighbour:

What stage of life are you at right now?

This might be related to your age (though they say age is only a number), your career, your family or your faith and church involvement. You might want to consider how your time, money, relationships and resources fit into this.

#### **What is discipleship?** (30 min)

Having started to explore what we mean by 'life stages', now we are going to take some time to consider the second part of our session title, 'discipleship'.

What words can you think of which mean something similar to 'disciple'?

The word 'disciple' in the New Testament is used to describe an apprentice of a trade, a student of a subject or a pupil of a teacher – examples include the disciples of the Pharisees, who studied the

pharisaic laws or the disciples of John the Baptist. It is the disciples of John who are closest to what we are called to as disciples of Jesus, in that we are to be committed not only to the message and teaching of Jesus but to Jesus himself. It is not merely an educational pursuit but one that calls us to follow him, devote our lives to him, to serve and to obey. Importantly, we are not merely students but Jesus calls us friends and welcomes us into the family of God.

Discipleship is a term to mean simply the act of living as disciples of Jesus.



Read the following passages.

Do you think any of these helpfully illustrate what we are called to do as disciples?

#### Luke 9

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, <sup>2</sup> and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. <sup>3</sup> He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. <sup>4</sup> Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. <sup>5</sup> If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” <sup>6</sup> So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

#### Matthew 22

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” <sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

#### Matthew 28

<sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Think about and discuss:

1. If Jesus is telling us in Luke 9 to proclaim the kingdom, what is it that we should be proclaiming?
2. Often we think that we would love to do more, only we feel we lack the money or resources for it. What does Luke 9 verse 3 have to say about that?

3. If we can summarise the Law as 'Love', how have we lived that out this past week?
4. Matthew 28 suggests we should multiply disciples, how do we *go* about doing this?
5. In both Matthew 28 and Luke 9, the disciples are given authority. What does it mean to our lives that Jesus has given us authority to do the work of the disciples?

Are there any other elements of discipleship you consider important and want to focus on?

Sum up in a sentence or two what you mean by the word 'discipleship'. This will be helpful for you later in the session.

### **Stages and changes of life (30 min)**

We will now try to bring together our thoughts of 'life stages' and 'discipleship', discuss:

- Do you identify with any of the characters on the following page, either personally or perhaps someone you know?
  
- What stages of life, life events and turning points can you identify in these examples (*e.g. university, retirement*)?
  
- Using your previous definition of discipleship, in what ways do you think discipleship is the same at every stage of life? In what ways is discipleship different at various ages and life stages?

**Sarah** is a mother of two young children aged 3 and 4, whose time is split between looking after the children and her part-time administrative job. She has her whole life regularly attended church and continues to do so nearly every Sunday. As much as she would love to join a church home group to build some supportive Christian friendships, her busy life means that she cannot take part in any of the other church activities during the week. Sarah wishes she could find more time to pray and read her Bible but too often finds that she is too exhausted at the end of a long day for this to be very refreshing.

**Paul** is a 42 year old, IT consultant, with two teenage sons. He started coming to church five years ago after his wife invited him on a course the church was running and he was particularly drawn to the friendly community. Paul loves being a part of the church and has for the last year been getting involved in volunteering on the welcome team. As much as he finds church uplifting and interesting, he is struggling to see how it relates to his work life throughout the week and feels like he is living to some extent a double life.

**Steve** has been in and out of work for the past ten years with various jobs since he was made redundant from a job he had been doing for twenty five years previously. He is soon coming to the age where he might consider retiring; however at the moment he is weighing up whether it might be better financially to keep working. Retirement poses lots of unknowns but he has felt like life has been a struggle for the past few years. Steve has always been a part of church his whole life but has for a while now felt quite distant from God and is having doubts, questioning whether church is worth the effort.

**James** is a recent graduate, now working for a big accountancy firm. He was heavily involved in his church youth group before he moved away to go to university but whilst there struggled to get connected into a local church. He has been coming along to his current church for five months but is not finding it easy. James has been wrestling with how his faith has changed over the past few years; he doesn't quite know what to believe anymore but doesn't think anyone will understand.

**Jill** has been heavily involved in church her whole life. She has for a long time helped out with various activities during the week at church and has always been involved in something on a Sunday, whether that be serving refreshments or welcoming on the door. However, over the last few months she has had to stop much of her activity due to ill health and struggling with mobility. For so long she was a key part of the church and was actively living her faith in the things she was involved in, now she is feeling increasingly removed from church life and is struggling to cope with how useless she feels now she can't do what she used to.

**Angela** retired last year after what feels like a long career in the teaching profession. Her children have 'flown the nest' and she, along with her also retired husband, enjoyed an extended holiday of five months world travel at the end of last year. She has hopes of many more fun memories but life back home is less glamorous than South East Asia! Since coming back she has got heavily involved in volunteering with church activities however it seems that there is always some other job that needs doing. The idea that retirement was like one long holiday seems come into sharp conflict with the responsibility of running the church midweek activities.

Growing up and growing older is very different day than it used to be, even amongst the lives of your congregation today. In an added appendix we have mapped out what some of these changes have been.



Reflect and discuss:

How is our church affected by these changes in growing up and growing older?



**Putting it into practice (20 min)**

So far, you will have considered what you mean by ‘discipleship’ and will also have started to explore how this relates to the different stages and changes of life people in your congregation will experience. Now we would like you to consider how this might affect your church life.

- What is your church currently doing that meets the needs, presents opportunities for and best serves people at various life stages?
- How could your church adapt what it’s currently doing to address various life stages?

An adaptation of the following table might help to direct your reflection.

| Life stage  |           | Your Church’s worship, mission, life, activities, Sunday and midweek |
|-------------|-----------|--|
| Pre-school  | Current   |  |
|             | Potential |  |
| Children    |           |  |
|             |           |  |
| Adolescence |           |  |
|             |           |  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Young adults<br>– university,<br>world of work |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| Parenthood                                     |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| Mid-life                                       |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> age – early<br>retirement      |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> age                            |  |  |
|  |  |  |

**Worship/Prayer (5 min)**

To close you may wish to spend a few moments in silence to reflect on the session and then one person may wish to lead the group in prayer; the following prayer is only a suggestion.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that care about each one of us, no matter our age or stage of life. You know us and our circumstances intimately and are present with us in all that life brings. Thank you that by your son who became human and lived on the earth that you can identify with our struggles and burdens. We pray that you would, by your Holy Spirit, equip us to live lives that honour you as we seek to follow and be obedient your calling. As we go from here, may we live as Disciples of Christ and be inspired to join in bringing your Kingdom here on earth. Amen.*

You could then finish by all praying together the Lord's Prayer.

## Appendix - New map of ageing

### Birth and Life Expectancy...



- Today 99.6% of children live beyond their 1<sup>st</sup> birthday (in the 1880s it was 86%).
- In 1921, average life expectancy at birth was 59 for women and 56 for men.
- This had rise to 74 and 68 respectively for women and men born in 1961.
- On current estimates, around 1/3 of babies born in the UK in 2012 will live to 100.

### Schooling...



- In 1918 the school leaving age was 12, rising to 14 in 1918, 15 in 1947 and 16 in 1972.
- Free state secondary education has been available for all to enjoy (or not!) since 1944.
- In 1913, only 6% of 14-16s were in full-time education in state-aided schools or colleges. By 2010, more than three-quarters of 16-17s stayed on in full-time education.
- In 1913, only 3.4% of young people went to university. In 1970 it was 8.4%, in 1990 it was 19.3% and in 2000 it was 33%. For the first time in the 1990s, more women graduated from university than men.

### Young Adulthood...



- When did you become an adult? People born in the 1920s and 1930s sang '21 today, you've got the key to the door, you've never been 21 before'. Since 1970 the voting age has been 18 – often today seen as the beginning of adulthood.
- Researchers point to the emergence of 'young adulthood' (c. 18-30) as an increasingly distinct phase of life with its own sub-cultures. Many of the traditional indicators of adult life (marriage, mortgage, stable job, first children) happen later today, if at all.
- 20% more young adults live at home with their parents today compared to 1997. 16-24's are three times as likely to be unemployed as over-25s (in the 1980s it was 'only' twice as likely).

### Marriage....



- The average age for women to marry fell from 25 in 1938 to 22 in the early 1970s, rising to 29 in the late 2000s.
- From 1900s-1940s, over 90% of men over 40 were married. This fell to 63% by the 1970s.
- In 1980 only 1/3 people lived together before they got married. It's now 8/10.
- In 1920 under 5% of marriages ended in divorce. This rose to 10% in the mid-1970s and 45% in by the late 2000s.

### Parenthood...



- In 1942 the average age for motherhood was 29 years, falling to 26 years in 1973 but rising again to 29 years in 2011. The average age for fatherhood has also risen in recent decades.
- In the 1900s the average number of children in 'completed' families was 3.5. In the 1990s this had fallen to 1.7 children. This is projected to continue amongst the current generation of new parents.

- The UK birth rate has gone through several peaks and troughs since the 1900s: generally downwards between 1900 and 1945 (but with a brief spike in 1920 – the biggest baby boom in living memory), followed by baby-booms in the late 1940s and late 50s/early 60s, a sharp fall in the late 60s/70s, and an upturn in the 2000s.

### Middle Age....



- In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'middle age' was thought to begin around the age of 35-40. According to one survey, many 50+ adults today think middle age begins about the age of 70 (though 7/10 early 50s admitted to being 'middle aged').
- The average age at which men permanently left the labour force declined in the mid-1980s (due to either long-term unemployment or early retirement) but has risen again since the mid-1990s
- More people in middle age have a living parent or grandparent than ten years ago, and more have dependent children.
- More people in middle age live alone than was the case 10-20 years ago, fewer are married and more are divorced.

### Pensions and Retirement...



- In the 1900s, 62% of men over 65 were still in work.
- The state pension age was 70 in 1908, 65 in 1925 (and 60 for women from 1940). From 2010 women's pensionable age has been rising again and will be the same as that of men by 2018.
- Young adults and the young middle aged can currently expect to retire at 68.
- In 1958, women's life expectancy after reaching pensionable age was 19 years (and 12 years for men). This had risen to 24 years for women and 17 years for men by 2010 (though it will fall slightly in future decades due to the rise in retirement age).

### Old Age...



- With increased life expectancy, many observers now talk of 'third age' (active, independent living in later life) and 'fourth age' (frailly elderly), though not everyone agrees with this language.
- In 1911 only 1 in 20 of the UK population were over 65. Today the figure is 1 in 6, and by 2033 it's expected to rise to just under 1 in 4.
- There were five times more people aged over 100 in the UK in 2010 than in 1980.
- According to the 2012 report *Fairer Care Funding* (The Dilnot Commission), 1 in 4 people aged 65 will need to spend very little on care, but 1 in 10 face major care costs in old age.

### Death and Life after Death...



- Before 1885 cremation was illegal in Britain – even in 1901 less than 0.1% of funerals involved cremation. Cremations became more popular from the 1920s until by 2010, around 3 in 4 funerals included cremation.
- According to one survey, more than 60% of the UK population have not made a will.
- Around 50% of the population believe in life after death – and the figure has changed only a little since the 1940s.