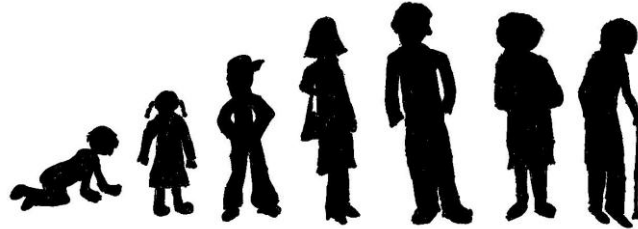


Through-Life Discipleship

- *Following Christ throughout the ages and changes of life*



the basic idea

Through-Life Discipleship is a new project being co-ordinated by St Peter's Saltley Trust to understand how best to support and resource Christian discipleship in and through the different stages and transitions of life.

Ageing affects all of us. We believe that, far from being incidental, God is interested in our growing up and growing older, the things we experience and the people we become in the process. And if Christian discipleship is potentially a lifelong journey, every stage of life and time of change presents new challenges and opportunities in following Christ.

In the light of this, how do we create churches which are attentive to the hopes, needs and experiences of people at different ages, stages and points of change across the life course, and which enable different generations to learn from and support each other in navigating the journey of life?

Working in partnership with local churches, **Through-Life Discipleship** seeks to:

- capture and share the good work churches are doing already in supporting discipleship through the life course and life transitions (at all ages and stages of life);
- encourage new work relating to Christian responses to the life course, life transitions, lifelong discipleship and intergenerational learning; particularly where there are gaps

In 2013, St Peter's Saltley Trust would like to partner a number of local churches in the region to explore the **Through-Life Discipleship** theme of 'following Christ throughout the ages and changes of life'. Beginning in January 2013, we are inviting local churches to explore this theme for twelve months, and to see where it takes them (both in terms of reshaping the existing life of the congregation and developing new initiatives).

St Peter's Saltley Trust staff will keep in regular touch with you as you explore the theme, providing support and helping to record the activities and reflections which arise. There will also be opportunities through the year to be in touch with other churches involved in the project, to share what you and they are doing. At the end of the year we hope to have built up a body of lived experience, which will in turn help us identify specific areas for future project work.

the core focus

What do we mean by 'following Christ through the ages and changes of life'?

The core focus on this project is upon those points at which questions of Christian faith, practice, worship and mission intersect with questions of age and ageing. There already exists much good *general* material on discipleship, and much good work that local churches already do to help people navigate different life stages and particular life transitions. But in this project, we are particularly interested in work which meets questions of age and ageing head-on, and which responds

intentionally to the challenges and opportunities of particular life changes and life stages. So, for example, we're not specifically interested in whether your church has a youth group or holds marriage services in itself. But we *are* interested in how you might help prepare and support your youth group for the specific social, emotional or spiritual challenges of adolescence, or in how you actively seek to support couples coming for marriage (or recently married) to embark upon their married life and/or maintain a relationship with their local church.

Just as speaking of 'whole-life' discipleship makes the point that we are seven-day Christians, this project's focus upon '*through-life* discipleship' emphasises that the Christian life not as a one-off decision or only lived out during certain seasons of life, but is a lifetime's journey with particular challenges and opportunities at different ages and stages. This begs questions about how we support and nurture Christian discipleship in relation to four related areas: a) the whole life journey; b) specific stages of the life course; c) key transition points or life-changes; 4) generations and the relationships between them.

So what are the key questions?

In working with you over the course of 2013, we hope to be able to understand both:

- a) what your church currently does relating to discipleship and the four dimensions of age/ageing as outlined above; and
- b) in the process of exploring the theme over the year, what new insights and responses arise, and how might those be put into practice?

Specifically, we hope to begin to understand:

- What helps individuals and congregations understand and respond faithfully and purposefully to the big changes we see currently in the shape of the life course and the nature of ageing?
- How do churches help support people through the major transition points and times of change in their lives, and enable them to reflect on this in the light of the Christian faith?
- What helps churches be places which are both attentive to the needs of different generations but also enable the generations to learn from each other and live out the Christian journey together?



the
context

Why this Project?

Growing up and growing old is a fundamental part of who we are as human beings. Our physical, mental and emotional needs and capacities change and develop as we age. So too, Christians and many others believe, we have the capacity to develop and mature spiritually (although this is not inevitable!). In some respects, many churches are already attentive to questions of age, ageing and generations.

We mark some significant transition points in life in baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Many churches run youth and children's activities and day centres or lunch clubs for the elderly. At their best, churches are some of the few social spaces where people of different generations regularly meet together in a common endeavour which goes beyond themselves.

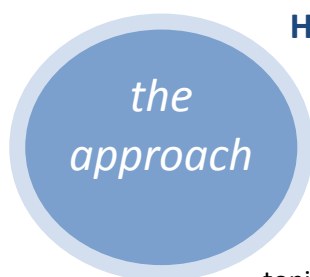
But if we're honest, churches are often more attentive to certain life stages and times of transition than others. We might invest considerable energy in helping teenagers negotiate the tricky transitions of adolescence, but do we give equal attention to supporting young adults as they enter the world of work, or to exploring what discipleship means in middle age? Many churches provide marriage preparation courses, but how far do we provide continued support through the early years of married life? Many organisations assist their employees to mark and prepare for retirement, but what if the church did too?

The changing shape of age and generational identity in society as a whole also begs important questions about mission – both in terms of growing new disciples and in terms of transforming communities. Rising life expectancy is in many ways to be celebrated, but it also brings new challenges, for example in caring for the growing numbers of very elderly people, and in ensuring that access to opportunities and resources across the generations is equitable. The shape of the modern life course is changing too, as 'young adulthood' becomes an increasingly distinct life stage in its own right, whilst sixty- and seventy- somethings may experience either the freedom and security of a 'second adolescence' or find themselves burdened by

commitment to care for grandchildren or elderly parents. What role might local churches play in helping both their members and others navigate the changing shape of the life-course?

Questions of age and generation also affect the life and work of local churches in other ways: some churches are all too aware of their ageing profile, whilst a comparatively small proportion of churches attract the majority of younger Christians. There is some evidence of a 'life-course effect' in church participation, with key transition points (e.g., university, marriage, childbirth, moving house) often as important as changes in beliefs in precipitating a move into or away from church. How might churches encourage a life-long perspective on discipleship whilst being attentive to the needs of particular life stages?

If we believe that God cares for all aspects of our being – not just our interior 'spiritual' state – and if we take seriously Jesus' words in Matthew 10:30 that 'even the very hairs on your head are numbered', we must take seriously that God cares for us throughout our lives as we grow up and grow older – even when those numbered hairs turn grey or start falling out! The Kingdom of God embraces all ages and stages of life: the children Jesus welcomed; the young and old in the prophet Joel's vision who saw visions and dreamed dreams; the prophets Simeon and Anna who in extreme old age at last saw God's promised Messiah. Both Old and New Testaments are serious about the responsibilities of the generations of God's people towards each other. If this is the case, how do we take up the challenge to support Christian discipleship through the life course and life transitions today?



How do we visualise this project unfolding?

Thinking holistically about discipleship 'through life'

In answering these questions, we wish to encourage creative thinking about the possible ways in which local churches can help people grow and develop through the courses of their lives. In this light, we are particularly keen to encourage churches to think beyond traditional methods of learning (such as study group courses). Courses can be helpful in focusing attention on a particular topic, and you may even develop some study materials together over the course of the year. However, we'd encourage you not to be limited by this and perhaps explore how questions of age, ageing and generations relate to our worship, fellowship and mission as well as to study and reflection.

During the original consultation to explore the scope of this project, participants strongly urged us to go beyond writing course material and explore the many different ways in which a church can help its members learn and grow. In particular, four possible areas of work around 'through-life discipleship' emerged:

- **Creating time and spaces** within worship and church life to explore questions of age and life stage, and for encounter across generations
- **Creating the environment, structures and processes** within church life to embed a 'through-life discipleship' perspective into the DNA of the church; not just confining it to house group study
- **Modelling prophetically the change we want to see:** sharing real stories of success and struggle, and good practice in supporting through-life discipleship, which then inspire others
- **Rooting it all in prayer and worship:** exploring how worship, prayer, liturgy and the church calendar can offer opportunities to recognise and reflect upon journeys of life and faith

Yet another thing to cram into the church calendar?

Yes and no. On one hand, taking anything seriously requires time and effort. Your church may well find that new initiatives or activity emerge as you explore the 'through-life discipleship' theme. However, we feel that doing through-life discipleship well may be more about developing attentiveness to questions of age and life change *within what you're already doing* than putting on more activities. It's about exploring how your church's existing pattern of worship and mission can more intentionally provide opportunities to reflect on these questions. So whilst new activity might be an important legacy of the project, the bigger prize is a 'through-life discipleship gaze' pervading the whole life of a local church.



the process

What will happen in practice?

Autumn 2012 We are seeking at least six and up to twelve congregations, of different sizes, traditions and community contexts (rural, inner city, suburban, outer estate, small town) to participate in the project, starting January 2013 or as soon as possible thereafter. We are seeking partner churches willing to give time and attention to exploring the 'through-life discipleship' focus of the project throughout the 2013 year. As far as possible, this commitment should be known and owned by the whole church (not just by a small number of individuals in leadership positions). We would welcome opportunities to come and speak to your main church decision-making body (PCC, church council, eldership, etc) to tell you more about the project and answer any questions you may have.

Jan-Dec 2013 Participating churches begin to explore aspects of discipleship through the life course/life transitions for 12 months, focusing reflection and activity around the key areas identified in the 'core focus' section of this paper. We are currently working on some introductory material which might be used with small groups, to get people thinking.

Through the year participating churches keep a record (in some fairly simple, light-touch way) of where the 'through-life discipleship' theme takes them and what sorts of activities or initiatives result. Saltley Trust staff will keep in touch on a regular basis, arranging occasional meetings to learn more about what each church is doing and help capture thoughts and reflections along the way. We also plan to develop a platform for churches to share the results of their reflection and activity throughout the year – perhaps via a project Facebook page, shared online workspace for uploading news and material or (where there is little use of information technology) an occasional digest/bulletin of project news or face-to-face. We will discuss the most appropriate format with participating churches as they join the project.

End of 2013 Project gathering to celebrate, share and reflect on findings and discern next steps.



next steps

What do we hope will arise from the project?

As an immediate legacy: the development of a body of experience and resources on through-life discipleship which are grounded in the experience of actual congregations (grounding the project in this way is critical to the long-term usefulness of what emerges from it). As suggested above, this may include some new course material, but we'd encourage churches to consider how a 'through-life discipleship gaze' might be embedded into the whole fabric of the life, worship and mission of the congregation.

As a medium-term legacy: in addition to developing a body of lived congregational experience, the partnership project will provide indicators of key areas of further development around discipleship, the life course, life transitions and generations, to be pursued beyond 2013.

We see the **longer-term legacy** of the through-life discipleship project as a body of wisdom and good work which will resource and equip churches and their leaders to support people as Christian disciples from cradle to grave. The ultimate goal is to seek to create churches which are attentive to the 'lifelong' aspects of discipleship.

Interested?

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