

JOURNEY OF DISCIPLESHIP

Gene Tanner

Valparaiso Church of the Nazarene

In one sentence our “Journey of discipleship” is an organized plan for taking visitors on a journey to salvation – sanctification – membership – assimilation and maturity. While this seems like an overwhelming task, we have found our “journey” to be an effective tool. Most people will run on a track if they can see where a track exists. Sometimes we make a mistake of hoping people will run with us, but we fail to show them where to run. We hope our “journey of discipleship gives a clear track. We have based much of our journey on the Rick Warren book, “Purpose Driven Church.” We have taken Pastor Warren’s book and modified it to fit the unique needs and goals of VNC. As others consider our “journey” I would urge that you also modify our work to fit your needs.

Our growth has been based on the assimilation of visitors. Not everyone who visits VNC desires to come back, but the ones who show interest we have a plan to bring them into the body. Once a visitor fills in the “connection card” available on their visit, it opens the door with information for us to follow up. I phone each visitor Sunday afternoon merely letting them know I have received their card and thanking them for visiting today. I make a home call on all visitors on Thursday or Friday of that week. I want to see them at the end of the week as if they promise to return I want that promise made late in the week as opposed to early in the week. I write a report on each home visit. This report goes to our director of adult ministries (Pam Anderson). In the next week, Pam begins a connection with a follow up phone call. The desire here is to connect and lead them into our “journey of discipleship.” If, when I called in the home, I found out the kids are athletic that would be on the report to Pam. She would follow up telling them about the children’s sports programs. If I noticed a grand piano in the living room, this would be on the report and Pam would highlight our music ministries. We try and use the home call with my report to attract visitors within their interests. Our intent is to guide them into our “Journey.”

Our “journey of discipleship” is based on the 101-201-301 model. In our vision statement for the journey we define the entire process as: Sometimes in the journey called life, we can feel all alone. Valparaiso Nazarene Church wants to help you on this spiritual pilgrimage called life. We want to help you discover how to navigate this incredible journey that God has in store for you and for those you travel this road with at VNC.

The journey begins with 101. The 101 course is six Wednesdays from 6:30 PM to 8 PM. As lead pastor, I teach this course. It creates the opportunity for me to connect with new people and begins to give them a comfort zone with me. The course is repeated 4-5 times annually.

The 101 course is mandatory for those desiring membership at VNC. We purposely do the course on Wednesday nights as this is one of our primary nights for children's ministries.

The largest age group of new people fall between the ages of 20-45, most have children that could be in our Wednesday programs. They do not need to find babysitting to attend the 101 course – they merely bring their children to our Wednesday programs. This is very important to our design. Once their children have been a part of our children's ministries on Wednesdays for six weeks – they desire to continue. The set up of the room is very important to the success of the journey. Tables are round and combined to form groups of 16. There are seven couples (or singles filling the chairs) plus one couple that is not new. As everyone is probably strangers we all have name tags. There is one couple at each table that is defined as trail-guides. The trail guide is an established member of VNC; they are there to bring everyone together in creating connection and guide them through the next six weeks. Once the six weeks are over, we continue each group as small group meeting at least once per month. After the course the trail guide transitions into the group leader, setting time and place for continued meetings. Those in the 101 have now grown into a small group. Small groups tend to work if everyone begins together and have a shared experience – here, they all have the shared experiences of starting at VNC at approximately the same time and they spent 6 Wednesdays together in this class.

The 101 class has the following mission: "Within us there is a longing for a deeper walk with Christ. This is the beginning of the journey. If you were going on a trip, you would always check your supply list to make sure you had the basics for survival. At VNC we offer this six-week class to give you the tools you will need for the journey towards being a fully devoted follower of Christ. This class will teach you about the reality of prayer, biblical study, and service in your relationship with God. It also prepares you to fulfill the great commission by living a life of service."

In the agenda of the class each session begins with 15 minutes of sharing within each group. The connection time is important if we hope to see them evolve from strangers into a small group. The first session begins with the trail guides telling their story. As the six weeks progress every person, or couple, will have the chance to tell their story to the group. We begin with the trail guides as they set the tone and give permission to be vulnerable. The first session covers the history of the Church of the Nazarene. How we came to be. We tell of Pilot Point, Dr.

Bressee to the world mission of our church. From here we tell the story of VNC, our beginnings in 1924 at the corner of Lafayette and Monroe streets in Valparaiso. The key here is to let them know we have a story and their story is now part of our ongoing story.

We want them to sense ownership early in the sessions. We want them to have a sense of being a part of something bigger than just this church. A sense of history will do this. From here we explain salvation.

Salvation is laid out, no preaching, no clichés, no long stories – just what Jesus calls us to. There is a box in the back of the room. I have 3/5 cards and pens with this promise, “We will be together for 6 weeks, maybe you came with a question you wanted answered. It would be sad to be here all this time and I never answered it. Write your question on a card and drop it in the box, at the last session I will answer the questions.” At the end of the first session I ask, “If anyone prayed the prayer of salvation, write on a card: I prayed the prayer.” I have never had a 101 without people coming to Christ in this first session. As I write, last Wednesday was the first session and we had 5 cards telling me they prayed the prayer.

In the second session we begin to share some strategy. We unveil our mission statement, “Helping you become fully devoted followers of Jesus.” We talk about execution. Without execution our mission statement is merely a slogan. Our execution is based on something we call “worship+2.” Our church is very good at worship; now let’s focus on +2. Our two other parts of the puzzle are growth and service. So, if worship is the only thing you do at VNC you are seeing only 1/3 of the picture of what God has for you. We also explain our goals for outreach. Here we use Pastor Warren’s definitions of community, crowd, congregation, committed, and core. We end this session by defining worship. As worship is part of our execution in Worship+2, we must define our terms. We make clear that worship is what we give God not God to us. The elements are (1) Celebration (Ps.122:1), (2) Inspiration (Isa.40:31), (3) Preparation (Eph. 4:12) (4) Communicate God’s word (Eph 3:10), (5) Witness (Acts 1:8), (6) Maturity (Heb. 6:1). All leading to help you become a fully devoted follower of Jesus. We end the session with our core values.

The third session takes us back to theology. We teach the core beliefs and focus on free agency and sanctification. Developing our walk is a theme here with prayer and allowing the word into our hearts. We pray the prayer of sanctification at the conclusion of this class. While I do not repeat the “I prayed the prayer” on a 3/5 card here, I have had great feedback on those who prayed the prayer of sanctification.

The fourth session is building on where we have been. How cute to see a baby but if the baby looks the same in a year, something is very wrong. Nourishment and connection are vital for a baby to grow in a healthy manner. It is the same for us spiritually. Now we begin to talk about taking our tables within the class and seeing them begin to change to small groups.

Once 101 is over in a few weeks, there is a class specifically designed for your growth meeting on Wednesdays in this time slot. (Your kids are already locked in – why pull them out just because 101 ended?) If you are not part of the next sessions – what is your specific plan to grow? Remember, our mission is to help you become a fully devoted follower of Jesus. There are other options of connection and growth here at VNC – now I begin to explain the ministries available to them and talk about participation.

We stress that growth is not an accident. Growth is always a decision and purposeful. The church cannot grow you – you must grow you. We end by coming back to the execution of worship +2.

Session five is designed to teach God's plan for the church and you. Every Christian is to be a part of a church family or else they are an orphan. Unity is a key here. We are all different but unified, much like an orchestra is different instruments but playing the same song. A church has a skeleton. As we can't grow beyond our skeleton, a church will not grow beyond its skeleton. The skeleton is, first, fellowship (Acts 2:42). We are fellows on a ship. We are rowing together. God must dislike vanilla because we are all so different but we still fellowship. We partner together and with God in what he has for VNC. Our story is your story. The second piece of our skeleton is family (I Peter 3:8). Blood is thick. Jesus blood paid a price I could not pay and as blood brothers and sisters our blood is thick. There is something about family. We function as a part of relationships. We forgive each other, we lift each other up, and we encourage each other. The requirement of a pastor in I Timothy is that he manage his family. We are a family, not an organization. The third part of our skeleton is body. We are a body not a business. (Romans 12:4-6). Each part is important, you are important. Everyone has a gift that God expects us to use. Our execution is worship +2 grow and SERVE. No one on the sidelines! Why did God bring you to this church? What does he want you to bring to this body? The fourth and final part of our skeleton is flock. (John 21:16). Let us flock around you. No one should laugh alone or cry alone. As you are part of VNC we want to flock around you. I give examples of the church meeting individual families needs (no names are given).

Session six concludes by the difference between a guest and a home owner. A guest can sit on the furniture and watch TV. The home owner must vacuum and make the beds. There are guests in the church but our desire is they become an owner. The key here is service. They have

the opportunity to discuss their interests and fill in a form that will lead us to placement in the church. If they allow, we want them involved immediately. This session also goes into financing the vision. We detail that tithe is not a Nazarene concept but walk through the biblical teaching and blessings. We even detail the tithe envelope with its unique lines such as faith promise and our building pledges. Time is spent here on membership and application forms are passed out.

Completing the course does not guarantee membership – the application form may show a red-flag that will need to be dealt with privately with me. Time is also spent with the trail guides in designing their first group meeting in the next month. If anyone has not yet told their life story this is also completed. I end by answering any questions left in the box.

As the class defined different areas of ministry, the staff person leading that ministry now makes a contact and looks at assimilation into the ministry.

Once 101 is complete they automatically progress into 201. The mission statement of 201 is: “So what happens next? You have traveled the journey for a few weeks, picked up some supplies, gained some knowledge about the lay of the land and met some great people who are heading in the same direction. Some of us are wired to be around people. Some of us are not. For those who need more time in relationships we would encourage you to continue your spiritual growth and get involved in a connection group. Your connection group will include a trail guide and a group of people that you can meet with periodically to discuss life and God. You’ll also be able to live life together.”

201 is the continuation of the group that met for six weeks in 101. It is an important step. It keeps them together. The log out of the fire is the first to burn out no matter how hot it was in the fire. We set 201 to keep everyone in the fire. The small connection group is our strategy to accomplish this.

We then go straight to 301. The mission statement for 301 is: “In the marketplace, many of us have to continue in our education to ‘keep up.’ In our journey we need ongoing education to grow in our faith. Our relationships grow and deepen as we get to know each other more intimately. In our relationship with God, He has given us a great resource to get to know him more, the bible. The core is designed to keep you growing as a follower of Christ. In these different classes you will be challenged to go deeper and discover a continuing maturity as you walk with Christ.”

301 is the classes we desire our 101 graduates to graduate into. These classes are on Wednesday and are scheduled around the 101 schedule. When 101 is completed, there is a new 301 session beginning the next Wednesday night. 301 is taught by staff and covers such subjects as the book of John. As their children are in our Wednesday night programs, this becomes a natural step for our new believers.

As we have stayed faithful to this ministry it has been blessed by God.

For the past 5 years VNC has brought in more than 100 new members by profession of faith in each year.