

INVITING AND INITIATING YOUTH INTO A LIFE OF DISCIPLESHIP

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ABSTRACT

The research question/problem with which this article deals is whether we have lost the radical nature of the faith community as disciples of Jesus and seekers of the Kingdom of God? In youth ministry children and adolescents are often invited to make a decision for Christ as if such a decision comprises the totality of being a Christian. Being a Christian, as with being a disciple, consists of more than a mere decision. Both the Old and New Testaments reveal greater depth to such a commitment. Discipleship involves following Christ in a more considered way. Such a commitment requires the willingness to be initiated and guided into the acquisition of wisdom which enables one to discern what the more appropriate options are for a Christian to make. Given such a positioning, the role of the faith community as a people demands consideration. This article argues that we are the invitation and recommends how to frame the invitation.

INTRODUCTION

The gospel of the Kingdom is our message, as it was the message of Jesus (*cf.* Lk 8:1–3). Reducing the gospel of the Kingdom to a culturally manageable entity is more than a temptation: it is a reality. Our 'sinfulness' expresses itself in a constant, and often subtle process: While adapting the gospel to the cultural context, which is essential to faithful witness, there is always the temptation to bring the gospel under control, to make it manageable' (Guder 2000:97). Reductions take place, in any case, in translating the gospel. When reduction becomes a game of (usually cultural) control, it becomes 'reductionism' (Guder 2000:100). Such devaluation of the gospel, which is inflationary in nature, has occurred since the beginning of the Christian era, being almost fast tracked in the post-Constantine era, with ongoing serious consequences.

Post-modern emerging movements might just be a form of serious reductionism of the gospel, and especially of the faith community as a gospel community. Only time teaches whether something new is an instance of reformation or deformation. Let us hope that we live in a time of reformation, during which we are at least able to recognise the sequence of 'absolutized reductionisms' in both our past and present, which will allow us enough time in which to repent and reverse our ways. Many renewal movements have proved to be a 'reaction to various forms of reductionism' and 'called the church (back) to greater faithfulness to the gospel' (Guder 2000:103). Some of McLaren's writings deal with such a phenomenon. His case for *generous orthodoxy* is largely an attempt to unite the two concepts of generosity and orthodoxy, despite an admission that such concepts, in conventional church parlance, tend to be used in such a way as to exclude each other, in 'oxymoronic' fashion (McLaren 2004:27; also *cf.* McLaren 2008, to which reference is made below).

The *research question/problem* on which I want to reflect in this article is whether we have lost the radical nature of the faith community as *disciples of Jesus and seekers of the Kingdom*. Have we to follow Jesus into the mission field? If so, how should we invite and initiate youth into a life of discipleship?

The church began to lose its discipleship focus very early on in history. While Guder (2000:106–113) does not specifically refer to such lack of focus as reductionism, such might have been one of the most 'disastrous' reductionisms. Christians have often, throughout the history of Christendom, sought acceptance through belonging to an

organization that is conservative, accepts secular order, dominates the masses, has universal claims, and therefore uses ... the state and the ruling classes to sustain and expand its domination and to stabilize and determine the social order.

(Rasmusson 1995:234)

Whether such a Christendom still exists is doubtful (*cf.* Guder [1998:46–54], for a description of the 'disestablishment' of Christendom).

To the extent that we have lost the radical nature of the church, we might have lost the art of discipleship (*cf.* Schaller 1999; Snyder 2005).

My research hypotheses are as follows:

- Kingdom-seeking churches are serious about discipleship and disciple-making churches are serious about the Kingdom of God and his justice under his rule.
- When we recover the 'making of disciples', youth, together with their 'disciple makers', will 'make disciples', seeking the Kingdom passionately and responsibly.

I would like to take two well-known pericopes from the gospel of Matthew as theological departure points for the above hypotheses:

- Matthew 6, verses 24 to 34, with special reference to verse 33: 'But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (NIV).
- Matthew 28, verses 18 to 20, with special reference to verses 18 and 19: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples (*mathyteusate*) of all nations...' (NIV).

1. In reference to the subtitle of Easum's (2001) *Unfreezing moves: Following Jesus into the mission field*.

UNDERSTANDING DISCIPLESHIP

A look at Scripture

Learning and discipleship

The concept 'disciple' has a unique dimension in the New Testament. The New Testament writers did not invent the word. In the antique Greek world, the concept was used to refer to an apprentice (Rengstorf 1967:415). The concept also refers to the intellectual bond between teacher and pupil. Such a meaning is rooted in the verb *manthanein*, which literally means *focusing your thoughts on something* (Rengstorf 1967:391). The verb, which is used 55 times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, is used to translate more than one Hebrew word. It is clear that the 'attitude sought in *manthanountes* is that of obedience of the whole man to God in the doing of his will' (Rengstorf 1967:401). 'Learning' is the process by which a people apply themselves to the doing of the will of God, as revealed to them in the *Tôrâ*. An obedient Israelite is a pupil or disciple of the Law. He not only understands the Law, but is also obedient to the Person of God – he does God's will. As time went by, the teaching of rabbinic Judaism developed an intellectual bias.

The verb *manthanein* is found, surprisingly, only 25 times in the New Testament, while another word for teaching, *didaskain*, is used four times as often. Similarly, the word *manthanein* is found only six times in the Gospels and Acts. Scholars say this is because the verb 'to follow' (*akolouthain*) is the word used most often to describe the New Testament disciple, rather than the term *manthanein*, which is used for 'teaching' or 'instruction' (Rengstorf 1967:406). Such a finding does not imply that teaching and instruction are treated as unimportant in the New Testament. The New Testament teaching, however, differs from the rabbinical emphasis on mere intellectual teaching and instruction. Jesus neither merely conveys information, nor does he tend to enshrine reigning attitudes. Rather, he seeks to awaken an unconditional dedication to, and bonding with, himself.

The term 'disciple' (*mathytys*) is a derivative of *manthanein* (Louw & Nida 1988:328). As stated above, in the Greek world, the word has been used for an apprentice, as well as for an enthusiastic follower, even an imitator, of a teacher (cf. Rengstorf 1967:417). *Manthanein* also refers to a 'process by which one arrives at understanding which seems to be semantically dominant in the meaning of this series' (Louw & Nida 1988:381).

The New Testament term for 'disciple' (*mathytys*) does not appear in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Hebrew equivalent for disciple is found in the Old Testament only in 1 Chronicles 25:8, where it is translated in the NIV as 'student' (the Hebrew *Talmid*). It is striking that, in the Old Testament, it is the people of God as a whole who have to teach and instruct. All the people of God must know and obey his will. The vocation to be God's people and to know and obey his will is of the greatest importance in the revelation of God in the Old Testament (cf. Dt 4:10; 5:1; 6:1; Smart [1954], for an overview of how Old Israel approached the practice of teaching). Such communal following, on the basis of God's choice of Israel, is seen as the most important reason why the noun is not used in the Old Testament. The use of a noun would emphasise the individual, which would contradict the tenet of the Old Testament, with such an individual being seen as one who gives merely of himself. Such a focus on self would tend to have separated the individual from the other members of the 'chosen people' as a whole (Rengstorf 1967:412).

Similarly, the Greek emphasis on the Lord–pupil relationship is missing from the Old Testament, in terms of which God himself is the teacher, as is the *Tôrâ*. The strong revelatory character of Old Testament religion relativises man as teacher. The rabbinic disciple was not an individualist. If he had been, he would have placed himself outside the circle of other rabbinic disciples.

Jesus encountered rabbinic Judaism and its idea of the teacher (rabbi/pupil/disciple) in the Israel of his time. The system he encountered contained a distinction between two types of disciples – those who were just starting out on their study of rabbinic writings, and a second group of scholars who were so far advanced that they could choose what to study independently. However, the rabbinic ideas on discipleship were now also influenced by ideas from the Hellenistic world. The rabbis integrated many such ideas into their own mindset, especially regarding their own concern for, and preoccupation with, the *Tôrâ*. A legalistic bent dominated religion and the teaching of the rabbis and their pupils. Jesus often criticised the Pharisees for their preoccupation with the teachings of men, rather than with focusing on an understanding of the real meaning of the will of God, as revealed in the *Tôrâ* (cf. Mt 12:1–8; 15:1–23).

As has already been said, the term *disciple* in the New Testament is found only in the Gospels and Acts. The noun is used about 250 times (some say 259 times; Lawson 1981:51), in contrast to the verb, which is rarely used (especially in the Gospels). The noun refers to those who are committed to Jesus as their master or rabbi. Such is, indeed, the main point of New Testament discipleship – 'disciple' implies the existence of a personal bond, which determines the whole life of the individual. The bond is clear in respect of which of the two (the teacher or the pupil) has the power and influence to change people (Rengstorf 1967:441).

Therefore, New Testament discipleship reminds us of the Old Testament bond between God and his people. What distinguishes New Testament discipleship is the Person and Work of Jesus, who calls people to become his disciples. While the initiative in rabbinic Judaism lay with the individual to join the righteous (with the pupil choosing the rabbi), it is Jesus himself who saw, chose, and called his pupils. Although there are examples of such occurrences in Greek literature, it remains a dimension unique to the Gospels. The accent is exclusively on the person of Jesus, with the truth explaining the strong emphasis on his words in the context of discipleship (cf. Jn 8:31, 15). After the Resurrection, too, the disciples rallied round the risen Person of the Christ (and his words).

While rabbis and Greek philosophers all presented a specific subject to their pupils, Jesus Christ presents (sacrifices) himself. Two things constitute Biblical discipleship:

- acceptance into a personal relationship with Him who calls you to belong to Him; and
- a vocation, which means that you have to be a follower and pupil of the Christ who has called you.

(Rengstorf 1967:446)

In other words, according to Rengstorf (1967:406),

Jesus's concern is not to impart information, nor to deepen an existing attitude, but to awaken unconditional commitment to Himself. That mathytys, as akolouthain, is also manthanein, is self-evident.

(Mt 11:29)

In contrast to both Rabbi Akiba and the philosopher Socrates 'Jesus binds exclusively to Himself' (Rengstorf 1967:447).

In addition, according to Louw and Nida, the verb 'to make disciples' (*mathyteusate*) refers to

disciple in the sense of adhering to the teachings or instructions of a leader and promoting the cause of such a leader ... In many languages the equivalent of 'to follow' (in the sense of 'to be a disciple' is literally 'to accompany' or 'to go along with' or 'to be in the group of.

(Louw & Nida 1988:470–471)

Louw & Nida (1988:471) also state that the verb means to 'cause people to become followers ... In order to avoid a wrong implication of a *causative* (bold italic – MN) it may be important to use such expression to 'convince them to become disciples' or 'urge them to be my disciples'.

Teaching (*didachein*) and discipleship

Discipleship can easily degenerate into the rabbinic and Greek notions of the word, with it then referring to an endeavour to be like a rabbi, or to become a rabbi yourself (with your own disciples). For the disciples of Jesus, their discipleship was not the first step, with a promise of greater things to come. It was, rather, the fulfilment of their very existence (Rengstorf 1967:448). In this relationship, the Lordship of Jesus (as the *Kurios*) was, and became increasingly more, vital. He was not only the Teacher of the congregation – he was the Lord of his disciples. He was not merely the rabbi (the teacher), but the *Kurios* (Dulles 1980:19). Such an attribution gave authority to his words in the lives of the disciples.

Is such a quality not what we have lost? Often, we teach as though teaching makes disciples. God, in Christ through the Spirit, makes disciples of us in and through ourselves and our teaching. Have we lost the scriptural meaning of teaching? We should consider what kind of teaching God has employed, all through history, to make people his followers.

Firet (1986:50–68) has often provided guidance on what it should be to invite, and where we might have lost the ‘art’ of inviting, youth into a life of discipleship. He (Firet 1986:53) invites his readers to ‘first savor the spirit of the *didache* in the world of the Old Testament’.

Initiation (*Chanukkâ*)

Drazin reflects that:

Jewish education was rather synonymous with life. It unfolded life, giving it direction and meaning. In fact a modern Hebrew term for education, Chinuk, from a root found twice in the Bible in the sense of to “train”, etymologically means dedication or initiation (cf. Proverbs 22:6).

(Drazin 1940:12)

The verb, as a rule, refers to the dedication of a house, which makes it fit for a purpose. Firet (1986:53) adds that

the “way” (Proverbs 22:6) is the life of a person seen from the perspective of destination. Lives do not just “run out”: as a rule, they go somewhere. Every life has its own purpose; to direct oneself to that end is mandatory; in order to be able to direct oneself to it a chanukkâ is needed – a “transfer of dedication”.

(Firet 1986:53)

The use of such a word explains the atmosphere of Jewish upbringing and *didache* best. According to Firet:

This appears most clearly in the family where the upbringing, and hence the didache, begins and belongs ... The “transfer of dedication” consists especially in the initiation of the child into the story of Yahweh and his people: it implicates him personally so that it becomes his story. The child is initiated into the story with a view of where he has to go. The “way” did not begin when he was born: it started with the Exodus. He was there when it happened ... The didache is not primarily an explication of history, or of the words and works of Yahweh. It is first of all the act of implicating the young Israelite in the story of Salvation. He learns to say and experience “we” – the “we” of the covenant.

(Firet 1986:54, cf. Dt 4:6, Ex 10; Ball 1988:1, 8–13)

Tôrâ

The Old Testament contains numerous references to the *way* of God (cf. Ps 25:4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12; 119: 1, 3, 5, 9 etc.). That “way” must be learned. In order to find it, and to walk in it, one needs *tôrâ*. Buber (1951, 2003:57) writes:

The Torah of God is understood as God’s instruction in His way, and therefore not as a separate objectivum. It includes law ... but Torah itself is essentially not law. A vestige of actual speaking always adheres to the commanding word; the directing voice is always present ... To render Torah by “law” is to take away from its idea this inner dynamic and vital character’.

Buber ([1951] 2003:57)

Firet makes an additional point in this regard:

Torah is “direction, instruction, information”. It points out the way, offers guidance on the road. It is the word of revelation in which God comes to a person...To direct a person to her destination, to initiate her into the story, to take and lead her on the way – that is the Jewish Didache...life-shaping pointers for concrete situations... Torah in their totality, are the means by which God’s coming to direct and redirect his people continually takes place.

(Firet 1986:55)

Chokmâ

Vriezen (1958:315) explains the subtle, but important, distinction between law and wisdom, in terms of the fact that ‘fundamentally the laws are looked upon as received directly from God, while wisdom is, as it were, the human reflection on this’.

Chokmâ has its own function in the Jewish *didache*. Firet (1986:55) refers to such a function in relation to the everyday question ‘Now what do I do?’, in relation to those situations in which one must arrive at one’s own answer. Knowledge of ‘the way’ is not enough: One also needs knowledge of affairs, a perspective on specific situations, insight into problems (cf. Micha 6:8). *Chokmâ* addresses itself to such a need. Fohrer (1971:476) writes that the reference is to ‘prudent, considered, experienced and competent action to subjugate the world and to master the various problems of life and life itself’. The wise one is not a superior person, but ‘wisdom begins – and this is the essential and unique feature of the Israelite concept of *chokmâ* – in the “fear of the Lord” (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Ps. 111:10)’ (Firet 1986:56).

Firet’s summary of such a point is striking:

To be truly human, according to the Old Testament, is to be implicated in the story of the covenant, to live in the fear of the Lord, to walk in the way of the Lord amid the complexities of the life of every day, at work and in social activities ... To help human beings gain and experience this humanity is the purpose of the didache in its various forms.

(Firet 1986:58)

Firet (1986:58–68) continues to discern the uniqueness of Christ’s teaching, and what impact it has on the teaching of the church. Osmer (2005:284) phrases such discernment well, finding that ‘[d]iscernment, thus, is a weaving together of our stories, learning to see the unfolding dramas of our lives within the larger Theodrama of God’s dealings with the world.’ Saying this, Osmer emphasises the *koinonia* that we share with, and in, Christ.

‘The Teacher is here...’ (Jn 11:28)

A brief look at the uniqueness of ‘the One who teaches with authority’ (Mt 7:29) should start with finding that it was his *exousia* that discerned, and which discerns him, from the many rabbis, then and now. Firet (1986:61) is, to my mind, correct when he writes: ‘The *didache* of the church certainly has everything to do with the *didache* of the Lord, but it cannot be a continuation, still less an imitation, of it’. The imperative to teach (Mt 28:19) rests in the ‘indicatives of messianic fulfilment and the promise of the Spirit’ (Hoekendijk 1948:224; also cf. Dingemans 1991:163–168). The Lord (the Messiah-King) remains the teacher. According to Firet,

It is clear that the didache of the church does not replace the didache of Jesus. Jesus Christ remains the teacher: The apostles and the church, by their didache, can only lead people into discipleship of this teacher.

(Firet 1986:163)

Discipleship is truly, according to a New Testament understanding, ‘the following of the way, a continuous life with Jesus’ (Firet 1986:163). According to Dingemans (1991:163–164), the characteristics of the New Testament teachings are its

- pastoral nature
- dialogic character
- practical nature

- persuasive structure
- central focus on faith in Jesus Christ.

If one wants to relate such characteristics to Old Testament tradition, it might help to think of the *halacha* (the normative part of teaching) as the centrality of God in Jesus the Christ and the Spirit and of the *haggada* (the narrative part of teaching) as the open-ended, interpretational learning process, which was so critical to the Jewish tradition (cf. Dingemans 1991:160).

As has been explained above, in reference to wisdom (*chokmâ*), learning was not only aimed at understanding, but also at attaining a certain way of life, governed by the making of decisions about amending practice in everyday life. Abram (1980:112) called such decision-making the dynamic between tradition and the individual. By learning from tradition, you come to change, and as you change you add to your practice. Tradition also grows from the insights and new activities provided by the learner, resulting in the real ‘mediational happenings’ (*‘bemiddelingsgebeuren’*) between God and man. Dingemans (1991:161) states that the encounter with content and experience lies at the heart of the Jewish tradition, being ‘not primarily aimed at “scholarship”, but on “wisdom”, meaning living wisely (*“recte handelen”*)’ (freely translated, MN). I believe that Verboom (2003:177–195) picks up on what one might call the ‘experiential’ or ‘existential’ nature of teaching and learning in his article on *‘bevindelijke catechese’* (‘experience in catechesis’).

The lifelong nature of New Testament discipleship also alludes to the Jewish perception that learning is permanent. Dingemans (1991) refers to Abram’s (1980:151) enumeration of the five principles of learning in the Jewish tradition: Learn

- permanently
- by repeating
- individually and collectively
- by bringing it into practice
- by planning your learning personally.

Our challenge is to invite children and adolescents into his teaching. We are only employed to help in the hermeneutical process. God, the Spirit, continues to ‘lead you into all the truth ... He will take what I say and tell it to you’ (Jn 16:13, 14, *Good News Bible*).

A brief look at history

The purpose of my research is not to describe the history of teaching as a way of inviting and initiating youth into discipleship as such. Others have already done so. Osmer (1990:61–138; 1996:27–160) investigates the historical perspective on confirmation. A brief look at history is crucial for contextualising the question of whether we have lost the art and the desire to take discipleship seriously in youth ministry and, more specifically, in Christian education as a part of youth ministry. Dingemans (1991:15)² argues for the use of the concept *matheteus* (*‘mathetiek’*) rather than *catechein* (*‘catechetiek’*), to convey his departure point regarding ‘How do people become pupils (learners) of Jesus? How do they learn to believe?’ (Free translation of the Dutch – MN: *‘Hoe worden mensen leerlingen van Jezus? Hoe leren ze te geloven?’*).

I will briefly focus on the so-called ‘golden age’ (Turner 2000:7–11) of disciples and teaching, stretching from 300 to 500 AD, and including the Augustinian period. Nichols calls the period

a time of difficulty, from both within and without. Yet it was also a time of victory and triumph, and a time that witnessed God’s faithfulness in building the church’s foundation.

(Nichols 2006:26)³

The time was one of vibrant missionary outreach, during which those adults who converted to Christianity were not only taught,

2. Dingemans (1991:159–177) also offers a short overview of history.

3. cf. Nichols 2006:65–83 for his excellent description of the life and writings of Augustine.

but also baptised. Such adults were presented to the congregation by Christians, who were most probably involved in their conversion. Such godparents or ‘sponsors’ (Dujarier 1979:35; Field 1997:21) were called *Pater* (male) and *Mater* (female).

The introduction (teaching) of those who inquired into the secrets of the Christian faith took some time. In 385 AD Augustine himself (who was then 30 years old) received such teaching for two years (cf. Dingemans 1991:168). The 4th century *Constitutiones Apostolicae* set a period of three years for such training. The teaching was in the well-known four modes of faith, law, prayer, and the Sacraments, which are found in many references to teaching in the Early Church, and which also run through the history of the Old Testament as the Torah, prayer, faith, and the feasts (*pesach*, *sukkot*, and *sabbath*) (cf. Dingemans 1991:160).

Field (1997:11) points out, in relation to the overall impression of ancient texts regarding the rites of Christian initiation, that a

strong unanimity existed among catechists throughout the church, pointing to a common tradition going back to apostolic times... the fulfilment of the realities of the Old Testament in Christ and in the Sacraments of the New Covenant...the corporate character of Christian initiation, the vivid use of rites...Conversion is thought of in terms of engagement in the tremendous drama of redemption, in which God is the principal actor.

(Field 1997:11)

According to Field, every inquirer or applicant for membership to the church was

examined regarding their motives, their condition in life and their morals ... The church did not want halfhearted Christians who might endanger her principles ... Certain occupations were considered incompatible with Christianity ... anything connected with pagan worship, the theater, or the gladiatorial games.

(Field 1997:19)

Once admitted, they were allowed for three years to attend the Liturgy of the Word, but that was the limit of their allowable public devotion. After the three years, ‘an enquiry was made into the conduct of the candidates during their probation ... Those who proved ready then received several weeks of intensive preparation for baptism at Easter’ (Field 1997:20). Such baptism normally took place during Lent. Studying the intensive teaching of the time makes for good reading. Field (1997) describes in great detail what was taught in every stage, quoting the original (translated) texts, such as the Bishop’s opening address at the ‘reception of the candidates’ (Dujarier 1979:40; Field 1997:22–31; cf. Turner 2000:4–11).

Dingemans rightly remarks that ‘the result of this stringent period of admission was that the church existed of members (*fideles* – believers) who were wholeheartedly committed to the cause of the gospel’ (Dingemans 1991:168, freely translated, MN). A growing number, however, did not undergo baptism, leading to the consideration of baptism as a form of secret ‘initiation’ at the end of the period, with its being for the real ‘insiders’ only, as with that undergone in the mystery religions. Already, tendencies towards one-sided intellectual teaching were observable, with the well-known Schools for Catechists, such as those in Alexandria, Antioch and Caesarea, dating from the period.

As a more favourable attitude started to develop towards the Christian Church, catechetical teaching became less stringent and was sometimes even neglected. ‘Instruction in and of the faith shallowed to nothing more than initiation into the sacraments and superficial acknowledgement of the Apostolicum, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments’ (Dingemans 1991:169–170, freely translated, MN). In relation to the greater focus placed on reflection and confessions at the time, I refer the reader to the insights provided by Nichols (2006:26–27), in his references to the building of ‘the church’s foundation’.

Some current emphases

My recent reviewing of over 50 books on the reformation of congregations has been directed towards obtaining an understanding of their identity and faithfulness to the gospel of the Kingdom. Authors refer to such a process by different names. McLaren (2008:128) asks whether one should choose between reformation and, as he puts it, 'revolution and refounding'. Others call the process renewal (Snyder 1996, 2005), revitalisation (Avery 2002; Gibbs 1993), redevelopment (cf. Mann 1999:1–12), or a second Resurrection (Easum 2007). Most of the authors concerned have conducted empirical research into, and on, congregations. They have tried to find answers to the question: Why are some churches (irrespective of their size) more effective (in the sense of making a difference) than others? Most of the researchers found the main reasons to be the form of Christian education adopted, and the importance placed on commitment and discipleship, by the churches concerned. Discipleship (which is sometimes called by a different name) is part and parcel of congregational reformation.

The difficulty of embarking on such a new dawn is described by Barbara Hixon in her description of her denomination, which

for a thousand years have been conservationists (her emphasis)... but [then] came along Vatican II, a veritable earthquake, cracking the Roman rock to expose its component pebbles: the people of God ... We are as yet uncomfortable with it. Living Rock moves. That means changing, reshaping, levelling mountains, and filling valleys. It means making way for the Lord. The switch from conservation to transformation is difficult.

(Hixon 1997:63)

Hixon's description relates directly to the restoration and transformation of the catechumenate.

Campolo (1995:133) writes, 'Of all the failures of mainline churches over the last three decades, none has been more pronounced than their failure in Youth ministry'. Churches might be in decay due to their exclusive philosophies of ministry, or because they have lost the desire to make disciples of their own children. I have tried to argue a case for inclusive youth ministry in many different books and articles (cf. www.malannel.co.za). Even though many of the authors to whom I refer to above do not directly relate what they have to say about learning, teaching and discipleship to youth and youth ministry, they do at least acknowledge what might lead to the rediscovery of the importance of youth ministry. The work of the following empirical researchers is worth mentioning in this regard:⁴ In the well-known research of the Gospel and Culture Network relating to the patterns to be found in missional faithfulness, Barrett (2004:59–73) lists 'Biblical formation and discipleship' as second on the list of 12 patterns enumerated, explaining: 'The missional church is a community where all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus' (Barrett 2004:160).

- McIntosh and Reeves (2006:73–108) devote two chapters to discipleship in their book on thriving churches in the 21st century. Extensively they discuss the importance of spiritual discipline, as 'life-giving system 3' (McIntosh & Reeves 2006:73–87), and of mentoring relationships, as 'life-giving system 4' (McIntosh & Reeves 2006:88–108), for such churches.
- Schnase (2007:7, 59–78), who undertook research into the Missouri Conference of United Methodist Communities in the USA, describes 'intentional faith development' as one of the five practices of faithful congregations. He writes (Schnase 2007:62) that, through the ages, 'the followers of Jesus [have] mature[d] in faith by learning together

in community'. Churches that practise 'Intentional Faith Development offer high quality learning experiences that help people understand Scripture, faith, and life in the supportive nurture of caring relationship' (*ibid.* 2007:62). With reference to my broader research into building up missional congregations, it makes sense that the next prioritised practice of fruitful congregations, as described by Schnase (2007:79), is 'risk-taking mission and service'. Schnase (2007:125–144) relates such practices to excellence and fruitfulness in his context of the Missouri Conference.

- Dick (2007:116–126) researched 717 congregations of the United Methodist Church, during which research he discerned the existence of four different types of churches. In the conclusion to his research, he describes the first three 'pathways to vitality' as:

thinking holistically about the congregation; balancing both the inward and outward focus; and pursuing the practice of lifelong learning.

Dick (2007:118) describes the situation as follows:

Promoting a love of learning and developmental plans are high priorities in vital congregations. Vital churches have a clear picture of what it means to be a Christian believer, a Christian disciple, a Christian leader, and the body of Christ.

(Dick 2007:118)

Keifert (2006:117–137) refers to the formation of Christian community, in connection with which he says that learning and growing are

always about the catechumenate, about initiating persons into the reign of God, through evangelism and a deliberate spiritual journey that takes them from being seekers (consumers of religion as commodity) to being disciples of Jesus. Forming Christian community without this basic activity leaves the congregation without the profound engagement of real people who seek to truly understand God.

(Keifert 2006:126)

- Woolever and Bruce (2004:3), in their comprehensive study of more than 4 000 congregations, mention a few universals that they found, among which they list as the second of five the tendency of 'congregations universally seek to educate worshippers about the faith and behaviors expected of the faithful'. They explicitly mention the focus of the congregations 'on the young'. The universals that follow in the list refer to the involvement in mission or to the making of disciples.

Many books have been written on the Roman Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, to which I only wish to make passing mention here. According to Dujarier (1979:18), 'Even before the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, a Roman decree of April 16, 1962 authorized the restoration of the stages of the catechumenate.' When the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* was published in 1972 in Rome 'it brought to completion a work that was ten years in the making' (*ibid.* 1979:18).

Several authors, in addition to Field (1997), to whom I earlier referred, describe the process and content of initiation learning. Steffen (1997:9–13) describes such learning as the process of leading people to become discerning disciples. Already in 1988 the British Council of Churches Working Party published a report on the relationship between Christian initiation and church membership. In the same year, Ball (1988) published a work on helping leaders to understand the themes at stake in the Christian initiation of adults. As recently as 2006, Yamane, MacMillen and Culver published a collection of accounts of how such initiation takes place, of which one is entitled 'We're about Making Disciples' (1–30).

- Heitink (2007:79–116) devotes a chapter of his book on a church with character (freely translated, MN) to the process of *initiation*, which he deems necessary, due to the sometimes

4. My main focus is not discipleship *per se*. I, therefore intentionally neither describe my own reflection on discipleship in building up missional congregations (Nel 2005:96–111), nor refer to the classics on discipleship by Wilson (1976) and Watson (1982). I also neither refer to the recent writings by Gibbs (2000) and Gibbs and Bolger (2005), nor to the two well-known books by Ogden (1998, 2003). I also do not shed light on any of the 36 discipleship-related books that were published in 2008 alone.

complete break between adults and youth. He describes the concept of initiation from a cultural-anthropological point of view. All children are introduced into the culture in which they grow up, such as in the case of African culture, in terms of which culture they have to undergo a separate *rite de passage* into adulthood. In the Early Church adult converts underwent just such a process. Many churches have come to neglect such a rite, due to cultural and pedagogical changes. Heitink (2007:88) quotes several European authors, who refer to the fact that culture has changed so much that children are no longer children and adults are no longer discernible as such either. He refers to Kooops, Levering and De Winter (eds. 2007:21) who call the times in which we live a 'childless time' (*'kinderloze tijdperk'*).

Due to exposure to a multimedia-dominated society, the world in which we live no longer contains any secrets. As Heitink (2006:88) puts it, 'electronic media can keep no secret and without secrets the concept *child* cannot survive' (freely translated, MN).

Such a cultural reality has deeply impacted on the pedagogical system. Never before has so much attention been given to children. In this time of no children (due to the lack of secrets), there is so much more 'child'. Godot (2003:24) says that never before has so much attention been paid to the wishes of children, and never such a '*speelruimte op maat*', with advanced marketing being employed in relation to even the smallest child. In terms of modern-day culture and education, children are expected to be extremely responsible from a very young age. With parents being involved in their own world, 'the responsibilities for their (the children's, MN) own coming and going rest upon their own small child shoulders' (*'eigen kleine kinderschouders'*) (Godot 2003:26). Part of the dilemma is the generational divide that has developed, due to such pressures. In reformed churches, a certain apprehension about baptism has developed, resulting in decisions being taken 'over the head of the child' (Heitink 2007:103). In a situation that is subject to growing missionary endeavour, the occurrence of such a phenomenon might increase still further. Already in 1990, Callahan (1990:13) described the situation in the following terms: 'The day of the church culture is over. The day of the mission field has come.'

Heitink's (2007) work on a church with character has prompted my investigation into this issue, and led directly to this article. Many other researchers could have been quoted above. Almost all would agree: It looks as though we have lost the art of initiation, and maybe even the plot! And we need to get it back, or else the consequences could be dire.

INVITING TO, AND INITIATION INTO, A LIFE OF DISCIPLESHIP, AND TO A LIFE OF SEEKING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

It is hard to imagine anything more challenging than seeking the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is so daringly different from the world that we once knew, as well as the world that we now know. Brueggemann (2006:16) describes the difference well when stating that the 'recovery of the text (biblical, MN) is to mediate a *present tense of covenantal neighbourliness* in the face of the dominant text of *anxious selfishness and alienated greed*'. He concludes that the dominant text (our world, MN) features:

- a nonexistent past of amnesia, in which there is only the hard, endless work of self-invention;
- a future of despair, in which there are no more gifts to be given, but only a no-win struggle against scarcity;
- a present, consisting of a jungle of frightened meanness; and a world which is characterised by the credo 'Greed is good' (referring to the film *Wall Street*).

In this world, according to Brueggemann (2006:16), our present is dominated by 'greed powered by anxiety and issuing in shameless brutality against the neighbor. The world, in such limited horizon, really has no option'.

In terms of Brueggemann's (2006:9–19) recovery of the text as being, in essence, the text of the Bible, and, as such, the text of the Kingdom, his contrasting of biblical and present text explains much about the radical nature of the Kingdom.

The recovery of the text:

- *is in order to mediate a memory of generosity in the face of a dominant text of amnesia;*
- *is to mediate hope of utter fidelity into all futures in the face of a dominant text of despair;*
- *is to mediate a present tense of covenantal neighbourliness in the face of the dominant text of anxious selfishness and alienated greed.'*

Where God reigns,

- *'scarcity can be displaced by generosity;*
- *anxiety can be displaced by confidence;*
- *greed can be displaced by sharing;*
- *brutality can be displaced by compassion and forgiveness [own emphasis].*

(Brueggemann 2006:17)

Even if it was only for the *risky nature* of seeking such a Kingdom, it would have been worthwhile inviting children and adolescents to participate in such a life. The youth enjoy taking risks. Many even risk taking or losing their lives for what they love and like. Dean (2004:4–6) refers to the object of their affection as something or someone for whom they consider it to be worth dying. In the Christian context, she refers to such a phenomenon as 'losing it for Jesus'. In terms of my argument, I prefer referring to such as 'losing it for the King'. Not only in the armies of this world, but also in seeking out the rule of the crucified one, the young are the best. But how will they know it? How will they both voluntarily and passionately sign up for so daring a task as to *seek first the Kingdom of God and go to make disciples of all the nations*?

Why has it become so critical to rethink our invitation to, and our way of initiation into, following the way of the Lord? It is because we have lost the art of being, due to our very God-given nature. We have lost track of how to be disciples who seek the Kingdom and of how, as we walk and talk, to make disciples of our own children, as well as those of 'the nations'.

The few recommendations that I make as to how to recover the art are in no way meant to be prescriptive. The way in which we recover such an art differs from context to context. Borne out of conviction and my extensive readings, I have come to share a few insights in this regard.

The host: Being the invitation Disciples make disciples

Disciples in the making, make disciples. For the invitation to be valid and worthy of being extended, the so-called 'adult' members of the group of disciples (the congregation) need to understand such a precept. Such an understanding defines a missional people who are serious about converting their own children, as well as the 'nations', into disciples. Halter and Smay ask some pertinent questions in this regard:

Leaving, listening, living among, and loving without strings are the practices that help us draw the hearts of the sojourning world. What if and when they "Start inquiring"? What are we "inviting them into"?

(Halter & Smay 2008:147)

The recovery of the faith community demands of us that we clean up our house in preparation for the party, else how dare we invite others to, and want to initiate them in, the celebration? Sjogren (2002) refers to the current church as being perfectly imperfect, in short the ideal church. We follow and commit to Jesus, *the Christ* because we are broken, and because we are in constant need of healing, of knowing, of gaining the wisdom to discern, and so on. We do not yet 'have it' and we are just not there yet. He has us, and we have only him (cf. Ps 83). We are

but disciples in the making and, as such, best 'qualified' to be involved in inviting others into the discipleship and the making of disciples (*cf.* Nouwen 1994).

Such a prerequisite has to be understood in terms of the theology of Ephesians, especially in terms of Chapter 4. Building up the body requires simultaneous consolidation and missional intent (Nel 2005:23; Roberts 1983). As we grow into the fullness of our union with him, we invite others to become part of the body constructed on him. The importance of such a dynamic reality or dialectic escapes many congregations, with disastrous consequences of decay and death for the body concerned (*cf.* Nel 2005:24–37).

An incarnational community

A pneumatological view of the body of disciples compels us to think of ourselves as an incarnational community. The one who became flesh dwells and remains in us, and we in him. The ebbing away of such a spiritual reality is not necessarily recoverable by means of sprinkling the concept of 'spirituality' everywhere we go. Only as an earth-bound (fleshy) confessional reality can we be the incarnational community, being made by the Spirit and sustained by him. In this sense, more than in any other way, the congregation is a spiritual reality and being. The Holy Spirit makes known the Father and the Son, so that when he reigns and fills his people they participate fully in what he does. We, the congregation, are employed by God the Spirit to perform that for which we were created and for that which he came to do: To proclaim the involvement of the Father and the Son in the healing and restoration of such a broken reality (*cf.* Van Ruler 1969:181, 1973:12, 28–29, 36–37; Dingemans 1991:42–52). For such reasons, Jesus became flesh, and lived among us. He now lives within us, enabling us continuously to be restored, so that we can represent God on Earth.

In Kingdom language, Matthew 25 means providing water for the thirsty, visits for the lonely, and hospitality for the stranger, without our conscious awareness of serving as providers, but rather merely as a result of our being different. Disciples, who actively seek out the Kingdom, neither pretend to care for others, nor shout out invitations to non-disciples in order to secure life after death for themselves. We should embody the invitation to a life worth living, both in the here and now, and forever.

With such an embodiment being a prerequisite to making the ultimate invitation, we must consider how we are perceived by the youth. Do they see us as people who think, talk, walk, and live in his presence, in the present? Or do they see us as people who think, talk, walk, and live like the rest of the 'world', entering into some spiritual trance only once in a while. Such a trance is characterised by a state of mind in which consciousness is fragile and voluntary action is poor or missing, being a state that resembles deep sleep (Word Perfect Thesaurus). Snyder (2005:192) refers to such a state as *spiritism*, and considers it as the first disguise of the enemy. Why should anyone pay attention to the invitation when they perceive that the community of disciples is no different from what they perceive the non-Christian world to be?

Lifelong learners

Any good in the generational gap is likely to lie in adults in the faith community no longer thinking of themselves as people who have arrived. The unending information explosion should help us to understand that 'Christian initiation has a crucial process dimension' (British Council Of Churches Working Party 1988:24). We follow as we learn, and we learn as we follow. Despite Peter's confessing him as the Christ (Mt 16:16), having the capacity to be called the rock (Mt 16:18), and being capable of being sufficiently inspired to confess him (Mt 16:17), do not keep him from being reprimanded: 'Go away from behind me Satan' (Mt 16:23). Why is Paul referred to as Satan in the Gospel context? The answer is clear: 'Because you think not the things of

God' (Mt16:23), which is a more literal translation. Even Paul has to learn, a fact of which he is implicitly aware. As he says, your mind is continuously renewed (Rm 12:1–2).

Discipleship is a journey, and not just a decision, though it might start with one. No young person should be duped into thinking that a once-off acceptance of Jesus is a guarantee of being saved. The apostle John helps us to gain greater insight into such decision-making: Accepting Jesus as Saviour is the opposite of rejecting him, and of not acknowledging that he is the Christ. Confessing and accepting that he is, is only part of the initial stages of a lifelong commitment to learning that he is the crucified one. To remain in him (in terms of the typical John phraseology) is to listen (to obey, if you prefer) to him. 1 John 2:6 states in no uncertain terms: 'Whoever says that he remains in union with God should live just as Jesus Christ did' (*Good News Bible*). Faith consists of 'leaning into life' (Fowler 1981:92) and learning how to make reckoning with God, entailing a renewed commitment every step of the way.

Heitink (2007:104) is, to my mind, correct when he says that in a post-Christian culture we will have to do much more than merely be a pastoral and catechetical embodiment of child or adult baptism in the life of the congregation. In this way, *catechesis or Christian education is made central to the inviting and initiating of children and adolescents into a life of discipleship of Jesus*. At a time when the priesthood of all believers is at least confessed by most, the new challenge which is set for all believers is that of becoming involved in the invitation. Only if we *are* the invitation, dare we *extend* the invitation. A learning community, which is modest in its accomplishments of learning, is an open invitation for the inquisitive mind of the child and the questioning mind of the adolescent. Firet (1986:246) describes such openness as constituting the 'equihuman' approach.

Inevitably, some are closer to the young than others: Parents, whether separated or together, divorced or widowed, broken or in the healing process, are ideally situated to be the invitation. Whoever is related to a child has a God-given relational (covenantal) opportunity to be the invitation. My purpose in this article is not to argue a case for a developmental approach to Christian education, but to emphasise that certain people are natural, God-given invitations at certain times of their life. For the children of disciples, such people are the members of the community of disciples: Parents, significant others, such as members of a discipleship peer group, teachers, leaders either in or outside the congregation, and any others who, under the guidance of the Spirit, are excited about Jesus the Christ and his spiritual body of followers. Heitink's (2007:109–111) reference to house and basis catecheses can be seen in terms of such a category. 'A baptized church is a studying church', writes Brueggemann (2006:108).

A learning community puts its arms around children and adolescents and walks with them, in a way that embodies *Tôrâ* and *Chokmâ* at their best. We know that our only advantage over younger disciples is that we have been 'on the way' longer than they have. We know how challenging it sometimes is to remain faithful to him and the values of the Kingdom. We know that making the right (or better) choices in life does not come easily. Therefore, the *parakalein* (only speaking when your arms are around the one to whom you speak) is our mode of invitation. Such an encounter is close and personal, as well as being one which is supported by the community.

As adult disciples, we have learned to say 'we', though such learning sometimes takes a lifetime and even when we often, erroneously, opt for 'I'. Dick (2007:92) finds that vital churches work on such a principle. 'We' is the word spoken most frequently in vital congregations. The community of faith comes first. It is striking to be in a large group of people where agendas are set aside for the common good, though this is the norm in vital churches. Unity, connection, oneness, and communion are

defining terms for such congregations. That is not to say that there is not disagreement or conflict in such churches, but only that, where such disagreement does exist, there is a healthy, respectful way of addressing it. Vital congregations are striking for the absence of 'toxic influencers'. Bad behaviour is confronted, challenged, and either fixed or removed. Such is the importance of modelling Christian unity and grace. You can only imagine how invitational such an approach is in a broken world!

The Holy Spirit makes discipleship possible. He calls us into a relationship with the Father and the Son, by maintaining the constant and permanent relationship with the Lord whom we follow. Only through the Spirit and under his guidance is true discipleship of Christ possible. It is he who helps the disciples to remain 'in the words' of the Lord. Such an emphasis shows that discipleship is about obedience to the Lord's Word and will. His words teach his disciples perpetually to improve their understanding and conduct under the guidance of the Spirit, and in communion with other disciples.

Passionate about Jesus

From the short biblical and historical overview given above, it is clear that what discerns discipleship in a Christian setting is the presence of Jesus. Therefore, when churches lose their focus on him, they are on dangerous ground. Effective churches and churches that make a difference focus on holistic ministry and centre on a 'congregational life around passionate worship of the Triune God, celebrating salvation by grace through faith in Christ and relying on the power of God's Spirit for fruitful ministry' (Sider, Olson & Unruh 2002:129). In the words of De Claissie-Walford (2006:72), 'Holistic churches hold to the centrality of Jesus in congregational life'. (Both such sources view 'holistic' as amounting to 'a wholehearted embrace and integration of both evangelism and social ministry so that people experience spiritual renewal, socioeconomic uplift, and transformation of their social context' [Sider, Olson & Unruh 2002:325]).

When it comes to us, being the invitation and initiating youth into a life of discipleship, such a 'prerequisite' is critical. I believe that Dean is correct when she states:

The adolescent quest for passion reveals a theological aneurysm in mainline Protestantism: We are facing a crisis of passion, a crisis that guts Christian theology of its very core, not to mention its lifeblood for adolescents [her emphasis].

(2004:7)

Passion in discipleship should not be confused with fanaticism, with the former being marked by caring constructiveness and the latter by uprooting destructiveness. Passion for Jesus does not so much ask what Jesus would do and leave many misjudged individualistic options to one side. Passion asks what Jesus or God did, as well as what the Triune God is doing. Then it is that discipleship kicks in, with personal study of the Word and the acknowledgment of the wisdom of the many preceding and contemporary disciples, as well as the wisdom of Christian tradition, which facilitates the discernment of how we as a faith community can contribute to his work. (For Dean's understanding of passion cf. 2004, especially pages 17 to 21.)

'Framing' the invitation

We are the invitation. Being disciples of Jesus, the Christ, is invitational in itself. And, yes, we have to invite and to initiate. Carroll takes a leaf out of the autobiography of Nelson Mandela:

Like all Xhosa children, I acquire knowledge mainly through observation. We were meant to learn through imitation and emulation, not through questions. When I first visited whites, I was often dumbfounded by the number and the nature of questions that children asked of their parents – and their parents' unflinching willingness to answer them ... My life, and that of most Xhosas at the time, was shaped by custom, ritual and taboo. This was the alpha and omega of our existence.

(Carroll 2000:12–13)

Mandela (1994:19) recalls the respect and awe with which he held the local Methodist pastor, whose 'powerful presence embodied all that was alluring in Christianity'.

My conviction is that *pastoral narration* should be the frame of this amazing pictorial invitation (which might be broken, but which is perfectly imperfect) of the faith community, which is the community of people already following Jesus, namely the congregation. What then will and should be the function of this tradition? The following explanation phrases the answer to this question in relation to the biblical explanation given above.

A communal commitment to discipleship and discipling

Working with parents to secure the port of entry for mutual discussion regarding communal commitment should facilitate sharing about what has gone wrong and about how we have now to pay the price for the current lack of Kingdom-seeking disciples. We should consider the following statement of Brueggemann:

Does it strike you that congregational life [his emphasis] for the most part is remote from such deeply rooted, biblical understandings of discipleship and evangelism? Well, yes. Much congregational life has so fuzzied the claims of the Gospel in order to accommodate to culture that the church, only with difficulty, can be a truth-teller in the face of denial and a hope-teller in the face of despair.

It is clear now, is it not, that this is a new time in the church. It is a time when many people, with deep ambiguity, want an alternative with a deep sense that dominant patterns of life in our society simply are not working. There is a hunch and a wish, guarded to be sure, that the church should let the news, with all its implications, have its say. Such a say depends upon preachers who risk, supported by congregations who will stand by in solidarity.

(Brueggemann 2006:112)

McLaren writes, with almost tangible pain, of how he grew up loving the church and then had to discover how ill it is:

I want to welcome them in, to help them become part of our life and mission. But often I have felt like an ambulance driver bringing injured people to a hospital where there's an epidemic spreading among the patients and doctors and nurses ... You try to help the hospital get the epidemic under control again, so they can get back to helping people heal ... The hospital can be a pretty sick place sometimes.

(McLaren 2004:21)

We have to transform the hospital into a place of healing. We need to reform, and redevelop, reinventing the invitation, which is the body of disciples themselves.

Rethinking and restructuring teaching/learning opportunities

This invitation and initiation cannot bypass teaching and learning. It might be wise to take parents more seriously in our process of rethinking and restructuring teaching and learning opportunities. It is no secret that the family is under pressure. Within the congregation as 'learning community' (Schipper 1977), parents and families should find 'cover against the storm'. Only then can one agree with Sweet (2008:5) that '... the perfect storm offers the church its greatest chance to become the 'Ultimate Church' and make the ultimate catch for the gospel', and, may I add, this is so in spite of the 'Hurricane of Post-Christendom', as Sweet (2008:104) typifies the 'religious storm'.

Even where fathers and/or mothers cannot be the early church 'sponsors' or 'godparents', disciple-making churches should find other mentors (cf. Osmer [1996:202–210] for a description of the role of spiritual mentoring in confirmation). God is as serious about youth as he is about making disciples who will make still more disciples. He is intent on providing, and has already done so. We who are responsible for such provision in the present have to identify such mentors. When it is that we will grow serious

enough about families (as mentoring houses) depends on when it will be that we are able to develop a high level of sensitivity for the Scriptures and for the second text of our society. Barna (1998:191) adopts a pleading tone towards the church when he writes: *'The future of the Church in America depends largely upon the spiritual commitment of families'* [his emphasis].

Need I refer to the many other such pleas, such as my own and those of so many others (DeVries 2004; Nel 2005:9–27; Sell 1995; cf also DeVries 2008)? Of what significance others are in youth ministry is well-known. Dean and Foster (1998) rightly call such ministry 'the art of soul tending'. How much more critical to my 'becoming' is it if those people who cared for me in pre-birth and especially since 'I' entered their present space by birth or adoption are those who are also able to minister to my spiritual needs? Their space then becomes my 'hermeneutical *raum*' (meaning space; Nel 2005:18), encompassing of my initial invitation to, and initiation into, the goodness of God.

Teaching and learning in biblical terms was never supposed to become either one-sidedly intellectual or emotional. Biblical teaching is existential in nature, involving being taken by the hand, by those who care. Such teaching, in a sense, entails taking those who inquire about the invitation on a walking tour through the discipline of following Jesus. Such teaching provides the opportunity to walk the talk as we talk the walk (cf. 1 Pt 3:15–18). 'The *walk* is to cure, the restoration of broken humanness to full creaturely well-being. The *talk* is to assert the nearness of the new rule' (Brueggemann 2006:101). Brueggemann continues to relate this walk and talk to exercising the discipline of following Jesus: 'The church is a community engaged in disciplines that make following the master-teacher possible and sustainable' (Brueggemann 2006:107). One might say, in biblical phraseology, that such disciplines make one 'fit to complete the race' (cf. Heb 12:1–14). Such discipline is inconvenient to us all. We are all disciples, though we are ones in the making. Such disciplining is inconvenient, until we are 'fit' enough to enjoy the benefits that we can gain therefrom. Such uneasiness with having to conform to the dictates of a discipline can become deadly when we lose focus on Jesus. When we do so, the discipline becomes a form of imposed exercise and no longer an expression of spiritual fitness. According to Brueggemann,

The disciplines function to inconvenience us enough that we become conscious, self-conscious, and intentionally aware of who we are and what we are doing with our lives ... I submit that only those who are inconvenienced enough to be intentional will have the energy for mission.

(Brueggemann 2006:109)

Barna (1998:202–203) argues for assimilation into the family that Christ came to establish. Jesus 'recruited people who were willing to sell out to God, with no holds barred' (Barna 1998:202). Whoever accepts such a call is called to exercise discipline and sound ethical values. Snyder (2005:130–137) positively relates discipline, sanctification and the exercising (which he terms 'operationalising') of spiritual gifts to the service of evangelism and justice. McLaren (2008:80) writes that 'most of the truly important skills we learn in life come through training, practice, and tradition or community'. Everybody who has succeeded in dieting, in sport, or in academic achievements knows the truth of such a statement. Why do we want to water discipleship down to those who are not in the practising disciplines? Would we not prove, if we were to do so, that religion is for those who are unsuccessful? Would discipleship not then be a crutch to assist the lame-spirited rather than those 'getting fit to run the race'?

Osmer (2005:26–56, 106–117) concludes his discussion of what he calls 'Paul's Teaching Ministry in Congregations', by discerning three core tasks in Paul's teaching: *catechesis, exhortation and discernment* (Osmer 2005:26–27). He finds Paul's teaching to consist of both *formation and education*. 'Formation has to do with the relationships, practices, narratives, and norms of a community's shared life ... Education has to do with

those practices that focus directly on teaching and learning.' No matter whether we like and agree with such a distinction or not, we need to care that the purpose is so much more than just a mere gathering and remembering of facts, but rather forms a 'resituating of our lives' (Brueggemann 2006:107). We need to be equipped to help construct the body of believers (cf. Eph 4:7–16). Disciplining youth, along with inviting and initiating them into a life of discipleship, is about finding purpose in life, in terms of something that is worth both living and dying for: The seeking out of the Kingdom of God and the trusting in our loving Father for all our needs of tomorrow (cf. Mt 6:24–34).

I wish to return to Carroll's reference (2000:12) to Mr. Mandela's story one more time, in order to consider what traditions do and why they are important. Carroll's (2000:12–13) answer to such questions, I believe, pertains to who we are and how we can extend the invitation. Tradition, which frames the invitation to look good and in place, also serves to:

- help one locate oneself in the larger narratives of family, tribe, or community
- provide us with the basic frame or perspectives through which we view the world
- help us to learn what is expected of us, in a general sense, both in day-to-day routines and in relationships with others
- connect us with larger narratives from the past in which we can locate ourselves, because they also give us perspectives and precepts that guide our understanding and behavior in the present, they also to some degree shape how we organize our future.

Keifert (2006:118–126) also calls the congregation a learning community, inviting others to a life of learning along with other disciples. The purpose is not just factual knowledge, however important such knowledge, at times, might prove to be. The point is 'doing local theology' as a listening and learning community, and as a body of disciples, in terms of which we can think and discern together (in a form of what Carroll 2000:105 calls 'reflectivity or reflective practice') as to where and how God is at work, and how we can join in. One might call such teaching and learning existential and experiential. According to Firet (1986:186), 'Nurture's aim is self-reliance.'

Inviting on behalf of ... the God who invites us into discipleship

The invitation that we are and the invitation that we extend is 'on behalf of'. The whole Bible bears witness to the God who calls (cf. Brueggemann 2006:92–96), which, once again, is the unique difference between the concept of the disciple in the Gospels and other, related, concepts in the Greek and Hebrew cultures. While 'students' chose a rabbi, meaning a teacher, we know that Jesus was the one who 'saw' and 'called' in the biblical context.

When we extend the invitation on his behalf, we should never forget this. The fact that God does the calling does not take anything away from our seriousness or passionate intentions. It does, however, call for us to exhibit modesty and integrity. Being employed by the Spirit to invite and to initiate gives new meaning both to our dependence upon God and our self-reliant functioning simultaneously. Firet (1986:182–230) has tried to help us understand such simultaneity, by stressing the dual nature of dependence and self-reliance. Under the guidance of the Spirit of Christ, disciples come to grow in receptivity, discernment and creativity. Whenever we train disciples to make still more disciples, and, in their turn, to invite and to initiate, we should develop such open-minded discernment in creative ways. We need to learn how and when to invite, so that we can extend the call to 'follow Him' on his behalf and in terms of his spirit.

I do not know of a theologian who does not agree that, when you have a sustainable relationship with youth, you may invite them to become disciples. God is a relational (covenantal, if you prefer) God and honours his commitment to closeness, even to death, in the form of the death of his son. The invitation has to

come from those who walk the talk and talk the walk. According to Firet

The mode of the didache calls for a style of pastoral role-fulfilment which differs from the style of the professor. The didache as initiation into discipleship calls for a person who himself lives 'the way' and is exemplary in his entire life, not just in what he says as a teacher.

(Firet 1986:67)

Providing meaningful rites de passage

Providing meaningful rites of passage where there are no secrets and, therefore, 'no children' any longer is difficult. What helps us as disciples is that there is 'more'. In union with the one whom we follow, there is always 'more'. In fact, there is so much that we do not know and that we have not yet experienced. What we need to take seriously is the creative reinvention, in a simple but meaningful way, of what I will call *celebrations of inclusion*. The younger that children are, the more simple and accessible such celebrations of inclusion should be. Bijlsma (1977:136), who, in the Dutch theological world, is so well-known for his writings on catechesis, for instance, even devised a formula for publicly celebrating the 'transfer from childhood to adolescence'. Such a formula is not to be confused with the public confession of faith in the reformed tradition. All the literature on the *Rite of Christian initiation of adults*, which is referred to above, refers to such celebrations. In his book *Finding our way again*, McLaren (2008) often refers to 'the return of the ancient practices'. Rediscovering and employing such practices, along with all that we have learned about youth and culture, is our challenge. McLaren (2008:145–146) rightly, to my understanding, writes: 'When our churches are schools of practice, they make – and change – history ... when the community of faith realizes it has lost its way, it begins moving forward by looking back.' Osmer's (1996:194–218) chapter on a *fitting practice of conformation* is worthwhile consulting in this regard.

The challenge to creativity in youth ministry is certainly not a lack of options for *rites de passage* but, rather, how to relate whatever celebration, as a rite of inclusion, there is to the living faith of the community of disciples. To my mind, the key to meeting such a challenge lies in *us* continuously discovering the new horizons, and the unveiled secrets (*cf.* Eph 1:1–14) of our 'following Him into the mission field' (Easum 2007). When following him, there is no predicted future, but only a safe one.

CONCLUSION

Disciples themselves are the invitation. While following and discovering (learning), we invite others to follow the one whom we follow. As Paul wrote, 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1).

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