

# Disciple Development Descriptions

## Young Children

### Ages 3–5

Young children rapidly develop physically and cognitively. They relate to clear concepts and understand life from symbols, story, and experience. They enjoy routine and ritual. Young children are curious about others and progress from solitary (parallel) play to

associative (interactive) play with others. For these young children, fantasy and make-believe are as real and powerful to them as reality. Loving, trustworthy attachments to primary caregivers shape the child's ability to make healthy attachments to others throughout life. Children aged 3–5 are in the experiencing stage of faith development. Faith is experienced by action, not words and is based on powerful stories and concrete images.



heroes. They strongly want to learn and belong and so enjoy clubs and group events. Children at this age are still in the experiencing stage of faith development: they understand right and wrong, and choose behavior that pleases significant adults. For them, faith must be experienced by action, not by words.

### Ages 9–11

Children aged 9–11 can think more abstractly and can compare, analyze, and classify information. They have a strong sense of fairness, seek clarification of rules and boundaries, and wish to be more like peers. At this age they assume responsibility for friends, pets, the Earth, and form strong attachments to significant adults and friends. In the joining/belonging stage of faith, their faith is based on the models of significant adults and they store up impressions of God before fully understanding the meaning of words used for God. Children aged 9–11 desire to be included and learn the rituals and patterns of worship.



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## Children

### Ages 6–8

Children aged 6–8 are motivated by working busily and by developing a sense of initiative, rather than performing through guilt or a sense of inferiority. They learn to read, write, and do basic math, they understand concretely but are captivated by fantasy, magic, and

## Multiage Children

Grouping children from ages 6–11 has strong indicators for success. All can read, write, and compute and they love to join clubs and groups. Younger children look to older children as models, and want to be engaged with them in challenging activities. Older children like to share their skills and confidence with younger children. All understand faith through action and experience, and deeply want to learn the rituals and patterns of church life and worship.

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## Youth

### Ages 12–14

Youth in early adolescence have a third person perspective on life, so they begin to debate accepted rules and facts. Physically and cognitively they are changing as much as young children do. They bounce



from one extreme to another in their viewpoints and passions. They like to explore their gifts and talents and try out new experiences. Peer acceptance is a stronger influence than family and they discover their identity through reactions of peers and significant adults. While still in the joining/belonging stage of faith development, they now affiliate more with peers than with adults, so their connections with a group of the same age is strong and influential.



### Ages 15–18

Youth in later adolescence believe in compassion and inclusion, but may give in to be part of a group. They form values and beliefs by testing ideas and debating with others. They want their faith values to be relevant to their lives. At this age they form close, sometimes lifetime friendships. Youth aged 15–18 are in

the searching stage of faith development, looking for new ways to express their faith and worship, are globally-oriented, and challenge the church with new insights.

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## Adults

Young Adults are transitioning from the searching stage of faith development, looking for a faith that is relevant to their lives. As they form families, interest in faith communities may increase.

Adults of all ages begin to accept the beliefs most relevant to them. They choose what knowledge is trustworthy and useful, and they will teach themselves valued content. Adults seek universal ethical principles. They want meaningful involvement in social, religious communities. Their personal relationship with God is based on freedom rather than authority. They seek to



share their experiences with those in earlier stages, and they bring a sense of meaning and continuity to religious life.

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## All Ages Together (Intergenerational)

Disciples greatly expand their discipleship in a multi-generational setting. Many congregations plan monthly intergenerational learning experiences, based on celebrations of the lectionary/Christian year, a mission focus (including youth mission trips), justice issues and events, studying the life of Christ, baptismal preparation, disciple practices, sacraments, Disciples Generous Response, or many others. Because their learning takes place in the context of community, they can effectively grow in

relationship with others and integrate their gifts into their faith community. All ages can inspire, energize, and teach each other in ways that develop their discipleship and create a vibrant, nurturing community.

## Disciple Formation Stages

All ages mature through disciple formation stages of inviting (seeking), growing (practicing), embodying, and continuing the journey.

**Invitation to Christ** is characterized by a commitment to follow Christ. Excitement and inquiry lead to relevant exploration of the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith in general and Community of Christ in particular. Establishing mutually supportive relationships in the faith community is vital to growth.

**Growing in Christ** involves a deepening understanding of membership in the body of Christ through study, service, fellowship, worship, sacraments, and witness. Discernment of individual gifts and exploration of meaningful opportunities to serve; practical tools for spiritual development and ministry; and mutually supportive and accountable relationships are all part of this dimension of discipleship.

**Embodying Christ** involves a maturing faith and a clear understanding of being the body of Christ in the world. Faith and discipleship become integrated with life practices in visibly identifiable ways. This dimension requires practical ways to embody or live out faith. Authentic and accountable relationships take on critical importance as persons share out of their experience with others on the journey.

**Continuing the Journey** occurs when there is a need and willingness to discover God's unfolding purposes at different points along the discipleship journey (faith crisis, new call to ministry, new phase of life). Focused, relevant opportunities for learning are needed to support faithful response.

*\*Compiled from developmental theories of Jean Piaget (cognitive), Lawrence Kohlberg (moral), Erik Erikson (psycho-social), and John Westerhoff III (faith).*