

Passionate Discipleship

Six Foundations

A Canadian Baptist Youth Initiative

Foundation #1

MESSY COMMUNITY



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Passionate Disciples Develop Their Faith in the Midst of Messy Community

Messy Community Defined

Our journey through life begins in mess. We enter the world through the pain of childbirth, are included in families that experience fatigue and stress, and face the uncertainty of the future.

The characteristics of mess are universal – sloppiness, unkempt appearance, odour, confusion, lack of direction, disorganization – does this remind you of your university roommate? It might remind you of some of the youth and young adults you are serving in your ministry. It might even remind someone of you!

In our context, however, mess means more than dirty rooms or smelly socks. It means more than a confused high school student or a dishevelled young adult. Messy community IS the defining characteristic of this millennial generation.

I'll attempt to define messy community. Messy community consists of broken homes (almost 40 percent of all marriages end in divorce¹), addictive behaviour (pornography, substance abuse, gambling, etc.), identity crises, political uncertainty, dying churches, relational tragedies, stress from work, home, school, family, health, and debt! There...I said them...the major issues that occupy our days and cloud our thinking and which define many of those we are called to serve. Ministry in this generation is messy.

With messy community defined I would like to explore the following questions. How do we live within the "mess" of messy community? Can we recognize God's perfection as he enables us to become passionate disciples through messy community? And, how do we recognize a passionate disciple when they are living in God's purpose and will within messy community?

Living in the Mess

When thinking of Christians in messy community who have persevered and been restored or died a martyr of the faith, one often thinks of Job. Job endured great pain and anguish, yet emerged as a passionate disciple of God. After all of the suffering he went through, Job cried out to God, "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'" (Job 42:4-6) Scripture tells us that with that confession, God restored Job's assets and his happiness.

I remember the story of Jason, a kid in my youth group. His mom and dad had been divorced since he was three. He grew up in poverty, living in a mobile home park with his mom and grandfather, neither of whom was employed. Jason attended school with students in the group, which allowed him to experience

¹ <http://www.imfcanada.org/default.aspx?go=article&aid=1182&tid=8>, Wed., Dec. 16, 2009

life on an even playing field. However, most of the kids in our group were born into upper middle class families and enjoyed the finer things in life. It was obvious to Jason that although he felt at home in the context of our group most of the time, there were certainly differences in the opportunities available to him, compared with the opportunities of the other students. He often struggled with whether or not he belonged. No matter how much we assured him that he was a part of our “family,” he was in constant identity confusion.

Jason’s community was messy. Much of the time, youth and young adults that find themselves in messy community like this have little or no control over their life’s circumstances. But the crucial dynamic is that Jason did indeed belong in this community. As confusing and messy as it was, he belonged.

Jason found significant spiritual comfort in our community. He embraced the community’s dynamics, participated fully when on campus and on trips, and found faith to be very comforting in his life of messiness. Jason found Christ in the context of our community and was baptized in the Nolichucky River in western North Carolina on a youth group white water rafting trip. Jason lived in, found relational significance in, and began a lifelong faith journey as a passionate disciple of Christ within messy community.

The most passionate disciples often emerge from messy community. History tells us of significant spiritual campaigns that have been born out of persecution and exile. Within this messy community of our youth and young adults, what significant spiritual campaign will be next? I suggest that passionate disciples are born out of messy community.

Recognizing God’s Perfection

As we find ourselves in messy community, God has proven time and time again that what was created in us is exactly God’s plan for us. The perfection in each of us can be extracted or launched in the midst of messy community. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What’s a sundial in the shade?” I agree. The talents and perfection we possess were intricately created by the God of the universe and can be used in and despite our circumstances.

I preach a sermon periodically called “Where You Are is Why You’re There.” I’ll give you a minute to think that one through before we continue. The premise is that God has placed us in our current demographic/geographic/relational spot so that he might use our gifts to care for, share with and develop relationships with people. But God has also provided people who will come alongside us, merge with us in speed and intention, and teach us things about ourselves. In this spot, God actively provides opportunities for us to use the perfection placed in us and to be sharpened by those around us.

In Acts 8, Philip encounters an Ethiopian official struggling to understand the book of Isaiah. After nudges from the Holy Spirit, Philip walks him through the prophecy he is reading and explains its fulfillment in Jesus and the need to be radically changed. The official asks to be baptized by Philip right there on the road to Gaza. Philip, just on a journey from one place to the next, finds himself being used to do just what God had designed him to do – share the gospel with others.

In a dramatic twist, Philip disappears from the scene only to find himself farther north in Azotus. Scripture tells us that Philip then preached the gospel there and along the way until he arrived at his intended destination. In a routine situation – a walk to the next town – God provided perfection. In the literal mess

of a hot, -long walk, the metaphorical mess of life among strangers, and the vocational mess of “am I really cut out to preach the gospel?” Philip realized that he was exactly where he needed to be for God to use him – and to teach him about the perfection of reaching others that God had placed in him. I would contend that Philip, who was martyred for his faith, was a passionate disciple regardless of the circumstances that surrounded his life and work.

I often think of Tina. Tina was a student who, in the midst of life struggles as a teenager (bad parent relationship, drinking, following the crowd, etc.), was used by God in a mighty way. Tina began coming to our youth ministry with a friend. On the second night, Tina was asked to lead in a prayer time, something she had never done before. Though nervous, she proceeded to lead this short time of gathering prayer requests and then lead the group in prayer. She was overwhelmed to be asked in the first place, but as she reflected back on the night, she realized that she felt in a sweet spot of sorts during the task and in subsequent weeks of leading prayer. Tina recognized her gifts and became a leader before she ever gave her life to Christ. A passionate disciple was born out of the mess of a sixteen-year-old teenager who, according to her own self-profession, was “far away from God” at the time. Tina later served at the Portland Promise Center in inner-city Louisville, Kentucky, doing youth and community ministry.

Passionate disciples don’t always turn out to be ministry leaders. Many live out a positive, dynamic faith while integrated into culture. Bryson never missed anything happening at church. He was dependable, conscientious and a “good ole boy” to the core. However, Bryson, and the rest of us, knew that he wasn’t cut out for vocational ministry. Bryson is now a civil engineer providing information technology support to his firm of engineers. He is a passionate follower of Christ who gives generously to the work of the gospel, to students and adults alike, and every year considers making his vacation time a work trip to benefit a village or church or family somewhere in the world. Bryson would never be considered a great speaker or a great teacher of Christ’s life, but he does live like Christ lived and serves like Christ served. Ask anyone who knows him.

Passionate disciples can recognize and find their perfection in the midst of messy community. Finding ways to extract the perfection and create opportunities for it to be used is a joint effort between ministry workers like you who are youth leaders and the individuals themselves. God’s perfection is always available for our use. Just like the water reservoir is always available for the fire hydrant, God’s perfection is always a twist or tweak away from being fully recognized, fully utilized and fully blessed.

The ID of a Passionate Disciple

So, the question becomes, do I rest in the identity of a passionate disciple? Or, do these students look like passionate disciples from the inside out and outside in? The constant struggle of a youth ministry worker is how to determine if someone is fully following Christ with their life and striving to be a passionate disciple. In the last portion of this chapter, I’ll include my only plug for programming and youth ministry strategies: small groups!

We obviously look to Christ when trying to identify a passionate disciple. If we look closely at Christ’s life in ministry we find that he was consistently surrounded by people. With a closer look, we realize that he was surrounded by the same group of people. During the difficult times he surrounded himself with Peter, James and John. Christ belonged to a small group. His small group prayed with him, knew intimate things about him and called him out on certain things too (Christ always won the argument however!) I would say that they knew Christ best because of their significant relationship with him.

Identifying a passionate disciple of Christ requires time and a commitment to regularly exploring the growth of the individuals within the context of the group. In my own small group, it is easy to identify those people who are passionately following God with their lives and even easier to identify those who are not. I certainly try hard to follow Christ with my own life, but I listen intently to the comments of others in my small group regarding the sincerity of my identity as a disciple. If others, especially close friends, believe that I am following Christ passionately, I listen to them because they see the results in my life over the course of our relationship. This will certainly hold true in the lives of youth and young adults. If there is a pattern of accountability and challenge that lasts for a lengthy period of time, then our identity as a passionate disciple of Christ is clear. And if we are not actively following Christ with our lives, it is even clearer.

Making small groups with students work is quite a challenge. There are hundreds of curricula for ministry workers to use. I would suggest finding one that fits your group best. A more important observation and suggestion regarding small groups and their effectiveness is that the success of a small group often hinges on the commitment and effectiveness of its leader. As a pastor, I was adamant that all student small groups were student-led. These students were mentored by me or another leader, and were in constant training with an adult in a leaders' small group that provided modelling of an effective small group. For those involved in leading small groups, there was consistent defining of their faith and of their identity as a passionate follower of Christ. Our small group ministry produced many passionate disciples of Christ. Many of the passionate disciples weren't in fact the leaders but the participants that sought small group community to enhance, perfect and direct their life as a passionate disciple. And it worked!

Go and Be Great

You've read my thoughts on how I believe passionate disciples are formed within messy community. Despite our life station or swirling confusion, we can emerge as passionate disciples. I would also suggest that we are often made stronger by the mess. Get at it...get messy and become passionate followers of Christ. Lead well, participate well in those small groups and help one another create, support and consistently evolve into passionate disciples!

We're looking for real life examples of this! Please send your stories and photos to:
communications@cbmin.org

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. Based on your own context, define messy community.
2. List here and provide commentary on situations you've observed where messy community actually sharpened the faith identity of a passionate disciple of Christ that you know.
3. In your opinion, what are the three identifying characteristics of a student who is a passionate disciple of Christ?
4. How did God's perfection emerge in your own life despite messy community? Are you still seeking

ways to engage in using your perfection for Christ?

5. As a youth leader, name two to five students who you believe are passionate disciples of Christ and list with their name how you might encourage them to follow Christ more intently within their messy community.
6. Are you a passionate disciple of Christ? Is your community?

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