



Module AT03

Series: Discipleship

Title: Building a System

Required Resources:

- One (1) pad of Post-it notes per team member.
- Whiteboard or large sheet of paper.

Self-Facilitating Small Group Module

Background

All churches share a common mission *to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*. This two part mission transforms Jesus's call to *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself"* into an action statement for the church. How do we live out the call to love God and Neighbor? We make disciples and strive to transform our communities and world.

Making disciples will not happen by accident. It must be the intentional work of each local church. In DS01 and DS02 we covered some of the aspects disciple making. In this module the goal is to help you begin to articulate a clear path of discipleship for people in your congregation.

Each congregation will likely have their own flavor of discipleship system. It will vary based on your location, context, and the gifts and graces of your church. This variation is healthy and as God intends. To be a vibrant movement Christianity needs a diversity of churches.

That said, there are some common elements that should be part of any discipleship system. This module will walk you through developing each element in a way that best fits your local congregation. Those elements are:

- A clearly articulated definition of discipleship.
- A defined set of core practices expected of all disciples.
- A system of small groups.
- A system of "on-ramps" for new participants to begin a journey of discipleship.
- A system of 1:1 discipleship mentoring.

As you can see this list moves from aspirational to very practical. An aspirational definition of discipleship is required and also are practical opportunities for discipleship to be developed. A true disciple making church will have both.

As you move through this module you may want to invite additional people outside of your WCI team to participate. The final goal is to develop a discipleship system that can be widely embraced. It will take you more than one session to complete this process.

Part 1: Crafting a Definition

A disciple is someone whose life is being transformed by the love of God the creator, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and by following the way of Jesus Christ.

In DS01 Part 1, you began a process to developing a definition of discipleship. In that section the following definition was offered as a starting place. The first task before you can do anything else in building a discipleship system is to have a clear definition.

Review the definition above and some or all of the following scriptures:

- **Matthew 28:16-20**
- **Romans 12:1-18**
- John 8:31-32
- 2 Timothy 2:2
- Luke 6:40
- Luke 9:23
- Luke 14:25-26
- John 3:3
- 2 Corinthians 5:17
- *Others*

Group Activity

Have each person write the words or ideas they feel are most important from the scriptures read on a whiteboard or large piece of paper. Review and identify any comment elements. Write them below.

Individually write a 1-2 sentence definition of discipleship or adapt the definition above and share aloud.

As a group develop your definition of discipleship keeping the following in mind:

- Is it short? 1 or 2 sentences.
- Will people remember it?
- Is it trinitarian? The full expression of God should be present.
- Is it active? Discipleship is an ongoing journey that doesn't end.

Also keep in mind your definition does not need to be timeless, it needs to be timely. It should line up with who you are as a congregation today. You should plan to revisit it occasionally to be sure it still serves you.

Our Definition

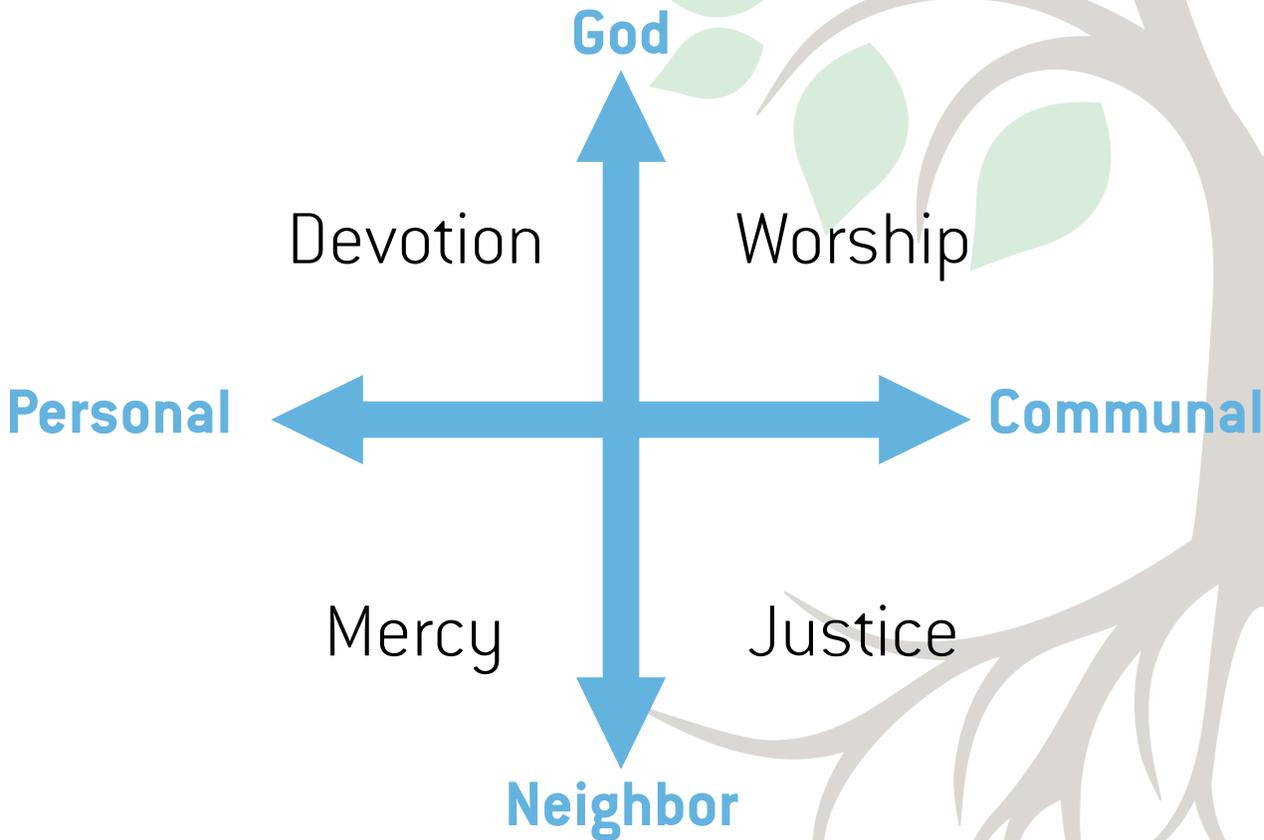
How can you share this definition?

What?	Who?	By When?

Part 2: Core Practices

Every congregation has a set of core practices they expect individuals to participate in. Unfortunately these practices are rarely explicitly stated and often don't serve well our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Instead, they are holdovers from a time when church participation was seen as a duty or obligation.

As you work to define your discipleship core practices you need to release as much as possible your existing assumptions about what individuals *should* do. Each practice you identify should serve one or more aspects of discipleship. Review the discipleship cross from DS02 part 2.



Core practices are those things you expect disciples to do. They may vary, but most congregations will have commonalities. For example, think about worship. Do you expect disciples in your church to participate in weekly worship? How often?

Do you expect disciples to be engaged in mission work? What kind and how much?

Do you expect disciples to have an active prayer life?

Do you expect disciples to lend their voice to those not being heard?

All of these and more are questions to be asking yourself as you move forward.

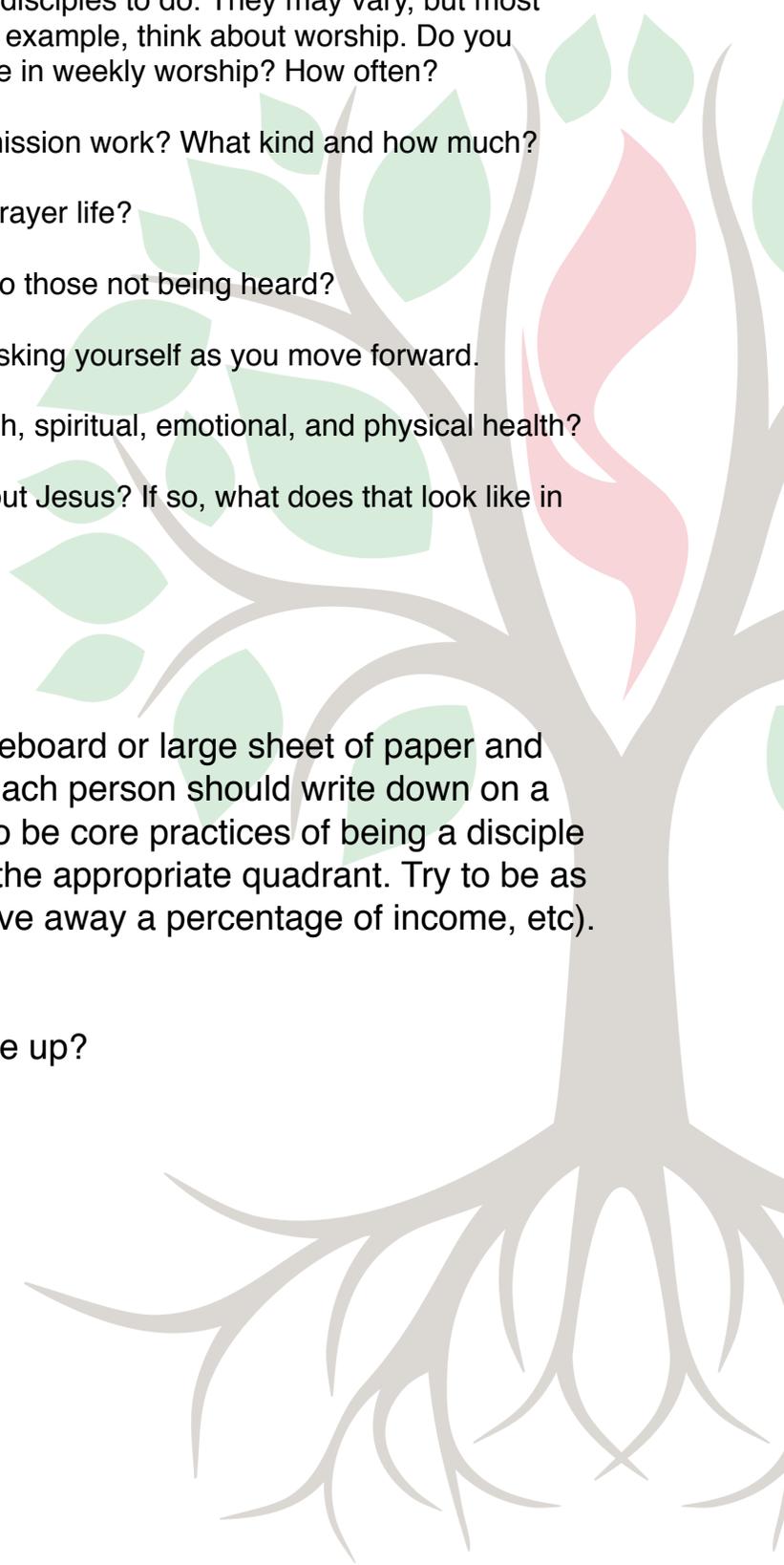
What about issues related to personal health, spiritual, emotional, and physical health?

Is it the role of every disciple to witness about Jesus? If so, what does that look like in your context?

Group Activity

Draw the discipleship cross on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper and distribute post-it notes to everyone. Each person should write down on a post-it, one each, what they believe to be core practices of being a disciple and then place them on the board in the appropriate quadrant. Try to be as specific as possible (i.e. pray daily, give away a percentage of income, etc).

What common practices/themes came up?



For each area create a manageable list of core practices agreed upon by your team. This will take time. Do not be in a hurry. You will also revisit this list later so do not worry about making it perfect. A good list will be a combination of things you are already doing and some new activities. Existing activities will likely need tweaks to make sure they are truly useful to your discipleship system.

Devotion

Worship

Mercy

Justice



How can you share these practices? What buy-in do you need from the leadership of your church?

Sharing Suggestions

- Develop a sermon series that introduces the idea of core practices and concludes with a presentation of your list.
- Offer a small discipleship group experience for 8-10 weeks where people can start to practice the activities and support each other (this could become an “on-ramp” in Part 3).
- Gather and distribute written testimonies from those already doing one or more of the practices.

As with the definition this list of practices needs to be timely not timeless. You should reevaluate the list and make changes about annually. Do not be too quick to change. Give yourself time to live into them.

What do you need to do to move forward:

What?	Who?	By When?

Part 3: Let's Get Practical

It is expected that you won't currently have opportunities in place to help people develop all of the core practices identified in part 2. In fact, if your list from part 2 directly matches the activities you are already doing, then you likely need to repeat part 2. Similarly, it is expected that you will have activities happening in your church that don't line up with any part of your core practices list. If these activities consume a great deal of time or energy in the congregation, you need to reconsider continuing them.

Every church has a responsibility to provide opportunities and encouragement for people to grow in their discipleship. Your core practices list is the first step in identifying how to do that well. Next, we need to discern what activities need to be developed to meet your goals. Sometimes existing ministries need to be tweaked or their intention better articulated. Sometime whole new programs will need to be created. It all depends on your starting place.

If you are a church focused on justice and advocacy than you will need to develop ways to help people do that well. If you are focused on sacred worship you will need to invest in that. Your core practices will be your guide.

While specific activities will be varied some things are indispensable in any disciple making church. Most of these have been part of the Methodist tradition from the beginning.

Small Discipleship Groups

The rediscovery of small groups has been underway for several years all across the wider church. Once trumpeted as the savior of declining congregations, we now have a more realistic view of them. Small groups by themselves are not the savior of a local church. That said, they *are* almost always a part of any vital disciple making church and should not be easily dismissed.

The roots of the Methodist movement is in small discipleship groups called Class and Band meetings. Everyone was expected to be in a Class meeting if you wanted to be a Methodist. Bands were a special form of small group for leaders in the Methodist movement.

Small discipleship groups are distinct from other forms of christian education. Too often we mistake Bible studies or women's and men's groups for small discipleship groups, while in truth, these activities serve different purposes. First and foremost Small discipleship groups exist to be places of mutual support and accountability. They encourage us on our path of discipleship and keep us honest in making progress. They are small (no more than 12), private, and confidential spaces.

Small discipleship groups come in two major forms, ongoing and seasonal. Ongoing groups start with no end date in mind. They are formed by various means, often meet weekly, and become like close families. They do not tend to grow bigger but instead multiply. Meaning, when people join over time the group eventually splits rather than simply becoming larger than a dozen or so people. Sometimes ongoing groups begin with two leaders so that they are prepared to multiply when the time comes.

Seasonal groups start with an end date in place. They may last 2-6 months, often meet weekly, and can be more topical. They will often form around one of the core practices and provide an opportunity for people to learn and expand their experience of that practice. For newer Christians, seasonal groups are far more attractive. They also better accommodate the transient nature of some demographics of people like young adults.

Ultimately, a discipling-making congregation will have a mix of ongoing and seasonal groups. Seasonal groups make a great starting place for congregations with no current small discipleship groups. Various resources exist to help any size church start ongoing or season groups. A great place to start is Discipleship Ministries, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/wesleys-small-group-model-for-today>.

On Ramps

Everybody needs a starting place on the path of discipleship. Whether you are new to church or have been sitting in a pew your whole life we can all continue growing. Often times however people don't quite know where to start. Creating at least a few "on ramp" opportunities is critical to meet this need.

The reality is that many churches make it too easy to become a member of the local congregation. While membership does not equal discipleship, the membership process is often times a good means to introduce discipleship principles to new people. You should review your current new member practices and ensure they include an introduction to your core practices.

Setting up a small discipleship group that focuses on core practices can be a very successful way to bring people into a new rhythm of discipleship. If you are a congregation that focuses on acts of mercy you may need to develop a way for folks to discover their gifts for service and how to put them to use.

One-on-One

The value of a one-on-one mentoring relationship cannot be overstated! These are powerful opportunities for growth that often go by names like, spiritual direction, coaching, and mentoring. Each will have its own flavor based on the gifts and graces of those participating.

One-on-one relationships also come in ongoing and seasonal varieties. Sometimes it is a “sponsor” type relationship that is ongoing for years. Sometimes it is a seasonal relationship designed to help someone through a difficult time or help establish a new discipleship practice.

This is typically one of the last parts of a discipleship system to get put into place but it can also be the first. That will depend on the culture and context of your congregation. What’s important is to not overlook it as you move forward.

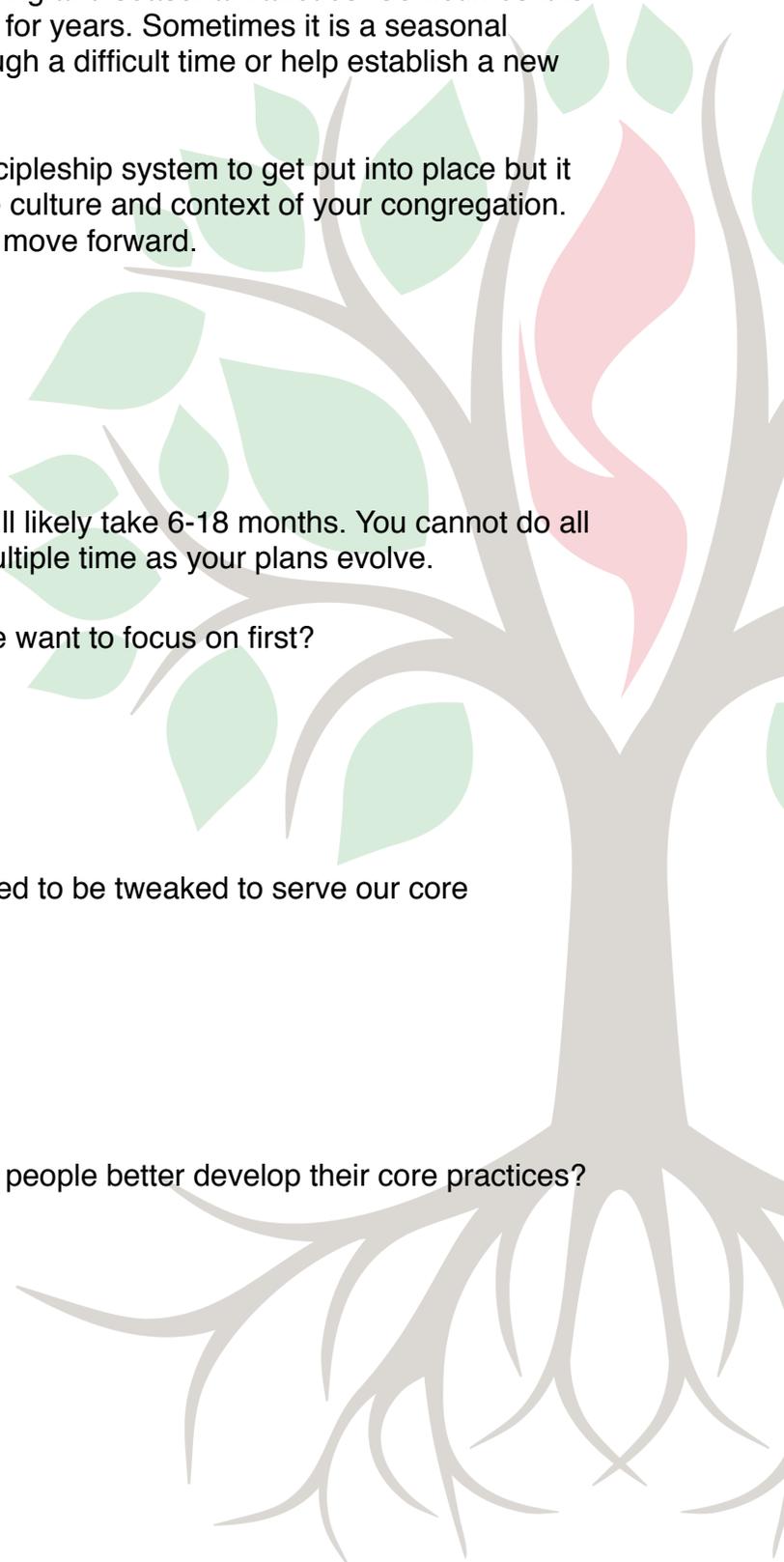
Group Activity

Fully developing your discipleship system will likely take 6-18 months. You cannot do all of this at once. Plan to revisit this section multiple time as your plans evolve.

What part(s) of the Discipleship Cross do we want to focus on first?

What activities are we already doing that need to be tweaked to serve our core practices better?

What new activities do we need now to help people better develop their core practices?



What do you need to do to move forward in the following areas?
Remember, you cannot do all of this at once, so don't try.

Develop On-Ramps

What?	Who?	By When?

Develop Small Discipleship Groups

What?	Who?	By When?

Develop One-on-Ones

What?	Who?	By When?

Additional Activity: _____

What?	Who?	By When?

Additional Activity: _____

What?	Who?	By When?

Additional Activity: _____

What?	Who?	By When?