



## Module DS01

Series: Discipleship

Title: It's About the Relationship

### Learning Outcomes:

- Discover a definition of discipleship.
- Explore the relationship between discipleship and vulnerability.
- How to create the right environment for discipleship in your church.

**Matthew 28:19-20.** *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*

## Part 1: What is a Disciple?

### Group Discussion

What is a disciple? (write a definition)

While many definitions exist, in its most basic form:

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

Most churches today have not spent time reflecting on what a disciple is and how they are formed. Instead, we simply continue inherited assumptions about discipleship, church membership, and the intersection of the two. For now, we will set aside the concept of membership and focus on the more important task of disciple making.

The massive culture shift underway now requires us to reexamine most aspects of church life; primary among them, what we mean by discipleship. While the definition above begs additional questions, it is an important starting place for this conversation.

## Part 2: Being Vulnerable

### Watch Video: TED Talk: The Power of Vulnerability, By Brene Brown.<sup>1</sup>

To claim maturity in discipleship is to claim a high level of Christ-likeness. To do this seriously, one must be willing to embrace the full nature of Christ. Any discussion about discipleship cannot be about a destination. Instead, it is a discussion about the need to improve over time in becoming more like Christ. Ultimately, the strength of discipleship, the ability for God to transform a life, will be determined by the strength of the relationship between the person and God.

Transformation is a messy business. It means confronting aspects of ourselves we would rather not. It sometimes means confronting addiction, abuse, neglect, guilt, and shame. True transformation is not possible unless we allow ourselves to become vulnerable which, in turn, allows the Holy Spirit to work on us. A church that wishes to take discipleship seriously must be prepared to offer safe space to people that allows them to become vulnerable.

John Wesley used the Class Meeting early in the Methodist movement to create space for honest sharing. This became the model nearly all small discipleship groups across denominations and traditions are based on today. Take a moment and reflect on the questions he required participants to ask each other regularly<sup>2</sup>:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)

<sup>2</sup> The Works of John Wesley, Volume VIII, p. 273.

## Group Discussion

Would you be comfortable answering these questions honestly, right now?

How could you create an environment where you would be comfortable answering these questions honestly?

What would it look like in your church if more opportunities existed for people to share honestly in a safe and respectful place?

## Part 3: The HOPE of Transformation

The quality of the environment is key to discipleship. Churches that make disciples well are places where opportunities exist for people to encounter God in new and differing ways that are at the same time safe and challenging.

We cannot force people to participate in a disciplining relationship with God. Instead we must create an environment where opportunities abound and genuine invitations can be made. We must then have faith in the action of the Holy Spirit.

### **H - Hospitality**

Key questions:

1. Is the local church ready to receive guests?
2. Can I be me?

A well-developed practice of hospitality creates a place where people feel at home. Insider language, poor engagement with new people (both by ignoring and smothering), and obvious lack of concern for the physical space are deadly to discipleship formation. If people are not comfortable they will often not allow openings for the Spirit to move. An additional, and often overlooked, aspect of hospitality is genuineness. Are people able to be themselves or are they expected to hide their real selves? Are there unspoken rules about how people are expected to act, dress, speak, and relate to one another? This kind of falseness is also deadly to discipleship.

### **O - Offer Christ**

Key questions:

1. Do you recognize the multiple doorways to the community of the church?
2. Do you proclaim God's ability to transform lives?

A transforming relationship with God requires an encounter with Christ. People most often encounter Christ by first encountering a faith community who has chosen to follow Christ. Most people today first encounter a faith community through its missions and discipleship ministries, not worship.

Personal invitation is key in today's world where people rely more on advice from friends and families over experts or authorities. Invitation isn't limited to those currently outside the church. Those already part of the community need to be challenged and invited to deepen their discipleship by strengthening their relationship with God through Jesus. We must recognize that the ultimate aim of invitation isn't to create new church participants, but instead to begin or strengthen a relationship between the person and God.

## **P - Purpose**

Key questions:

1. Is there an intentional focus on the continued development of personal discipleship?
2. Is there a culture of high expectations calling people to express their discipleship in everyday life?

Intentional discipleship is what we are after here. What a disciple is and how they are formed should not be left to luck or chance. Vital churches, across the theological spectrum, are consistent in one way; they are able to articulate their values clearly and are clear in how what they do relates to their values. In addition, the worship, programs, and missions they are involved in are deeply informed by how they understand discipleship. They are part of their discipleship system.

## **E - Engagement**

Key questions:

1. Is the understanding of missions more than writing checks?
2. Are there regular opportunities to develop relationships with those the church seeks to know and serve?

Mission is evangelism and evangelism is mission. The most effective forms of mission are when people work together in partnership. The goal is to blur the line between those serving and those being served as much as possible. New names should be learned regularly and relationships encouraged. The quality of the relationships formed is the most important aspect of engagement, more so than the efficiency by which goods or

services are offered. A vital church is one where the religiously unaffiliated are encountered often and there exists opportunities for relationships to form.

## Group Discussion

**Hospitality:** How “real” is your church? How well do you embrace those who dress, talk, or act differently than you?

**Offer Christ:** What are the doorways into your church? Do you intentionally invite people to walk through them?

**Purpose:** What are the values of your church? How do you help people more fully live into those values?

**Engagement:** Where do you learn the names of those not part of your community?

## Part 4: Moving Forward

Having an intentional discipleship system is critical to the health of any congregation. Providing opportunities for individuals to progress in their faith is too important, and too central to the mission of the church, to be left to chance.

Intention is the key.

### Group Discussion

Review the four areas of HOPE from Part 3. List three to five small improvements you can make right now to one or more areas. Assign them to members of your WCI team.

## Small Discipleship Groups

Your WCI team should already be acting like a small discipleship group in the mold of the original Class Meeting. The “Gather & Pray” phase is designed specifically to create this type of environment.

Today both short-term and on-going small discipleship groups are common. Short-term groups tend to run 12-16 weeks, while on-going groups have no set timeline. If small discipleship groups are new to your congregation, it is often best to start with short-term groups.

Small discipleship groups are not the same as Bible studies or affinity groups like quilting clubs. It is rare to find a vital church of any size today that doesn't have some sort of small discipleship group ministry. Modeling these groups on the “Gather & Pray” phase of WCI is likely your simplest path forward.

*Resource: The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience. By Kevin Watson. 2013.*

### Best Practices for Small Discipleship Groups

1. You must create safe space. A group covenant is recommended.
2. Begin with a time of open sharing.
3. Include a simple ritual repeated each week.
4. Emphasis the need for our faith to be expressed in our everyday life.

### Group Discussion

How can you begin to nurture small discipleship groups in your church?