

## DISCIPLER INTRODUCTION

As we began our work at Excellence in Ministry Coaching (EMC3), our goal was to use our decades of ministry experience to produce practical discipleship tools. When we visited congregational leaders around the country, we found passionate, motivated followers of Christ. They had faithfully attended Bible Studies, small groups, and countless committee meetings. They had read books, watched videos, and attended scores of training sessions. They had embraced the concepts of growth-focused congregational leadership: the call to discipleship; the call to connect meaningfully with their own communities; the call to build relationships that transform the world.

At workshops in which we reinforced the theological framework for these callings, we would inevitably see heads nodding in agreement. Local churches were hungry for this kind of challenge. Again and again, however, we heard the same question: *How?*

“We understand what Jesus is calling us to,” these leaders were saying. “We understand the value of starting in our own backyard as we answer that call. We understand the destination. What we don’t understand is how to get there.”

It’s like unpacking the box for a new bicycle on Christmas morning. They get the concept (two-wheeled, human-powered conveyance). They embrace the reason for its existence (cheap, fun transport). They understand the basic physics underlying the way the parts are connected (chains turn sprockets that turn wheels that pass over the ground on inflated tubes). But they sit there all morning, wistfully looking over the unassembled pieces because they don’t have the proper tools for putting the thing together.

Well, here’s your toolkit.

At EMC3, we first wrote a book (and accompanying workshop) called *Shift*, that shared the attitudes and approaches being embraced by growing and vibrant congregations, even in the face of a historic cultural pivot away from traditional church attendance. One such necessary shift is the movement from membership to discipleship. “Great,” our workshop attendees said. “How do we do that?” So, we wrote a book (and accompanying workshop) called *Membership to Discipleship*, and we gave them tools for helping people navigate this process. One essential element of that process was helping people understand our call as Christ followers to make connections with friends and neighbors in order to share God’s grace with them in life-changing ways. “Great,” our workshop attendees said. “We agree! So, how do we do that?” And in response we wrote our *Connect!* materials (and accompanying workshop).

You get the idea. It's been a wonderful mind-and-heart-expanding process. And it's why we've written *Discipler*. This new book offers a very specific toolkit to help those who wish to follow Christ. In our previous materials we have shared the six ways in which our lives develop more fully as we know Christ more deeply (worship, hospitality, openness, obedience, service, and generosity). This book offers daily interactive exercises which explore these six areas for growth. They are sometimes reflective, sometimes hands-on experiences, sometimes provocative, sometimes comforting reassurances as to our true identity as children of God. At all times they are moving us toward the goal of a deeper relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Ours is a faith that is not merely intellectual. It is meant to be lived out in the sometimes beautiful, sometimes terrible physical world we inhabit. A strong faith is a robust faith, lived with joy but ready for the reality of challenges and troubles. Our hope is that *Discipler* helps you build the spiritual muscles that lead to a healthier life in Christ, and that, thus empowered, you are ready and eager for the good work of changing your local churches, and thereby changing your communities and changing the world.

Godspeed,

Phil Maynard and Eddie Pipkin,  
EMC3 (Excellence in Ministry Coaching)

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## WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

*Discipler* is designed to provide a daily practical guide with Scripture-based reflections and exercises that will help you grow towards maturity as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We begin with these fundamental questions:

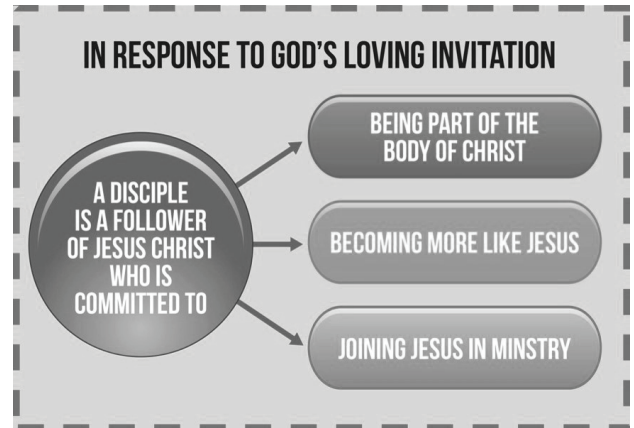
- What is a disciple?
- What does a disciple of Jesus Christ do?

It is helpful to answer these essential questions by returning to the words of Jesus, himself, as recorded in Matthew 4:19 (RSV):

Follow me (making a choice to be part of the body of Christ)

And I will make you (becoming more like Jesus)

Fishers of men (joining Jesus and his followers in ministry).



There are many different kinds of disciples at work in the world, but the discipleship characterized as following Jesus is unique. One may be a dedicated admirer of the ideas of a very learned person, or one may be passionate about a particular strand of philosophy. This means adhering to a set of ideas or ideals, but what we're talking about in the case of following Jesus is adopting a lifestyle—a way of living—that emulates Jesus in each moment, in every decision as to how we speak and act.

Discipleship is a continuing journey into the abundant life for which we were created. It is a process of continual development through which we grow in maturity (becoming more Christ-centered and fully surrendered). In a culture obsessed with end results and perfection, it's crucial to remember that, for a disciple, it's the journey itself that is most important. Disciples are often described as 'learners', but this is only one, potentially limited, understanding of discipleship. Discipleship in the biblical tradition is not just learning about Jesus; it means becoming more like Jesus—doing life the way Jesus did life.

There is no one-size-fits-all for this journey of discipleship. Each of us is uniquely wired to serve our purpose, and part of the journey is figuring out our strengths and weaknesses and exactly where we fit in. Choosing to be part of the body of Christ, working to become more like Jesus, and joining fellow Christ-followers in ministry are all broad strokes. They allow for unlimited possibilities for how your particular life of discipleship flourishes.

In order to understand how this process plays out, we look closely at the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus and those who would follow him, and we can clearly identify six dimensions for discipleship (it is in the details within each of these dimensions that our own individual story comes to life):

**A Life of Worship** – A Life of Worship means participation in corporate worship, but it also includes personal worship (e.g. daily devotional time) and eventually an entire lifestyle of worship in which every action and circumstance becomes an opportunity to give glory to God.

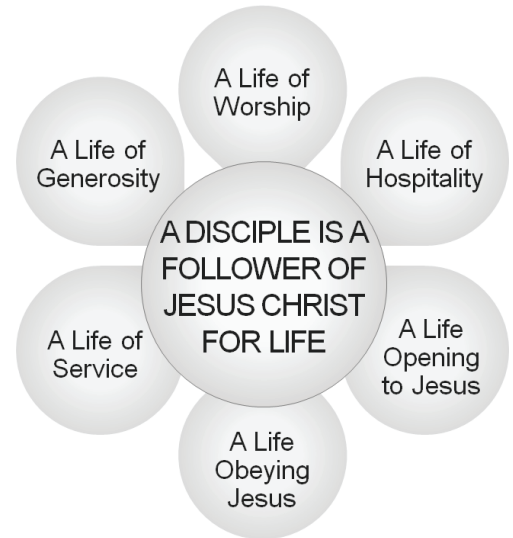
**A Life of Hospitality** – A Life of Hospitality includes the traditional roles of being part of the church community and welcoming new people to worship, but it also includes our personal relationships with (and our acceptance of) people who are outside the church and potentially quite unlike us, even to the point of intentionally building relationships with people beyond the church in order to embody Christ’s love for them.

**A Life of Opening to Jesus** – A Life Opening to Jesus points us in the direction of spiritual practices, such as Scriptural engagement and prayer, which help us to develop an awareness of the presence of Christ. This dimension of discipleship is focused on helping us develop an awareness of God’s grace at work in our world and to place us in a position to receive and respond to that grace, that working of the Spirit.

**A Life of Obeying Jesus** – A Life of Obeying Jesus begins with our acceptance of a relationship with Jesus and our commitment to becoming like Jesus. As we move toward maturity, we begin to apply the teachings of Scripture to our own lives, and we develop partnerships with others to help them grow as disciples.

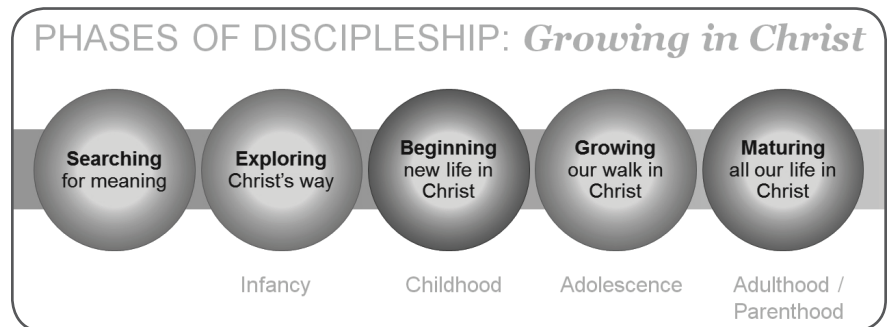
**A Life of Service** – A Life of Service includes supporting the ministry of the local church with our time and energy, as well as participating in service projects sponsored by the church, but it also includes a lifestyle of investing the best of who we are in service to others.

**A Life of Generosity** – A Life of Generosity includes presenting our tithes and offerings as an act of worship, but it also includes creating a lifestyle with margin that allows us to respond to the needs of others God puts in our path on a daily basis. It helps us think differently about the resources with which we have been entrusted.



Within each category of these dimensions of discipleship, we hopefully grow. If we are diligent, focused, and maintain healthy habits, we experience a progression of growth that can be described in stages which parallel the physical and intellectual growth of human beings as they move from infancy through childhood and adolescence to maturity.

Here are the five stages of spiritual development:



**Searching** – We all seek to make sense of our lives, asking questions like “What gives my life purpose, joy, and fulfillment?” We may seek to fill this fundamental longing in many different ways. *[Note that for the purposes of Disciplex, we don't deal with the 'searching' phase, because we assume that you must be at least at the 'exploring' phase if you are actively engaging the book's exercises.]*

**Exploring** – We may attend church and want to belong, but we might not yet have committed to following Jesus. We may wrestle intellectually with God's presence in our lives, often with more caution than curiosity.

**Beginning** – We are beginning to understand and put into practice our newfound faith. Growth can be awkward. We are often vulnerable to insecurity and doubt. We can also be the most excited about faith at this stage. This is the largest and most active segment of congregants involved in church activities.

**Growing** – We are eager to be identified as Christians and going public with our faith. We are increasingly willing to take personal responsibility for our growing relationship with Jesus. We seek to integrate our faith into life in a holistic way, and we look to Jesus to help us live our day-to-day lives.

**Maturing** – We are moving toward complete surrender of our lives to Jesus. We exist to *know, love, obey, serve, and be with* Jesus. We also realize that the role of a disciple is to help make other disciples, and we live towards that goal.

It is important to note that, not only does progress happen in phases, and that different people will find themselves at different points along the path towards maturity, but also that different disciples will find themselves at different stages within the individual dimensions of discipleship (worship,

hospitality, obedience, etc.). For example, a person may have a great passion for serving others (a characteristic associated with the 'growing' phase of the 'service' dimension), but they may simultaneously be only in the 'beginning' phase of 'opening to Jesus'. They may have expressed their intention to develop the spiritual disciplines which will deepen their connection to Jesus, but they may not yet have taken on the actual habits and attitudes that accurately describe a person in the 'growing' phase of that dimension of discipleship.

People will grow at different rates within the different dimensions of discipleship. This is dependent on the spiritual gifts with which God has uniquely endowed us, as well as our natural personality traits and interests. If you're a people person, you might naturally live out hospitality, even as you're struggling with generosity. If you're a natural introvert, you might have a good fit with worship, obedience, or even generosity, but struggle with service. That's okay, and it's normal. And, frankly, to some degree these imbalances in growth are the result of poor structures within our churches—we can have a lot of organized opportunities to serve, but fall short in creating engaging opportunities to study or pray. If we are to fully mature as disciples, however, we must strive to grow in each of these areas.

In order to have an honest view of that growth, it is important to move beyond generic descriptions of what that growth looks like, and instead understand the specific attitudes and actions which characterize each phase of development within each dimension of discipleship. That is what the *Discipler* material uniquely provides: exercises that explore each of these phases within each dimension. Having thoughtfully completed all exercises for each section, we grow a little deeper in the life to which Christ has called us.

## **Not a Solo Effort**

The exercises in *Discipler* are designed to be experienced under the guidance of a mentor or spiritual director. This is a person who is mature in their discipleship and can, by virtue of their accrued wisdom and experience, help you process the daily exercises. This partner on your journey of spiritual growth will hold you accountable, challenge you when you need it, help you clarify your feelings, and celebrate your progress. This person should be carefully selected: someone with whom you share natural affinities, but not just a 'buddy'—they should be someone whom you admire as an inspiration in living out the life of faith. They should be someone who is willing and able to commit to this process, who will take it seriously and invest themselves in you. If you need help identifying such a person, your pastor or congregational spiritual growth leaders can help. It is also possible to use the *Discipler* material as part of a small group process, with like-minded people interested in spiritual growth, under the leadership of a spiritual director or mentor. Using this approach, your group would meet regularly, sharing your experiences, insights, and questions.

## Flexibility Is Important

The *Discipler* exercises are meant to be uniquely flexible. You will see that they are arranged in such a way as to give you six weeks' worth of exercises for each of the growth phases (exploring, beginning, growing, and maturing, if you were able to do one activity per day). Within each section there are six activities, one for each dimension of discipleship (worship, hospitality, openness to Jesus, obedience, service, and generosity). That leaves you a day for Sabbath in each week.

This format is a template to keep you focused and moving forward. It's not supposed to be a straightjacket to make you feel intimidated. It's a tool for your encouragement, so feel empowered to modify it in whatever manner works best for you (in consultation with your accountability partner or small group). But if your schedule means you need to take more time to complete a section, you might decide to give yourself two weeks to complete that section, etc.

For maximum potential progress, however, keep these suggestions in mind:

- It is okay to scan ahead and preview upcoming activities. In fact, it will likely be helpful, because some activities require more complex planning and scheduling.
- Treat each section's exercises as a unit, and complete that section before moving to the next unit. It's not necessary to stay on a strict daily schedule if that doesn't work for you. It is also not necessary to do the activities in order during a given section. Move them around as needed (some require a field trip or getting together with another person). BUT it is important to do all of the activities for that section before moving on to the next. Some of the activities are much more involved than others. If you can't complete an activity with the time constraints of a given section, brainstorm a plan for when and how you will accomplish it and talk those plans over with your mentor or group. Come back to those experiences at a later date if you need to.
- Try to meet with your mentor/spiritual director or *Discipler* small group once a week, or at a minimum once every two weeks. This is a critical part of your progress, and you should do everything that you can to make sure that these sessions happen. You and your mentor / spiritual director / small group can not only talk about individual activities and your responses, but also develop an agreed upon plan for your completion schedule and any additional ideas you might want to try.
- If followed strictly, it will take six months to complete the *Discipler* activities, but you may stretch this out to a schedule that works for you and your spiritual partner or small group. It short-circuits the process to try to condense it into a shorter timeframe, however.



## Keys for Success

Remember, this is a flexible, Scripture-based approach that is designed to guide you on a personalized journey. Our experience is that you will enjoy the greatest progress if you remember these guidelines:

- Work with a guide: You are far more likely to hold yourself accountable to the process and to gain greater wisdom and insight if you have a partner or partners for this journey who have already travelled this path. You can process the *Discipler* material one-to-one with a mentor or you can process it as part of small group with a leader who functions as group mentor.
- Do things in order: We have ordered the sections and activities so that they build upon a foundation of specific skills and insights. It will be tempting to skip over things that are difficult for you or unappealing, but to do so will deprive you of deeper spiritual truths.
- Be flexible but diligent: Don't be afraid to mix things up as needed to work with your unique life situation and the opportunities provided by your local congregation and the experiences of your spiritual mentor, but don't be willy-nilly in your approach. Have an agreed upon plan and be faithful to it.
- Write down your reflections: Writing down your observations, insights, and questions will be a crucial part of the process. It requires you to be more thoughtful, and it provides a written record of your progress that will be invaluable as you reflect back on your journey. In your reflections, don't be limited by the provided blank lines on the page for each exercise. That space is limited by publishing constraints. It's a great idea to have a second journal with blank pages to expand on your thoughts and ideas as you go.
- Don't skimp, scrimp, or skulk: Don't shortchange yourself by taking shortcuts, checking items off without fully engaging the activity, or being less than truthful with your spiritual mentor or small group partners. You will get out of this process whatever you put into it.
- Don't be afraid to wander where the Spirit leads: A particular activity may lead you to a deeper exploration of a passage of Scripture, a personal revelation you need to explore, or a desire to serve in a way you haven't before. Go for it! Modify and add to activities—create your own pages, your own chapters in your personal journey of discipleship discovery.



## How to Use This Material in a One-to-one Conversation

**Suggested time frame:** 30 - 60 minutes

**Location:** Keep it casual, like at a café, coffee shop, park or back porch.

### Connect Time

This is a time devoted to 'catching up' on life, following up on commitments made in previous sessions, and building the relationship.

### Reflection and Accountability:

The majority of this time will be centered around the *Discipler* materials.

- As the conversation begins, ask, "As you interacted with the materials from the last section, where did you encounter a new idea or an activity that invited you to think about that dimension of discipleship in a new way?"
- Follow this opening conversation with the opportunity to share responses to each of the dimensions of discipleship growth, one at a time (worship, hospitality, opening to Jesus, obeying Jesus, service, and generosity). Share the goal for growth within each dimension's activity and the Scripture used for each reflection.
- Often, the conversation around responses will create an even deeper level of exploration around a particular theme. For example, a conversation around how the offering is introduced in worship might spark a deeper conversation about tithing and why we give in the first place. These deeper explorations are encouraged (even though they might preview down-the-road activities). Just remember to leave time for all the dimensions of growth to be covered.

### Next Steps

As the meeting time concludes, invite your partner to consider what they are going to do with what they are discovering about growing as a disciple of Jesus this next week. You might frame the invitation like this: "As you consider the reflections on discipleship for this week, what next step is God inviting you to take in your journey toward maturity?"

Preview the next section, talking about any adjustments you need to make to timing or activities, and settling on a schedule for your next session.

### Prayer Requests

Close the meeting time with an opportunity for partners to share prayer requests. Close with a time of prayer, giving attention to those shared requests.

## How to Use This Material in a Small Group Setting

**Suggested time frame:** 60 - 90 minutes

**Location:** If possible, a casual and comfortable setting (as opposed to a sterile Sunday School room context). Someone's home or a private room at a local diner, etc.

### Fellowship Time

As the group gathers, include a time for relationship building with the opportunity to share about what's going on in life (other than the coursework). It is helpful to have some light refreshments for people to enjoy as they reconnect with each other.

### Worship Time

Groups are encouraged to have a brief time of worship as they reconnect with God. This might include:

- Song of Praise
- Brief devotional built on one of the dimensions of discipleship
- Opening prayer

### Reflection and Accountability

The majority of the group meeting time will be centered around the *Discipler* materials.

- As the conversation begins, ask, "As you interacted with the activities from the last section, where did you encounter a new idea or an action that invited you to think about that a dimension of discipleship in a new way?"
- Follow this opening exchange with the opportunity to explore each individual dimension of growth, prompting each participant to share their own responses to each of the dimensions (worship, hospitality, being open to Jesus, being obedient to Jesus, service, and generosity). Get started by reviewing the goal for each dimension's activity and the Scripture used for reflection. For example: "Let's hear from each other how we responded to the activity focused on worship this week." Give all members of the group an opportunity to respond. Then move on to the next dimension.
- Often, the responses will create an even deeper exploration of a particular theme. For example, a group exchange around how the offering was introduced during a worship service might spark a deeper conversation about tithing and why we give in the first place. These conversations are encouraged (even though they may preview activities from later sections). Just remember to leave adequate time to cover all the dimensions of growth.

### Next Steps

As the meeting time concludes, invite participants to consider what they are going to do with what they are discovering about growing as a disciple of Jesus this next week. You might frame the invitation like this: “As you consider the reflections on discipleship for the activities we just completed, what next step is God inviting you to take in your journey toward maturity?” Not all people will be comfortable responding to this question openly with the group, but you can encourage them to respond by saying, “Is there anyone who would like to share with us that next step?”

Also, preview the activities of the next section in the book, making any required adjustments to activities or schedule and clarifying your next meeting time and location.

### Prayers for the Group

Close the meeting time with an opportunity for participants to share prayer requests. Note these requests and close with a time of prayer.

### Enhancing the Group Experience: Communication

You will find it helpful to do an email reminder about the group meeting time, focus of that particular meeting, and prayer requests that were shared.

### Enhancing the Group Experience: Sharing Meals Together

Groups often find that sharing a meal together (regularly or periodically) is a great way to build relationships and trust within the group. These, of course, are the foundational elements to creating space for deep, transparent, and vulnerable conversations that transform lives.

### Enhancing the Group Experience: Serving Together

Each group is encouraged to find a way to serve together each month. Your church can probably provide you with a variety of opportunities to engage in ministry together out in the community. This provides a safe place for participants to explore how they are gifted to serve, as well as providing another great opportunity to build relationships within the group.