

# Session 1 - Go Deeper

## Key Ideas Behind Discipleship Enablers

Here is a very brief overview of some of the main ideas behind this discipleship learning journey. This may be most useful to people who like exploring ideas and concepts. We'll explore each of these further during the rest of the sessions.

### 1. Head, Heart and Hands

Life with God involves our **whole** selves:

- **head** (our thoughts, values, worldview and understanding),
- **heart** (our emotions, experiences, feelings, temperament), and
- **hands** (our choices, actions and practical rhythms of living)

As a result, different sessions will focus on each of these to different degrees.

### 2. Self, Context and Task

Growing in Christian discipleship isn't just (or even mainly) about what we 'do for' or 'do to' other people. It involves bringing together three important dimensions of life:

- We need to be following Jesus for ourselves (SELF)
- We need to explore how following and growing in Christ might best happen in the particular times and places we live in (CONTEXT)
- We learn confidence, skills and sensitivity in supporting others to go on this discipleship journey for themselves (TASK)

We will therefore explore each of these over the course of this journey together.

### 3. Vision, Intention, Means

One increasingly influential way of thinking about Christian character formation comes from the American philosopher and Christian writer Dallas Willard (1935-2013). He suggests three important ingredients are needed:

- **Vision** (developing in our understanding of God, and the life God calls us into)
- **Intention** (desiring the 'with-God life' enough that we take steps to live it)

- **Means** (gaining the practical tools/practices/spiritual disciplines to live it out)<sup>1</sup>

You may already notice here the parallels with ‘head, heart, hands’. We’ll keep these in mind throughout all our sessions together.

#### 4. Enough Clarity, Enough Flexibility

To be honest, there’s a broad spectrum of opinion about how to enable others in discipleship.

- At one end of the spectrum, some people feel that because everyone’s journey of faith is unique, discipleship programmes are of little use, and may even limit people’s growth because they put people into a box.
- At the other end of the spectrum, some people feel that there are concrete, tried-and-tested, universally-applicable models or processes for ‘disciple-making’: use the right ‘technique’ and everything else will follow.

This resource sits somewhere in the middle: everyone’s discipleship journey is different, but not entirely different. There’s no single ‘method’ for enabling discipleship, but the Bible and 2000 years of Christian experience suggest there are practices and approaches which are generally fruitful for most people. (If there weren’t, we’d effectively be saying that enabling and growing in discipleship is either impossible, or a complete mystery we can’t influence).

There’s at least some research to suggest that a sufficiently clear understanding of what spiritual growth consists of, and how it happens, helps congregations grow together.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, defining discipleship too narrowly in terms of a fixed set of strategies, targets and practices risks us overlooking the importance of being open and attentive to God at work around us through all the big and small details of daily life – sometimes in surprising new ways.<sup>3</sup>

This discipleship resource therefore aims at a middle ground: **enough clarity** to be understandable and shareable, **enough flexibility** to reflect our various life circumstances. The statistician George Box once said: ‘All models are wrong, but some are useful’.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, this also applies to enabling discipleship!

#### 5. Nine (or maybe more!) ‘Pathways’ of Growth in Discipleship

Some recent research<sup>5</sup> commissioned for the Church of England found that several themes

<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (IVP, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Sally K. Gallagher and Chelsea Newton, ‘Defining Spiritual Growth: Congregations, Community and Connectedness’, *Sociology of Religion* 70.3 (2009), 232-261 [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40376076>].

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Kimber, *Fullness of Vision, Fullness of Life: Towards a Rebalanced View of Church Life and Leadership* (SCM Press, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> I’m grateful to Reign Ministries’ *Disciple-Maker’s Handbook* for this quote.

<sup>5</sup> <https://churchsupporthub.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ccx-report-digital-spreads.pdf>

seemed to crop up regularly in both people's experiences of growing in discipleship and in a range of writing about Christian spiritual formation.

Important 'enablers' of growth in discipleship seem to include...

- Having a clear, authentic vision of God, ourselves and the Christian life
- Becoming self-aware about the thoughts, experiences and feelings which shape us,
- Being aware of the reality of sin and God's ability to transform us
- Willingly setting aside our priorities and living out God's priorities
- Having a safe community in which we can be supported and challenged
- Having concrete plans and practices in place which enable us to grow
- Spending time in church cultures which prioritise growth in discipleship
- Addressing challenges and difficulties that prevent growth
- Putting into practice what we are learning, often at the invitation of others

Each of the sessions touches on one or more of these 'pathways' or enablers of growth. In reality, this is just one way of talking about what helps us grow in discipleship - there will be other ways of describing each of these, and potentially also other factors which are important. But these ones appeared quite frequently in the research findings and in a range of Christian writing on discipleship. We're grateful to Eido Research and particularly to Phil Sital-Singh for letting us use them in these sessions.

## 6. The Character of a 'Discipleship Enabler'

In his recent book on the history of catechesis (the process of preparing new Christians for baptism and confirmation), Alex Fogleman suggests that influential Christian spiritual writers tend to point to three qualities which catechists should possess:<sup>6</sup>

- Humility
- Joy
- Love

The same applies to supporting and journeying with anyone in discipleship. We need humility because we are not teaching people to be disciples of ourselves, but disciples of Jesus. Joy is vital because this is, ultimately, good news. Love is essential because otherwise, discipleship ceases to be about supporting others and becomes a matter of burdensome 'shoulds' and 'musts'. We become, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, little more than a 'resounding gong or a clanging cymbal'.

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Fogleman, *Making Disciples: Catechesis in History, Theology and Practice* (Eerdmans, 2025).