

Discipleship Enablers Session 7 - Creating a Healthy Discipleship Environment - Video Transcript

Discipleship Story

A few years ago I was part of a project researching how faith grows, changes and develops on the fringes and 'edges' of church. One of seven places we spent time with was Next Steps, a Christian charity supporting prison leavers to re-integrate into society and build a positive future.¹ Although there was no 'hard sell' evangelism involved, a remarkable number of the clients became Christians, were baptised and were turning their lives around. What was going on?

There were many reasons, but one significant factor was the healthy environment which the Next Steps charity were able to create. Their town-centre office was a safe space where clients could escape from the temptations of drink, drugs or crime, a place where you could just hang out, make a hot drink, play board games or chat. You didn't need an appointment; a staff member or volunteer always had time to chat, without any agenda. Several clients told stories about ringing up staff members any time of day or night, and they would come out to sit with them through moments of darkness. It was also significant that no one felt forced or pressured to change. In fact, several clients well advanced in the rehabilitation process talked about the importance of deciding for *themselves* to turn their lives around. Telling people to change didn't work - it had to be a personal choice. Next Steps walked alongside them as they chose to do so.

At the same time, this wasn't an 'anything goes' culture. Sin and forgiveness were taken seriously: 'they won't let you off, but they'll give you a second chance', said one client. There were clear rules and expectations, regular meetings and check-ins. You kept your flat tidy, showed up for appointments, took part in Next Steps' programmes, accepted that giving back to others was part of your recovery journey. Clients often talked about the importance of being held to account. Local church leaders who worked with the charity told us how much they had learned from this too. One vicar reflected how his usual approach to difficult issues with church members had been gentle to the point of almost going out of his way not to cause tension. However, he found that with Next Steps clients, there was value in a more direct approach, coming right out and saying: 'so, how's your prayer life? How's your porn addiction?' Rather than something to be avoided, direct challenge actually seemed productive.

As we reflected on our learning from the project, we tried to describe what kind of environment Next Steps provided. We found ourselves talking about: 'unforced spaces of grace'. Clients flourished in an atmosphere where high levels of freedom and support were coupled with clear boundaries and expectations. We reflected that this combination of space to grow within strong community life was not unlike the monastic movement at its best. But would this only work with prison leavers? Or was there wider wisdom for the Church here? Undoubtedly, Next Steps operated in a particular way shaped around the needs of some challenging clients. But staff, clients and volunteers all emphasised that the main difference between Next Steps users and everyone else was not their sin or need for forgiveness as such, but their honesty about

¹ You can read more about Next Steps and other 'edgy' places of faith development in the project report, which is available here: <https://susannawesleyfoundation.org/edgy-faith-and-learning-project-report/>

their mistakes and their brokenness, and their desperate need of God and a strong community in order to change. Perhaps, they reflected, more Christians should be honest about this. Perhaps the church would be a different, more supportive, more transformative kind of community as a result? If so, how can our groups and churches become, like Next Steps, ‘unforced spaces of grace?’

Main Session Content

Introduction

All of us are formed by the Christian groups and communities we’re part of. Roger Walton writes: ‘the issue is not *whether* church congregations will form people... but *what* they will form in people’.² Last session, we explored things which seem to help people grow as disciples. Two of these are:

- **Relational** - “Christians grow through committed relationships of safety, encouragement and challenge”
- **Cultural** - “Christians grow when we spend time in church cultures that are designed for spiritual growth”

The question for us this session is: How do we create the right kind of environment for discipleship? What kind of environment is going to provide both safety, encouragement and challenge? And how do we shape church cultures with spiritual growth in mind?

Part 1 - Where to Start: Safety, Support and Challenge

To foster an environment in which we can grow as disciples, and help others grow, we need meaningful relationships which offer three things:

- A commitment to a **safe** environment as the bedrock of everything else;
- Plenty of **support, example and encouragement**... along with...
- The **invitation** and **challenge** to change and grow into our identity and calling in Christ - both individually and as a small group or church.

Let’s look at each of these in turn.

1. Safety

This session isn’t a safeguarding training session, but it’s vital to remember that providing a safe environment is the foundation of creating a healthy environment for discipleship. It’s not an add-on.

Think about the character of God, who Jesus was, and what he taught.

- God is the one with whom we can feel utterly safe.

² Roger Walton, *Disciples Together: Discipleship, Formation and Small Groups* (SCM Press, London, 2014), p.31.

- Isaiah describes the Messiah as the one who is gentle with the weak: 'a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice' (Isaiah 43.3).
- Jesus says: 'my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt 11.30).
- In contrast, some of Jesus' most severe warnings and criticisms are reserved for those who cause others to stumble (Matt. 18.6).³

We need to keep people safe physically, psychologically, emotionally but also spiritually. We need to be able to recognise spiritual abuse and safeguard against it. Spiritual abuse comes in various forms; for example:

- Being pressured to share more than you feel comfortable doing
- Having your time, money or decisions controlled by others
- Being told you have to obey a particular leader

... and that you must do these things because scripture says so, or because the leader is alleged to have some sort of special authority from God. Spiritual abuse can also include being cut off by a group or gossiped about if you don't comply. You can find a full description of spiritual abuse on the *Action on Spiritual Abuse* website.⁴

Reflecting on the nature of spiritual abuse can also give us some clues about what a safe spiritual environment might look like. For example, people would be:

- Treated with respect as bearers of God's image, and recognised for what they contribute
- Free to make their own decisions according to their conscience, even if others disagree
- Able to share worries, doubts and vulnerability honestly, without pressure or fear of ridicule and censure
- Invited to take part, rather than feeling pressured to do so
- Loved regardless of our choices

In a safe discipleship environment, if we want others to hold us accountable, this is a free choice - not something forced. Leadership will also be humble and won't try to coerce or manipulate. Jesus is Lord - we are not!

For Roman Catholic writer Sherry Weddell, the ability to trust - God, church, or a Christian friend - is the first important threshold of conversion.⁵ We can create and model this safe, secure environment in small ways as well as big ways. For example, at the beginning of a session, a group leader can emphasise that...

- No one needs to share anything they don't want to;
- We respect other people's confidences (though safeguarding concerns do need appropriate reporting)
- What we explore together is an invitation to respond; not a burden to make us feel guilty.

Without safety, our attempts to support and affirm others will be hollow and empty. Without safety, any challenge we offer becomes coercive and manipulative. Without safety, we will hinder people growing in the way of Jesus.

³ Many of the points here are taken from the Methodist Church's studyguide *God Welcomes All: How Faith Informs Safeguarding*, (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/safeguarding/the-theology-of-safeguarding/>).

⁴ Action on Spiritual Abuse: <https://www.actiononspiritualabuse.org.uk/survivorsupporterresources>

⁵ Sherry Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (2012), 127.

2. Support/Encouragement

Building on this bedrock of safety, the second key ingredient to a healthy discipleship environment is support. Hopefully this should be the most obvious of the three so we'll only cover it briefly here. But think, for example, about the following:

- The second greatest commandment is 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'. For Jesus, this should be a hallmark of Christian identity: 'by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13.35).
- Jesus also says that 'the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve'. As disciples we follow this pattern; we don't 'lord it over others' (Matt. 20.25-28)
- Jesus lived this out in his own life, for example, in the way he was always open to the people who needed his attention and care - not least those overlooked by others.
- Note how often the phrase 'one another' appears in the New Testament: 50-60 times depending on how you count. Love one another, accept one another, be at peace with one another, bear with one another, forgive one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens. You might want to study all the 'one anothers' as a basis for a small group or sermon series?⁶

In this sense, the way we relate to each other actually powerfully shapes who we are as disciples. What does this suggest about how we create an environment of support and encouragement in our group or church?

3. Challenge

The third key ingredient for creating a healthy discipleship environment is challenge. Just to be clear, I'm not talking here about those very rare occasions when we might need to raise a specific issue of behaviour with someone. That won't be an everyday part of the life of a church or small group, and will need a different approach. Here I'm talking about how we create a culture of mutual invitation and encouragement to enable one another to go deeper with God, deeper into God's call and deeper into a life of holiness and fruitfulness.

Most kinds learning and growth require some element of challenge. But challenge isn't a good thing for its own sake; there is always a purpose to it. So it's worth pausing to think about when and why Jesus challenges others. Here are a few examples - can you think of others?

- To return to the heart of God's call ('repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is close at hand')
- To understand God in a different or deeper way ('you have heard it said... but I say to you')
- To encourage people to put God first ('seek first the Kingdom of God')
- To invite people to take part in the life and work of the Kingdom (e.g., the sending out of the seventy-two).
- To resist evil and call out injustice and oppression (not placing heavy burdens on people's backs)
- To highlight hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the mismatch between the life we claim to lead and what we're actually doing in practice ('you snakes... you hypocrites')
- To persevere when things get hard ('the one that holds out to the end will be saved')

⁶ There's a nice infographic listing all the 'one anothers' here: <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>

We are not Jesus; we can't automatically translate the challenge which Jesus offers into the challenge we offer to each other. But reflecting on Jesus' own ministry does give us valuable cues about the kinds of areas of our life where it may be valuable to urge each other on in holiness. In our contemporary discipleship situations, challenge can come in various forms; e.g., inviting people into opportunities to grow and step out in faith or exercise a gift or ministry in new ways. Perhaps a small group might agree to provide each other gentle accountability for each member's growth in discipleship. Perhaps there are particular issues in our lives that we want other group members to keep asking us about, and supporting us through. With the right kind of safety and mutual trust, this is a tried and tested method used by many different Christian movements across the centuries, from monastic communities to Methodist class meetings, to Christian-base recovery groups.

However, this all needs to be done with prayer, care and sensitivity, for several reasons:

- First, whilst challenge can enable growth, **we *don't* need challenge all the time**. Our comfort zones also provide growth opportunities (unless, that is, we deliberately try to avoid all forms of challenge). We shouldn't be receiving or offering challenge equally all the time.
- Second, **there are healthy and unhealthy amounts of challenge, and better or worse times to experience challenge**. Some psychologists talk about a 'stretch zone' and a 'panic zone'. The right amount of challenge at the right time can stretch us; too much challenge at the wrong time can send us into panic. So the *amount* of challenge is also critical.
- Third, **there are different kinds of challenge**. Don't imagine that challenge has to be of the very sharp, direct kind that Jesus gives to the Pharisees, or occasionally to his disciples. Confrontation and condemnation shouldn't be a typical part of a small group or church. Mostly our job as discipleship enablers will be to walk alongside others as *they themselves* identify the challenges they are facing and the new challenges they want to take on in the light of God's call. It's not our job to load them up further.
- Fourth, Jesus is Lord and we are *not*. **We don't possess Jesus's accuracy of insight into other people's character and circumstances**. So we need to be humble and cautious about how we offer challenge and invitation to others - as we'd want them to be with us.

Safety, support, encouragement and affirmation are all vital. Without them, we feel insecure and reluctant to share ourselves, receive from others or step out in new ways for God. Challenge without love and acceptance can feel like condemnation. Challenge without safety leads to coercion and manipulation.

Equally, support without challenge is only one half of the equation. It is easy to end up with groups or churches which are warm, welcoming and comfortable but offer little that is unfamiliar or stretching. Churches with a 'high support, low challenge' culture can sometimes also become very focused on their own needs and experiences, whilst their leaders can be run ragged trying to meet their church's expectations.

Part 2 - Cultivating a Culture of Discipleship in a Local Church

Part 1 explored what a healthy discipleship environment might look like (the vision) and why it's important (the intention). Part 2 explores what we can do to help create that environment (the method or means).

In recent decades there has been a lot of helpful research and reflection on this.⁷ Building on the bedrock of safety, encouragement and challenge already described, here are some common themes:

What a church leader (and others) can do

1. **Get your posture right** – we are all learners, all loved by God, all in need of grace, all have gifts and experiences to bring to the table to help each other grow. It's not about leaders 'doing to' others who simply receive or obey. Getting our posture right is also about modelling honesty and (appropriate) vulnerability in our own lives.
2. **Ask good questions.** Keep asking yourself: 'what is our plan for discipleship? Is it working?' Obviously, there's quite a lot about enabling disciples which can't be planned; it's not a production line process. But asking the questions keeps us curious and intentional.
3. **Agree to experiment!** It's OK simply to say: 'we don't know how to do this; we're doing to try something, see what happens and learn from it'. Creativity is possible if we stop thinking only in terms of 'success' or 'failure'. Avoid impulsive or unsafe choices, though.
4. **Pray** for a deepening of discipleship, and plan **worship** in a way which emphasises the importance of discipleship as an outflow of worship. What do our songs, liturgy, church notices, sermons, etc. say about what being a Christian means in practice?
5. **Offer a rich and rounded vision of discipleship**, in a variety of different ways (not just sermons). Most of us can think of a time we've been asked to do something but struggled to do it because the purpose was unclear. The same can be true in discipleship. Keep sharing a rich vision of discipleship, and watch out for 'drift'.
6. **Start with people's existing gifts and passions** - It's often easier to seek to deepen a culture of discipleship by beginning with these than with what's wrong or lacking. It's important to address the gaps and stumbling blocks in due course or they will probably keep tripping us up. But they may not always be the best place to start.

⁷ These suggestions are taken from a wide variety of sources, including reflection from colleagues across different churches and dioceses across the region, learning from projects supported by St Peter's Saltley Trust, and the following books and articles by experienced practitioners: Cris Rogers, *Leading and Shaping a Discipleship Culture*; Tracy Cotterell and Neil Hudson, *Leading a Whole-Life Disciplemaking Church*; Joanna Cox, *Getting Discipleship into the Lifeblood*; Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*; unpublished reflections by Revd Al Barrett; the Cairn Movement in Scotland; the 248 organisation's research on Global Disciple-Making Movements; and learning from many projects supported or evaluated by St Peter's Saltley Trust.

7. **Grow people, not programmes.** The point isn't to expand our church's activity, but to nurture disciples. This means carving out plenty of space for conversation and doing life together; not just formal meetings. Being adaptable and interruptible is important here.
8. **Provide real, honest but encouraging models/stories of what we want to see.** This includes both how we and other leaders model real, honest and (appropriately) vulnerable discipleship, and how we draw upon real-life models of discipleship from elsewhere - e.g., other churches, visiting speakers, global church stories, etc.).
9. **Take a whole church approach** – don't put 'discipleship' in a box apart from the rest of church life; even the 'church clean' can be an opportunity for discipleship - for worship, fellowship, service. Think wider than small group courses. Sunday worship is also formative, though most experienced leaders think it's almost impossible to develop a whole-church discipleship culture *only* through worship and preaching.
10. **Align systems, structures, and practical decisions to the discipleship vision.** Do we discuss spiritual growth in PCC meetings? Spend money on discipleship? Carve out space in the church calendar to learn and grow together? If not, other priorities will crowd in.
11. **Develop discipleship pathways.** Map out a simple, yet manageable, rhythm of opportunities for people to go deeper in discipleship over the course of a year. The seasons of the Christian year can provide a helpful sequence of different opportunities here.
12. **Address the means as well as the vision** – how are we practically equipping people with skills in discipleship? E.g., run a series to introduce different prayer practices, or learn how to share faith confidently and respectfully, or how to research to local community needs.
13. **Take it step by step** – lots of sudden, revolutionary change will be upsetting unless there is a widespread appetite for it. Instead, work by 'one degree shifts', remembering to tell stories about the impact of these changes when it occurs.
14. **Encourage interest and fruitfulness.** Notice who is hungry to grow, and who is already showing evident good fruit in their lives. Affirm and encourage these people (they may also be emerging leaders or good collaborators). Don't thereby neglect others though; just recognise everyone moves at different paces.
15. **Keep persevering.** Discipleship is a lifetime's work requiring patient cooperation with God. But give it time and you'll see the fruit appear.

What a church member (and leaders!) can do

In reality, many people who are passionate about enabling discipleship may not themselves be church leaders and may have limited influence over the church's decision-making. So what can we do to foster a culture of discipleship in that situation?⁸

⁸ Particular thanks here go to Anna Freij for our conversation on this subject.

- **Pray** for a deepening of discipleship in our group/church, ask for wisdom and discernment as to where to start. Pray the words of Psalm 51: 'Create in me a clean heart, O God...'
- **Engage constructively with our church leader** - tell them what we hope for, not what's wrong.
- **Be the change** we hope to see in our church's life.
- Ask to **gather those who are keen to go deeper**, and journey together.
- **Look for opportunities beyond our church** to take part in events or networks which offer inspiration, encouragement and enrichment; and share what we have experienced with people in our church.
- With our group's permission, **share and celebrate any 'good fruit'** with others in the church.
- **Find fellow travellers.** Are there people in other churches with whom we can meet regularly to pray, learn together and support each other, even whilst we continue to be an active part of our 'home' church?
- **Keep humble.** We musn't assume we have all the answers and so overlook the signs of spiritual growth amidst what our church is already doing. In particular, it's important to resist a two-tier view of church, in which there are 'real disciples' and 'other Christians'. The New Testament doesn't make this distinction, and neither should we.