

Personal Spiritual Transformation



A GUIDE TO DISCIPLESHIP PODS AT ST PETER'S CHURCH

Contents

	Page
1. Growing Authentic Disciples is a priority.	3
2. The need to change	4
3. How can I change?	6
4. The characteristics of an effective Discipleship Pod.	8
5. What journey does a Discipleship Pod make?	9
App 1: The Practice of Silence and Solitude	12
App 2: The Practice of Keeping the Sabbath	14
References.	15

“Pod (*NOUN plural pods*)

A small herd or school of intelligent marine animals, especially dolphins or whales” *Oxford English Dictionary*

1. Growing Authentic Disciples is a priority

Growing Authentic Disciples – or, more usefully, apprentices to Jesus - is one of the strategic priorities of St Peter's Church, Yateley, as it reflects our primary calling as Christians.

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Eph 4:22-24 NIV)

At St Peter's, we feel that small groups of apprentices can provide the space where our fundamental spiritual transformation can best be nurtured. We are therefore setting up a framework of what we are calling Discipleship Pods to help transform our church.

This booklet is a guide to help the formation and functioning of a Discipleship Pod (or simply 'pod' henceforth). It references a much more detailed handbook.¹ We have created it to gather together, in one place, a lot of the most contemporary thinking in the execution of that most long-standing Christian desire: to practise the way of Jesus.



"Without God we can't, and without us God won't"⁵

Please help us make this a guide that all can benefit from by contributing your own comments and suggestions to us,

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2. The need to change

*“Spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed and permeated by the character traits of Jesus as we walk in the easy yoke of discipleship with Jesus our teacher.”*⁴

As an authentic Christian apprentice, we are called to follow the Way of Jesus, through maintaining a constant, conscious awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:15-18 NIV)

The New Testament gives us a clear blueprint for how God intends us to lead our lives (*Matthew Ch 5-7 - the Sermon on the Mount*) and what the practical outworking of that blueprint would be (*for example the words of Paul, Peter, John and James*). However, we cannot think our way to Christ-likeness: we are not just ‘Brains on legs’ – we are shaped by our loves and longings.

*“Information transfer alone does not yield transformation.”*²

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23 NIV)

There is a gap between what we know in our head, and what we want to do in our heart. And there is another gap between wanting to do, and doing it with our body. What we love in our heart has a far greater effect on how we live than what we know in our head.

‘Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.’ (Pro 4:23 NIV)

The deep, fundamental change we seek to transform us - and go on transforming us, from the inside out - is not to make us a Christian clone, but rather to set us free to become the special person that God made us to be.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2Cor 3:17-18 NIV)

We are being changed by the world around us, whether we like it or not, by the stories we believe, the things we regularly do, the people we spend time with and the environment we live in. Just by waking up and drawing breath each day, we start to be formed into something. But who or what are we being transformed into? Unintentionally, we may follow a trajectory that may be taking us further from what God made us to be.

Is our transformation to better follow the Way of Jesus possible? Yes, but it’s not inevitable. It takes effort and application on a daily basis, and a deep, personal connection with the Holy Spirit.

*“Don’t copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.”
(Rom 12:2 NLT)*

3. How can I change?

Becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus is a 3-step process.^{2,3} It is the way Jesus taught his disciples.

1. Spend time with Jesus

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:13-14 NIV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” (John 15:1-4 NIV)

2. Become more like Jesus

(The point of apprenticeship is to become like your rabbi.)

“He also told them this parable: “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit? The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher. (Luke 6:39-40 NIV)

3. Do what Jesus did

(Imitate – Practise, Practise, Practise – Develop a new nature)

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (Matthew 14:28-29 NIV)

Our daily practices, or habits, shape our loves and our longings – our hearts. We do not always realise the power of habit.

To be transformed, we need to develop a new rhythm – a new way of living our life. We need to exercise our ‘muscle’ of will-power – and it’s not about just trying very hard, but rather training very hard.

“The spiritual disciplines are practices based on the lifestyle of Jesus that create time and space for us to access the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and in doing so, be transformed from the inside out.”²

We could start by looking at what habits we could swap for more spiritual practices - start with one or two things and progress from there over time. For example, try turning off the ringer on our mobile and checking for messages when it is right for us to do so – making the phone our servant rather than our master.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matt 11:28-30 MSG)

Examples of helpful spiritual disciplines, or practices of Jesus are:

- Silence & solitude (*see Appendix 1*)
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Simplicity
- Bible reading
- Living in community with other believers (*church*)
- Keeping the Sabbath (*set aside for rest and worship - Appendix 2*)

These practices of mind and body are our part in the partnership with God to transform us. A discipline is a way to access power and is a means to an end – to be with Jesus.

“If we want to experience the life of Jesus we have to adopt the lifestyle of Jesus.”²

Let us walk a life worthy of our family name.

“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” (Eph 4:1 NIV)

It is important to remember that we are built by God to be in relationship with others, and it is in the encouraging yet challenging company of other believers that real, lasting transformation can take place. We believe that small groups of 3 or 4 people provide the most powerful setting. It is these ‘Discipleship Pods’ that we describe in the rest of this booklet.

4. What are the characteristics of an effective Discipleship Pod?

A pod, as we define it, comprises 3-4 people who want to disciple one another and is a small group where intimacy, vulnerability, and accountability can flourish.

Jesus had a group of 12 recognised Disciples (although he was closely followed by a much larger group of people). He also had an inner trio (Peter, John and James). With them, He spent times of special importance, and shared deeper understanding and wisdom, so that they could become more like Him and do what he did.

In a similar way, at St Peter's, we have a vibrant network of homegroups, whose membership encompasses all sectors of our Church. Overall, half of our adult Church family is a member of a homegroup. However, even in a group of say 10 people, it is difficult to make those deep emotional connections required for the supportive challenge that is a characteristic of authentic transformation. The potentially fluctuating attendance, caused by outside influences, is another barrier to deep sharing. And, of course, half the church is not in a homegroup.

We believe that establishing a network of Discipleship Pods should be a priority if our church is to be transformed. In this much smaller setting (3-4 people) it is inherently easier to maintain a schedule of regular meetings, so that deep mutual sharing and supporting can flourish.

Through the deep personal transformation that we believe can be achieved through this process, we are confident that our whole church can be transformed, and better equipped to reach out to the local community we serve.

5. What journey does a Discipleship Pod make?

As a guideline, a pod:

- Meets weekly/fortnightly over an initial 6 months
- Exhibits intimate friendship through intimacy, vulnerability and accountability: a dynamic of expose and encourage - and
- Is intentionally driven to practically enhancing the spiritual formation of each other
- Through practising the Way of Jesus.

It is therefore a vehicle for a form of focused peer mentorship.

This will be accomplished through:

1. Being with Jesus: studying His Word and seeking Him through prayer
2. Becoming more like Him: Imitate – Practise, practise, practise – Develop a new nature
3. Doing what He did

Before setting up a discipleship pod, it is important to prayerfully seek whether this is something that God is stirring your heart to do. Does your current faith journey feel like the radical transformation that Jesus expects? Would being part of a small group/pod help?

Consider how this activity would fit into your life's other demands. If you wish to proceed, which other 2 or 3 people, probably of the same sex as you, would you want to do this with? Start to have conversations with them and build a pod.

In this process of establishment, you can enlist the help of the Discipleship Pod Coordinator, John Divall.

Once you are ready to hit the 'Go' button, you should meet, as a pod, with John. He will give you information and share some ideas with you, including what is contained in this booklet. Then you are free to follow the journey that God has planned for you, individually and as a group. John will be there as a resource you can use if it is helpful, but will not intrude on what you do.

In the early phase of the St Peter's programme, John would like to know, in general terms, how things are going at points in your pod's journey, and especially when you have come to the end of the initial 6 months.

The activity of a pod will be a combination of the processes:

Meet: perhaps twice a month but with a lot of phoning and texting prayer requests and encouragement to each other in between.

"...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together..." (Heb 10:24-25 NIV)

Share: be known, be vulnerable and honest, be supported, listen and care. Open up to each other and help each of the group with their own walk with Jesus. Offer and receive wisdom across ages and between members at different parts of their journey. Recognise that the group feels small enough for people to share honestly, but large enough that they are not isolated. Unleash the power of the Spirit 'when two or more gathered in His name'.

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body..." (Eph 4:25 NIV)

Pray: pray for one another in the group and regularly until the next meeting. Use the power that being open with each other gives to help everyone be more open with God. See Him answering prayer, often in unexpected ways.

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful..." (Col 4:2 NIV)

Support: lovingly challenge and inspire one another to transform your lives, one step at a time, practising the way of Jesus and growing more like Him with every day that passes.

A suggested programme for the initial 6 months of meeting would see the pod move through 4 phases:

1. **Story**: this illustrates the power of testimony. Each member of the group is asked to think back over their lifeline, recording significant people, places and events – both positive and negative – putting down markers and considering where God was in all that, how He was on the move. Each time the group meets, a member of the pod brings their own lifeline and tells their story, so that by the end of this phase, everyone knows each other's story.
2. **Vision**: this illustrates the importance of direction. Everyone considers the questions: "What person do I want to be at the end of this process? Lord, what would you have me do in each of the various spheres of my life?" The group follows teaching in the light of each individual vision.
3. **Pattern**: what does all of that actually look like right now? How can we go about making and breaking patterns or habits? Recognise each pattern, repent with the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and replace that with a new pattern that redirects us back to God's Kingdom.
4. **Coach**: contend for each other and focus on God's power at work in our lives. The pod is not just like a prayer triplet, not just an empathy group, but rather a breakthrough group, offering each other ongoing prayerful and practical support.
"Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel,...." (Phil 4:3a)

Appendix 1: The Practice of Silence and Solitude

It has been said that: “*We are distracting ourselves into spiritual oblivion*”⁶. We live in continuous partial attention and are driven by distraction and addiction to things that the world has created for us to focus on e.g. smart-phone apps, social media. In this so-called ‘attention economy’ our attention span is getting shorter and we are robbing ourselves of the ability to be truly present. We have lost those tiny fragments of time that could be portals into God’s presence.

The practice of ‘Silence and Solitude’ is to intentionally claim time to be quiet – to be alone with ourselves and God. Jesus practised this extensively, as a template for us to follow. Withdrawing to the ‘eremos’ - the solitary place, wilderness, deserted place, lonely place - was a big part of His life.

“Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” (Luke 5:15 NIV)

It allowed Him to re-centre on His identity and calling, and we need to do the same. The ‘eremos’ was His place of strength. In Mark 1, Jesus withdrew to the ‘eremos’ to do battle with Satan, where He knew that, after being alone and fasting, He would be at the peak of His powers.

He instructed His disciples to be quiet and rest, rather than do anything.

“The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.” (Mark 6:30-32 NIV)

For true silence, we need to quieten both externally and internally. In our western culture, we over-value talking and under-value silence. To obtain external silence may take some planning and action on our behalf, but is inherently easier than achieving internal silence. In the latter we may find emotions that are difficult to manage, but we should not run away from them, but rather meet with God in them.

To obtain solitude, it is obvious that we need to be alone. In solitude we hear the voice of our Father – we come home to ourselves and to God.

Think in terms of short and long periods of solitude. For example, practise solitude in four time zones: honour hourly, divert daily, withdraw weekly, abandon annually. But also grab every opportunity to be alone even for just an instant, perhaps waiting in the check-out queue or at the traffic lights, or even when refueling the car. These are times when we can touch base with God.

It is a good practice to start each day with a silent prayer, such as the one that John Stott used:

Good morning Heavenly Father, Good morning Lord Jesus, Good morning Holy Spirit.

Father I worship you as the Creator and sustainer of the universe.

Lord Jesus I worship you as Lord and Saviour of this world.

Holy Spirit I worship you as the sanctifier of the people of God.

Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father I pray that today I might walk in your presence and please you more & more.

Lord Jesus I pray that today I might take up my cross and follow you.

Holy Spirit I pray that you might fill me today with your presence and cause your fruit to ripen within me; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control.

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity: three persons in one God, have mercy on me. Amen

Appendix 2. The Practice of Keeping the Sabbath

In the world at large, and within the church, 'workaholic' is 'OK', 'busy' means 'I matter'. Nowadays, we carry our office in our back pocket, and we fill what's left of our lives with play. None of this, in moderation, is wrong, but it gives us little time to spend with God. If Satan can't make us sin, he's happy just to make us busy – either route has the capacity to cut us off from the presence of God and from ourselves.

The practice of keeping the Sabbath features right at the beginning of the Bible:

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work." (Gen 2:1-2 NIV)

God rested.

The Sabbath, in Hebrew, translates: to rest, to cease, to be done, and also has the connotation of to celebrate. Jesus carried out the majority of his healings on the Sabbath – it is a day for healing. It is therefore a time for rest, for worship and for healing.

In our 7-day culture, we have lost the capacity to celebrate, to delight in God's world. God blessed the 7th day and made it holy. He also built it into the cycle of creation. The Sabbath is our personal invitation to mimic His cycle: without it, we fight the natural rhythm of the cosmos. Work wears our energy down – rest gives us our life back.

"Each morning everyone gathered as much (manna) as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. He said to them, "This is what the Lord commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.'" (Exo 16:9-30 NIV)

God made time holy – not a space or a temple, but a day. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals - God's architecture in time. A holy Sabbath dedicated to the Lord for rest and worship - it is not a day off, dedicated to the maintenance of life.

It is both a command, and a gift. There is no right way to Sabbath, but however carried out, it allows us to feel our soul come alive again.

References

1. 'Practising the Way of Jesus – A Discipleship Handbook for St Peter's Church' John Divall & Stuart Bailey 2018
2. 'Practising the Way of Jesus' John Mark Comer – New Wine 2017 Teaching Series (DVDs)
3. 'Practising the Way of Jesus' Pete Hughes – New Wine 2017 Seminar (CD)
4. Dallas Willard
5. St Augustine
6. Ryan Dueck

For more resources to help with your discipleship journey, go to:
www.stpetersyateley.info/Discipleship.html



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