

**“Principles of Effective Discipleship”  
NWD Foursquare Research Project  
Winter-Spring 2024**

**Snapshot Description**

The following research project was connected by the Northwest District for the purpose of our 2024 Regional Connects. The goal was to identify common themes current experts say are needed for effective discipleship. We reviewed dozens of sources with the goal of current, diverse and trusted voices.

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## **Description of the Research Project**

We've spent the last two months doing research on effective discipleship. It's homework on our collective behalf! We looked at dozens of prominent voices and resources (Summary Slide), with the goal of identifying common themes in what they're saying is needed for effective discipleship. We had three criteria for our sources:

1. Current – most of what we looked at is post-pandemic. There are a few resources older than that, but they were referenced is still very accurate by one of the current sources
2. Diverse – Methodists, Baptists, Foursquare, Domestic and International
3. Trusted – Many of these are prominent voices in Christianity today – Ed Stetzer and John Mark Comer and Tim Keller. We talked to church consulting firms and looked at organizations where discipleship is the center of their work – Navigators and CRU and Intervarsity.

In this research, we identified 7 common themes. These were things we heard over and over and over again. I think some of this we'll find encouraging, some if it we'll find challenging. But it's our hope that all of it, will be helpful.

## **Source Summary – Books, Podcasts, Articles, Interviews**

Kara Powell (Fuller, Orange)

Alan Hirsch

Multiply Church Planters

Mike Gammill (Auxano)

Ted Vail

Jessie Cruickshank

Survey of NWD Lead Pastors

Carey Nieuwhof

John Mark Comer

Tim Keller

Don Carlson (Gospel Coalition)

Ed Stetzer

Lifeway “Transformational Discipleship”  
Study

The Navigators

Rich Atkinson (CRU)

C.S. Lewis Institute

Intervarsity

Grant Skeldon

Sam Rockwell

Tammy Dunahoo

Gary Matsdorf

Foursquare Global Council

Alan Noble, Professor OBU

Bureau of Labor Statistics

Heath Thomas, President, OBU

Mike Jarrell (Creo Collective)

Rick Warren

## **Summary Findings – “7 Principles for Effective Discipleship in the Church Today”**

### **#1 - Discipleship must be Christocentric**

We must remember the ultimate goal, for each person, regardless of what we hope to get out of them, is transformational union with God. What we want for people is a deep, ongoing move of the Holy Spirit, for them to be overwhelmed by the mystery and grandeur of God, and to allow that to transform their lives to look more like Jesus. And it's Jesus at the center, not me. It's Jesus working in me and through me, as he wills and wishes. In an ever-increasing culture of independence and consumerism, we must keep discipleship grounded in Jesus, not in our own desire for self-importance and purpose. “If we're not careful, discipleship will become increasingly narcissistic,” Mike Gammill, Auxano.<sup>1</sup>

*“Fundamentally, discipleship is relationship, and the goal of relationship with Jesus is transformation—to become more like Him in the ways we love and the things we do. For that reason, how we treat each other and help each other grow as persons have a great impact on becoming healthy disciples of Jesus. So first of all, pastors need to see themselves as disciples who need to be nurtured closer to the heart of God so that they can then share what they personally have with others. Then we also need to consider other influences that hinder disciples from fully experiencing Jesus and living for Him.” – Scott Ward, Dmin, Professor of Discipleship and Lifespan Education, Andrews University<sup>2</sup>*

### **#2 – Community, Conversation and Participation are Crucial**

Across the board, these experts said transformation happens in community. These are long-term relationships where people know others and can be known, where trust and vulnerability are built and protected. Greater retention and internalization happens through dialogue, engaging one another in our unique stories and experiences, and following the commands of Jesus together. Consider discipleship like apprenticeship – people learn and grow by doing life with someone further along in the journey, not simply meeting together, but doing together.

*“My beating heart is for formation, community, the relational transformation of the soul and for people to love like Jesus, my conviction, based on all sorts of data and research, is that primarily happens relationally, through smaller contexts,” John Mark Comer.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Gammill, Mike. (2024) *Effective Discipleship*. Interview conducted by Molly DuQue. 22 March 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, Scott, Sedlacek, David, Paquini, Rogelio, Fraser, Jasmine. (2023). Discipling the Whole Person. Ministry Magazine. August 2023. Available at: <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2023/08/Discipling-the-whole-person>

<sup>3</sup> Comer, John Mark. (2024) *John Mark Comer on the Crisis of Discipleship and Why Church Services Aren't Resonating*, Carey Nieuwhof Podcast. 23 January 2024. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrVKA0\\_CyJc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrVKA0_CyJc)

*“The most effective discipling takes place life-on-life. To disciple someone at a distance is extremely difficult, if it is possible. I personally have not been able to figure out how to do it.” Jon Ball, Intervarsity<sup>4</sup>*

### **#3 – Discipleship Requires a Culture of Growth Mindset and Self-Responsibility**

We need to create a culture where we all see ourselves on a life-long growth trajectory, and in-part are responsible for ourselves, and we sojourn together to look and act more like Jesus. Although there are lots of valuable tools and resources available today, Lifeway Research has found the number 1 factor of people growing in denying the self and serving others was reading the Bible daily.<sup>5</sup> This doesn't mean the church abdicates responsibility of discipleship – it means we partner with people in their own development, common language, opportunities and challenge.

*“Helping people becoming spiritual self-feeders is undeniably the most important thing in their personal discipleship journey.” Ed Stetzer<sup>6</sup>*

*“God wants you to grow up... Spiritual growth is not automatic. It takes an intentional commitment. You must want to grow, decide to grow, make an effort to grow, and persist in growing. Discipleship – the process of becoming like Christ – always begins with a decision.” Rick Warren<sup>7</sup>*

### **#4 – We Must Create Space For and an Understanding of Suffering**

We must create language and space for the engagement with and understanding of suffering as a formative part of our journey. As Americans, our cultural tendency is to avoid suffering, yet these experts agree – engaging with suffering, persevering through it and experiencing God's help and faithfulness is a crucial part of our spiritual development. This not only includes external suffering, or suffering we experience by circumstance, but engaging with the darkness within, also known as the Shadow self, or a “dark night of the soul.” In conversations with current Foursquare church planters, several of them said overcoming hardships and suffering was a formative part of their discipleship journey.

*“Three things we know transform people - deep contemplation of God, deep long-term relationships, and suffering,” John Mark Comer (paraphrased)<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Ball, Jon.

<sup>5</sup> Lifeway. (2014) Transformational Research Identifies Eight Attributes of Growing Disciples. 1 January 2014. Available at: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/transformational-research-attributes-of-growing-disciples>

<sup>6</sup> Stetzer, Ed. (2022) A Conversation with Ed Stetzer, Doable Discipleship Podcast, Saddleback Church. 22 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVVnRTnDigw&t=26s>

<sup>7</sup> Warren, Rick. Discipleship is All About Growing Up to Be Like Jesus. Pastors.com. Available at: <https://blog.pastors.com/articles/discipleship-is-all-about-growing-up-to-be-like-christ/>

<sup>8</sup> Comer, John Mark. Carey Nieuwhof Podcast.

## **#5 – Priority Needs to be Placed on Both Character formation and Doctrinal formation**

Experts agree – both of these things matter. It's not just knowing the truth, but living it out in a Christ-like way. Imagine a railroad track – one track is input and the other is experience, and dynamic reflection is what ties them together. Character and doctrine and meant to exist in tandem, growing together in the life of a disciple. This includes helping people engage with and understand culture. Biblical values that were once commonly accepted are now offensive in popular culture. People need help in developing a response that doesn't create greater offense, but expresses the love of Jesus, even when misunderstood. People need support in developing resilience, a Christ-centered commitment to unity, deep compassion and grace, and a Kingdom of God worldview.

*“Emotionally Healthy Discipleship is about getting deep beneath the surface in people's lives, so Jesus can transform them. It's about integrity, about congruence, about being the same person on the inside that we present on the outside. That who we are is more important than what we do,” Pete Scazzero.<sup>9</sup>*

## **#6 – We Need Clear Language, Vision and Outcomes**

When we talk about discipleship in our churches, we need clear language so we instill in people a clear sense of what we're individually and collectively working towards, and why. We need to answer questions like what is discipleship? What are we discipling towards? What markers do we hope to see in people lives as they grow, both subjective and objective? We also need to consider what we hope for people over the many years of their discipleship journey. What is your vision for someone in 10 years?<sup>10</sup> This includes checking our own intentions and practical needs for our churches. Our vision for people is for transformational relationship with Jesus, not to simply be a good church goer.

*“Few churches have a clear discipleship pathway. Even if they're trying to do discipleship, their strategy is disconnected and unclear,” Chuck Lawless<sup>11</sup>*

## **#7 - Thoughtfully and realistically apply this to everything in the church, including Sunday services**

Lastly, we need to see discipleship as a wholistic idea, not an 8-week program. Culture has shifted - We can't assume people know stuff or have a baseline understanding of who God is and our relationship to him. In response, we must thoughtfully and realistically consider how each thing we do – kids, youth, small groups, local and global outreach - contributes to developing a culture of discipleship. Curriculum itself is less important than how it's used, and the Bible is still our best tool for developing spiritual self-feeders. Large scale

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<sup>9</sup> Scazzero, Pete (2021) The Shallowness of our Discipleship. Emotionally Healthy Discipleship Channel. 23 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FFekqssAik>

<sup>10</sup> Comer, John Mark. Carey Nieuwhof Podcast.

<sup>11</sup> Lawless, Chuck. (2023) 11 Obstacles to Effective Discipleship. Churchleader.com.

19 November 2023. Available at: <https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/403263-11-obstacles-to-effective-discipleship.html>

campaigns – we’re all the same thing at the same time - tends to lend itself more to creating “good church goers” than disciples. It’s points towards church metrics, not disciple metrics.<sup>12</sup>

Many of these experts challenged us to remember that Sundays sermons can’t be our primary discipleship tool. “Sunday services create common culture, unity and inspiration, but are not a key component in transformation.”<sup>13</sup> But Sundays are a great opportunity to inspire people towards this, to navigate hard questions around suffering and personal responsibility. They can move people towards the deep discipleship that happens in community.

*“It does mean longer processes, it does mean more patience, it does mean being way more deliberate, it does mean every part of your church has to be seen as discipling rather than being a department,” Tim Keller<sup>14</sup>*

*“How can we make sure we are going deeper? It starts with culture. Be a church that wants to go deep with God. Provide ever-increasing opportunities for people who want to go deeper in spiritual formation,” Ed Stetzer<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Gammill, Mike. Molly DuQue Interview.

<sup>13</sup> Gammill, Mike. Molly DuQue Interview.

<sup>14</sup> Keller, Tim. Christian Coalition Discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Stetzer, Ed. Doable Discipleship Podcast.