

LEAD ON

DISCIPLING EACH OTHER

BY TIM FERGUSSON | ADAPTED FROM AN ARTICLE IN BAPTISTS TOGETHER MAGAZINE, AUTUMN 2024

Partners on the Path

Discipleship is a shared task. As Matthew and Mark tell it, no sooner had Jesus decided to call one person to follow him than he called two. And within a further paragraph, two more. The gospels present discipleship as an exercise in group learning, a sometimes glorious, sometimes faltering formational course in how to be like Jesus.

So, a question for those of us in leadership – with whom do you share your own discipleship?

Three of the richest times in my own following of Jesus have been spent with others. At the age of twenty, I spent a year as part of a team of twelve interns. At

thirty, I joined a class of ten ministers-in-training at a Baptist college. At forty, I was part of the cohort of Christian leaders on the CPAS Arrow Leadership Programme. These episodes were times of significant growth in my understanding of myself, my relationship with Jesus, and his calling on my life. And in each case, I was walking the discipleship pathway together with others.

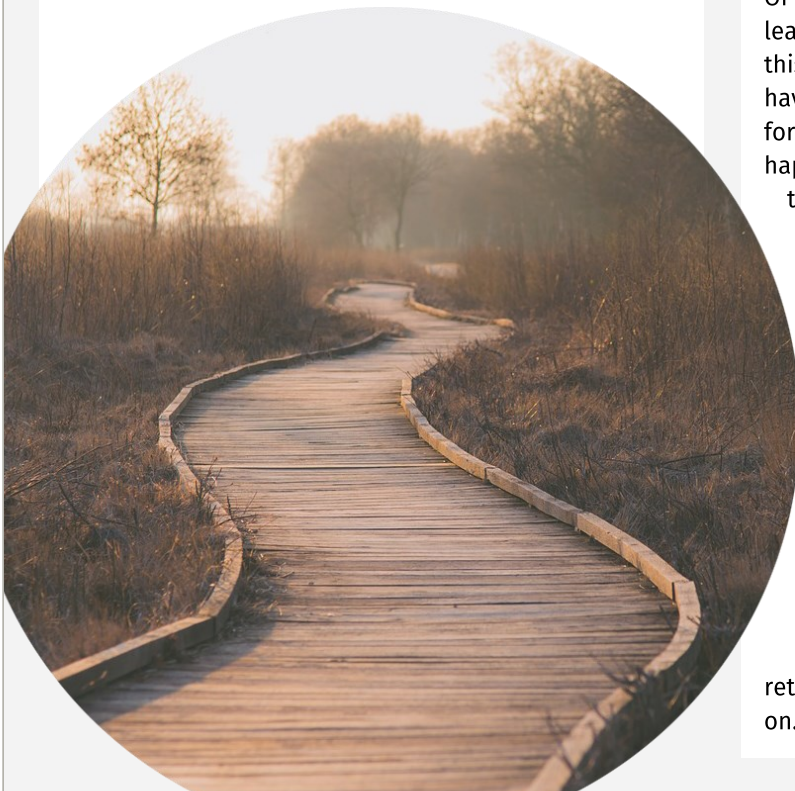
However, these high points of shared discipleship have not been the norm. For the bulk of my church ministry, people generally looked to me to disciple them. It's what a pastor is expected to do – teaching, guiding, encouraging and empowering others to follow Jesus as best they can.

Of course, some may say that in a healthy situation, a leader and their church should disciple each other. And this is true – I have ministered in two churches that have certainly both sharpened my faith. But though fortuitous for me, this mutual discipleship can be a bit haphazard. Not all churches nurture their leaders. And those of us who are evangelists, pioneers and chaplains may spend the bulk of our time with people who are not confessing disciples at all.

So, again, if you are in Christian ministry with a responsibility to lead others, with whom do you share your own discipleship?

Don't Walk Alone

I ask because I am not sure that personal devotional practices are enough. As leaders we are no doubt all committed to various solo spiritual habits. On the bedrock of Scripture and prayer we might add, variously, journalling, fasting, retreat, writing, meditation, art, walking, music, and so on. We each build our own architecture of abstinence



and engagement and these are all good habits for the journey. But I think we are wise if we travel with others.

For example, in John's version of the calling of the disciples, as soon as Jesus invited Andrew to come with him, Andrew recruited Simon for the cause. Perhaps this makes Andrew a very early evangelist. But I wonder whether he was simply looking for a buddy for the adventure.

Or, in Luke's Gospel, when Mary sat at Jesus' feet to listen to his words, we imagine her wanting to catch a little of his teaching. But I wonder whether she had a deeper desire – to be part of his travelling group so that her eyes, like theirs, might be blessed to see what prophets had longed to see.

In summary, then, travelling with others is good, but as Christian leaders it can be hard to identify peers for the pilgrimage from among those we serve.

In which case, surely, we must accompany each other, minister to minister, vicar to vicar, pastor to pastor, leader to leader. Not only so that we might be disciples together, but so we might disciple one another, side by side.

Finding Companions

The methods by which we accompany each other are hardly rocket science. Let me offer four, with particular focus on the final one.

1. MINISTRY GATHERINGS

For a start, within my own Baptist tradition, many of us accompany each other in 'cluster' meetings for ministers. In each of my two church pastorates, I have established such a group. Other denominations will have their equivalent gatherings. These can and ought to be supportive, prayerful, compassionate spaces for sharing what is enriching or demanding in our ministry. We have to take care that they do not become in any way competitive, pointed, grievance-filled, or dominated by just a few. If you are in such a group, take a close look at how the group welcomes, nurtures and honours each member. It should foster in every person a closer walk with Jesus.

2. STRUCTURED ACCOMPANIMENT

Then there is structured accompaniment in the form of pastoral supervision, spiritual direction, or mentoring. I have experienced all three as different seasons prompted me to seek different people trained to listen, probe, and share their wisdom. As someone who occasionally has to respond to complaints against ministers, I won't tire of saying that structured accompaniment is so important for our well-being and walk with God. It asks questions of our calling, ministry, vision, spirituality and resilience. So, if you have spiritual and pastoral oversight of others and you haven't yourself got a supervisor, director, or mentor, then may I (not so gently say, get one! And if you are responsible for the line management or development budget of others, please do all you can to ensure leaders get both the time and the money to access



accompaniment. Everyone wins when leaders are accountable and reflective.

3. LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Thirdly, some Christian leaders engage in learning communities where there is an intentional, time-bounded, shared exploration of a certain theme, book, ministry vision, or theological idea. My most recent experience was simple enough. I met with a group once a month, online. We discussed a chapter at a time of a book that aimed to capture the theological vision of my own church tradition. The discipline of the necessary preparation proved helpful, and the discussions led to new insights I would never have gained from reading the book alone. Other learning communities might be much more substantial in form, but the common feature is intentional learning from and with each other.

4. SOUL FRIENDS

Finally, I want to highlight a fourth type of shared discipleship. Some call it peer mentoring, others describe it as having a soul friend. I am talking about a fellow ministry colleague or friend – perhaps more than one – who journeys with us over a prolonged season. They sit outside our immediate ministry setting. Their concern is not just to sympathise, though no doubt this is part of what they offer us. With our permission they also provoke, challenge, and question us. They occasionally raise an eyebrow, puncture our balloon, and name our delusions. In other words, they do whatever it takes to help mould us into the disciple Jesus wants us to be. They do so out of a profound knowledge of what makes us tick and a deep concern that we should know fullness of life. As I write, I am on my way to see three colleagues I trained with twenty-five years ago. We have met twice a year across a quarter century, seeking to be attentive to what Jesus is doing in and through each other. It is always encouraging, sometimes enlightening, and sometimes uncomfortable as the Spirit speaks.



Such soul friends are God's gift to us. If you are fortunate enough to walk with one, pause for a moment and maybe send them a message to say how much you appreciate them. If, however, you are wondering how to find a soul friend, my best advice is to realise it won't happen by accident. The grace of God is involved for sure, because we cannot summon up from nowhere people who commit to us in the long term. But for the same reason, it requires us to be intentional, working to sustain important friendships in ministry, even as we or our friends move around the country.

Discipleship Companions

If we are called to nurture the discipleship of others, then an obvious requirement is that we pay attention to our own. And one way is to lean on each other. Baptist ministers would describe this as making real the covenant between us. The covenant language may not resonate with you, but hopefully the principle does. May we find fellow followers with whom we can walk the way of Jesus, companions in discipleship.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS



- Who has permission to ask you about your walk with Jesus?
- How do we take collective responsibility for those who share our calling?
- To whom you could offer your companionship for the journey?