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How to Create a Flexible Discipleship Program

Making disciples isn't like making widgets.

We can't mass produce followers of Jesus like cars on an assembly line—nor should we try. Life is fluid, people are unique, and life's challenges vary from believer to believer.

Maybe your group can't commit to a 30-week study right now. Probably the members don't even need some of these lessons right now, but they'll be more relevant six months or a year from now.

Recognizing these realities, *Rose Guide to Discipleship* is designed to be flexible and adaptable. Here's how to tailor a discipleship plan that fits the needs of your group:

1. Have your group members complete the "Discipleship Snapshot" (also here in the Appendix). On that self-assessment, they'll simply indicate their ten preferred study topics by ranking their top ten choices from ten to one (with ten being the subject they want to explore most) out of the thirty topic choices. Note: The instructions say to rank all thirty topics. Let your participants know you only need their top ten.
2. Have the math whiz in your group add up the group's responses.
3. Decide how many weeks you'd like to meet. (Note: Most small groups have the best experience with studies broken down into four- to eight-week modules).
4. If, say, your group decides it can only meet for six weeks, pick the six topics with the highest overall number of votes.

Guidelines for Disciplers and Group Leaders

How good and gracious of God to let us play a role in the spiritual growth of others! Here are some important truths to keep in mind as you embark on leading a discipleship group:

- ▶ God is the primary agent of transformation in a person's life. You can't rescue or "fix" anyone. See yourself, instead, as a human instrument in God's hands. The Holy Spirit alone knows what is best for each person. Trust him to work his will (not yours) in his own timing.
- ▶ Your job description is to be pure, available, and yielded to God. You are to be a conduit of God's love, grace, and truth. Your role is to ask God to work in your group members' lives—to believe that he sees and knows the deep needs of their hearts, to trust that he is at work, even when you can't see it.
- ▶ Though you can't save anyone or *make* anyone grow in the faith, you can:
 - ◆ Pray
 - ◆ Observe
 - ◆ Come alongside
 - ◆ Engage
 - ◆ Accept
 - ◆ Invite
 - ◆ Ask good questions
 - ◆ Listen
 - ◆ Model
 - ◆ Love
 - ◆ Serve
 - ◆ Share the gospel
 - ◆ Open your heart and life
 - ◆ Pass on your experiences
 - ◆ Invest time
 - ◆ Teach skills
 - ◆ Remind
 - ◆ Encourage
 - ◆ Challenge
 - ◆ Gently confront
 - ◆ Be gracious and merciful

In short, you can do a *lot!*

- ▶ Those who happen to be in your discipleship group are ultimately Christ's followers, not yours. They should imitate you only to the extent you are imitating Jesus. Don't try to create clones of yourself. Everyone's personality is different. Each person approaches faith and life in ways that you might not.
- ▶ The spiritual success or failure of those in your group is not—ultimately—your responsibility. Your responsibility is to be faithful. *God is in charge of outcomes.* Don't take credit for "dynamic" disciples; don't shoulder excessive blame for "followers who falter or fail."

Discipleship Leader MYTHS (and TRUTHS)

MYTH	TRUTH
Has it all “together”—has few weaknesses or failings—and works carefully to hide such flaws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Knows he or she does NOT have it together and never will this side of heaven! ▶ Is real, honest, and open about shortcomings . . . and is trusting God for transformation in those areas over the course of a lifetime. ▶ Has compassion for others too, knowing the Christian life is a marathon, not a sprint.
Must be a Bible scholar —ideally with knowledge of Greek and Hebrew	Must be a Bible student steadily growing in his or her understanding of the Word
Super Shepherd! Has deep, lengthy personal interaction (via email, phone calls, lunch visits, etc.) with everyone in the group, every week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Works to create an environment where group members care for one another—each one using his or her gifts. ▶ Does not want to pressure others about their life decisions but leaves that to God.
Seldom asks for help from others	Insists on help from other believers
Must have a big, fancy home	May or may not have a big, fancy home. If not, it's no big deal! Fancy doesn't matter, and if the home is too small, then other group members can take turns hosting meetings and socials.
<p>“One-man/one-woman show”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dominates discussions ▶ Makes all the decisions ▶ Does everything him- or herself 	<p>Encourages participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Delegates ▶ Decentralizes the ministry ▶ Divvies up responsibilities among group members according to gifts and passions
Has all the answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Realizes he or she does NOT have all the answers ▶ Is both teachable and willing to learn
Entertainer —responsible to make sure everyone is happy and having a good time	Encourager —responsible to challenge group members to continue to grow and serve
The goal of the group is a good weekly meeting with lots of “God-information”	The goal of the group is healthy <i>community</i> that spurs <i>spiritual maturity</i> and leads to <i>outwardly focused ministry</i> .

Minding Your *Ps* and *Qs*: How to Have Great Discipleship Discussions

Pre-Meeting

- ▶ **P**ayerfully **p**icture the **p**ossibilities—What if God used this upcoming meeting as a catalyst to change hearts?
- ▶ **P**erspective—Instead of seeing your discipleship prep as a project, one more “to do” on your long list, view it as a personal imperative. “I need to grapple with this topic or this passage; and then, out of my struggle, facilitate an honest conversation.”
- ▶ **P**repare—Read, examine, ponder; no shooting from the hip or winging it.
- ▶ **P**ersonalize—In two ways:
 1. In the sense of internalizing the truth, living in it, and wrestling with it. It’s one thing to examine a few Bible verses; it’s another thing to let those truths examine you. Speak and share from your life, not just from your lesson plan.
 2. In the sense of adding your unique imprint; can you think of a better question that fits your group better than the one provided? Ask it instead!
- ▶ **P**ress and **p**rod your group to come prepared.

At the Meeting

- ▶ **P**rime the **p**ump—Get ‘em going. Ask fun, warm-up questions, non-threatening icebreaker type questions to get people talking; this is less necessary as groups get to know each other.
- ▶ **P**roven **p**rocess—We’re not just filling thirty to forty minutes with “God-talk.” We’re trying to bring eternal truth to bear on everyday life. When handling Scripture, always move from “what do I see” and “what does it say” to “what does it mean” and “how do I live this out?” Remember that Jesus’ disciples—even after three years with him—were still learning the basics and messing up a lot. If you as a leader show up, lead the group, and love the individuals, that is enough. God will do the rest!
- ▶ **P**articipation—Pull others in. Involve the whole group. Absolutely resist the urge to lecture. Go around the circle and ask people to give a short

update about whatever they want. Limit this to three or five minutes. This allows the quiet reserved people to have a chance to be heard. Don't assume they don't want to talk. Allow people to say "Pass" if they aren't up for sharing.

- ▶ **P**atience—Don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes people need time to think and process before they are willing to share.
- ▶ **P**ush for honesty—On the first question, you should share first and set the pace for authenticity and vulnerability. Thereafter, have others go first and you go last. Disciples aren't created from polite, superficial, religious chit-chat.
- ▶ **P**ull out the "take home" truth. Interesting theological facts and Bible trivia don't really do much for us, but an understood and applied Scriptural truth can change our lives. What's the truth about God, the promise to bank on; the sin to avoid, the godly action or character quality to cultivate, etc.?
- ▶ **P**ress for participants to complete the life application—What does this look like in everyday life? What are we going to do about this? Determine to be doers, not listeners only, of the Word (James 1:22).
- ▶ **P**ray it into your lives.
- ▶ **Q**uestions—Keep them relevant, open-ended. Avoid "yes or no" type questions. Go for "how" and "why" questions.
- ▶ **Q**uiz—At the end of your time or at the beginning of the next time, review. Ask: So what did we learn? How did we do?
- ▶ **Q**uit on time—It's better to stop in the middle of a great discussion, than to drag on until all you hear is crickets. It's also okay to end early.

[Leader's Note: Copy these sheets and hand them out to each member of your group; then read and discuss.]

What to Expect in a Discipleship Group

Something very powerful happens when Christians who are eager to grow in their faith commit to:

- ▶ “Do life together” for a season.
- ▶ Gather regularly to open God’s Word and wrestle with what it means to follow Jesus.
- ▶ Trust the Spirit of God to bring about transformation in and through them.

Here’s a list of five things you can expect if you participate in a discipleship group:

1. **You’ll be surprised.** When we dig deeply and ponder prayerfully, we discover things about God, about walking with Christ, and about ourselves that we never knew. Disciples should be curious and open.
2. **You’ll be transformed.** Jesus promised that those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty would be satisfied (Matthew 5:6). Disciples can expect to know God better and grow in the faith.
3. **You’ll be encouraged.** Nothing is more inspiring than being in a group where the members are experiencing transformation and are being used by Jesus to make an eternal difference in the world. Disciples must be committed and faithful to build each other up in the faith.
4. **You’ll encounter resistance.** The enemy of our souls doesn’t want us growing in the faith. He will pull out all the stops to oppose, distract, and tempt us. Disciples have to be wary and persistent.
5. **You’ll be corrected.** The more we study God’s Word, the more we realize that many of our notions about life and the spiritual life are simply wrong. Disciples need to be humble and teachable.

If you are up for all that, here are five important challenges:

1. **Be committed.** The old saying is true: You get out what you put in. Show up. When you miss a group meeting, others can't benefit from what God is teaching you. But don't just attend. Merely showing up to meetings doesn't lead to growing up in the faith. Study. Ponder. Wrestle. Then come prepared to participate.
2. **Be authentic.** It's always tempting to try to make ourselves look better—more spiritual, more solid, etc.—than we really are. But no one benefits from that kind of dishonesty. You don't need to share your deepest secrets, but be a truth-teller even when the truth is hard or ugly. Often one member's transparency and vulnerability can set the tone for an entire group. Be that person!
3. **Be trustworthy.** Help make the group a safe place. Adapt the "Vegas philosophy": *What's said in the group stays in the group.* Don't blab the secrets of others. There's no quicker way to kill a group.
4. **Be realistic.** Groups aren't heaven on earth. You won't "click" with everyone. Some nights the discussions will drag—or you'll come away with more questions than you had when you showed up. That's okay. Remember discipleship is a lifelong process, not an eight- or thirty-week program. Hang in there. Long journeys take a lot of little steps.
5. **Be prayerful.** Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Without the presence of Christ, your group will be a mere meeting. But if, in a spirit of faith and surrender, you summon and submit to the infinite power of God, who knows what might happen?

[Leader's Note: Copy these sheets and hand them out to each member of your group; then read and discuss.]

Discipleship Snapshot: A Self-Assessment

Jesus began his ministry with the call to “Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). From those who answered this call, Jesus hand-picked a group of *disciples* (Mark 1:17). He invited these students—that’s what “disciple” means—to follow him so that he could teach them, change their lives, and through them, change the world (Matthew 28:18–20)!

The ministry of Jesus shows us that his disciples are those who follow him—to *know* Jesus and his teaching; to *grow* more like Jesus; and to *go* for Jesus, serving others and making new disciples.

This brief self-assessment is meant to give you a general sense of where you should focus first in your journey of discipleship. Simply rank the thirty statements below, from one to thirty (with one being the topic you most want to focus on, and thirty being the issue you feel the least need to wrestle with right now).

Know: Disciples learn. They get a handle on certain basic truths.

- _____ Learning the amazing good news of Jesus (Topic 1)
- _____ Establishing a relationship with God (Topic 2)
- _____ Knowing what it really means to be a new creature in Christ (Topic 3)
- _____ Being sure I am right with God—that I actually have eternal life (Topic 4)
- _____ Following Jesus—the nuts and bolts (Topic 5)
- _____ Knowing the kind of life change that’s possible for disciples (Topic 6)
- _____ Understanding the mission of Jesus (Topic 7)
- _____ Answering common questions about the Bible (Topic 8)
- _____ Learning what God is really like (Topic 9)
- _____ Getting a clearer view of Jesus (Topic 10)
- _____ Hearing what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit (Topic 11)
- _____ Figuring out how church fits in to following Jesus (Topic 12)

Grow: Disciples change. They gradually become like Jesus.

- _____ Dealing with the struggle to love others (Topic 13)
- _____ Experiencing joy and peace in life (Topic 14)
- _____ Strengthening my relationships with others (Topic 15)
- _____ Understanding the rare traits of faithfulness and gentleness (Topic 16)
- _____ Battling temptation (Topic 17)
- _____ Knowing the truth about forgiveness (Topic 18)
- _____ Coping when life is one big struggle (Topic 19)
- _____ Keeping on when you feel like quitting (Topic 20)

Go: Disciples act. They engage in practices that can change the world.

- _____ Clearing up misconceptions about worship (Topic 21)
- _____ Dealing with a noisy, frantic, and jumbled life (Topic 22)
- _____ Digging into the Bible for yourself (Topic 23)
- _____ Building a richer prayer life (Topic 24)
- _____ Figuring out what God wants you to do (Topic 25)
- _____ Understanding fasting (Topic 26)
- _____ Hearing Jesus on money and giving (Topic 27)
- _____ Using your abilities to bless others (Topic 28)
- _____ Having spiritual conversations (Topic 29)
- _____ Making a global difference (Topic 30)

Discipleship Participant Form

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

How did you hear about this discipleship group?

Explain a little about your spiritual journey since childhood:

What do you hope to get out of this group?

Is there anything you want the leader and/or group to know?

Are there any things for which you'd like prayer at this time?

Rose Guide to Discipleship

30 Topics for Spiritual Growth

Ready-to-Teach • Reproducible • Diagrams • Life Applications

You already know that discipleship is important. So, the question is not *should* you disciple, it is *how* to disciple: How can you help others become more Christ-like? What topics do you need to cover to make sure they mature in their spiritual journey? How do you help develop spiritual growth?

You'll enjoy having this **easy-to-understand guide** that includes 30 ready-to-use lessons on 30 discipleship topics: Becoming more like Jesus, salvation, forgiveness, prayer, trusting God, how to study the Bible, and other spiritual-growth topics!

Featuring simple summaries, charts, and illustrations, this **reproducible** guide is perfect for the church leader who wants **ready-to-use lessons** for discipling believers.

Every leader knows it isn't enough to lead a person to Christ, and stop there. You need to assist that person to grow and become more like Christ. ***Rose Guide to Discipleship*** helps you do just that! With its practical life applications and discussion questions, new believers learn what the Bible says and how to apply its truth to their lives.

You can pick and choose topics, or do all 30 lessons—and you can do them in any order.

Perfect for personal or group use.

