

why discipleship bands?

In his final hours, Jesus prayed specifically for us, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

Jesus prayed for the relationships between his followers to be of the very same character of the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Further, he prayed that our relationships would themselves find their home within the relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Finally, note why this matters so much. Our relationships with each other will either lead people closer to God or further away.

Why discipleship bands? Because banded discipleship creates the context for the supernatural love of God to become real in our lives and through our relationships for the world. Discipleship bands all at once create space for inward transformation and outward mission.

The great tragedy of Christian discipleship is that it has come to mean so many things it can mean next to nothing. To be sure, there are complexities to discipleship, but at the core we must have deep clarity. In his final instructions to us, Jesus made it clear:

why discipleship bands?

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (MATT. 28:18-20)

We are to make disciples and teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us.

Let's be clear. We are not talking about a new small-group program, or better accountability groups, or Bible study groups. We do not fail at the mission of God in the world for lack of more information or better content or enhanced skills. We fail for a lack of love. Our foremost challenge is not learning more but loving more.

We like the way our friend Phil Meadows describes discipleship bands:

A band is a form of fellowship that is a means of charismatic encounter with the presence, leading, and power of the Holy Spirit. We come together. Jesus Christ is present as he has promised and he breathes his Spirit powerfully. And we come to help one another fix our eyes on him, in our midst. And we come to help one another open wide our mouths to receive the Spirit he gives. And we come to have holy conversation.

The success of the gospel of Jesus Christ rises and falls on the strength of the relationships among his followers. Jesus' ambition is not to create a bunch of autonomous individual

why discipleship bands?

miracle workers. His mission is to create miraculous communities. This happens very simply through the arduous journey of people learning to love one another in the very same way that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit love one another.

There's nothing new here. It's actually quite ancient. From Jesus' band of disciples to the present day, everywhere the church has flourished some manner of banded discipleship was at the heart of it.

Most of us aren't lazy in our faith. We are stuck. It is not that we lack commitment. We are simply arrested in our development. The way forward is as close as a few other people who are willing to band together.

what is a discipleship band?

A discipleship band is a group of three to five people who read together, pray together, and meet together to become the love of God for one another and the world.

Carefully consider this visionary text of Scripture from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (3:16-19)

First, note this is the Word of God. Second, it is a prayer. Third, it is all about relationships. For these reasons and more, it serves as a foundational text for our work. Discipleship bands provide a context where we can do these three things well. We read together. We pray together. We meet together. And we

what is a discipleship band?

do these things with the all-consuming goal of being “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” This is the way toward becoming the love of God for one another and the world.

WHY SO SMALL?

It’s not that reading and praying and meeting can’t happen in a larger group. The point of a discipleship band is the depth and quality of discipleship possible in a micro-community model. In truth, there are only so many people one can connect with on this level of intentionality. When it comes time to meet together, it is most effective to allot at least twenty minutes for each person (to share and be prayed for). In our experience, five member bands are not advisable; two-hour meetings become difficult to manage.

WHY SAME GENDER?

While sin is common to the human race, at times it takes on different character and qualities when it comes to different genders. Because of the way shame accompanies sin it can give rise to complicated dynamics between women and men. On the one hand, mixed gender groups can hinder vulnerability because of the presence of shame. On the other hand, vulnerable sharing can create inappropriate bonding. A discipleship band must be an ever-growing place of safety, where shame can be shed and truth can be told. Anything that tends to hinder this should be avoided. While mixed gender bands are permissible, in our judgment they are not advisable.

WHY SO SIMPLE?

Small groups satisfy many needs across the span of one's life. Discipleship bands provide a focused context for depth discipleship over a significant span of time. They aren't intended to be mission or service oriented. They aim to prepare people for mission by causing the mission of the gospel to become more deeply realized in one's own life.

Discipleship begins with understanding what God has done for us. It moves to God doing this work in us. Finally, it matures as God does this work through us in the world. Many programmatic models skip over the second phase, moving people from an understanding of what God has done for us to people doing something for God. The big challenge of discipleship centers around the work of God in us.

Because it's easier to measure and report outside activity, and because it is so difficult to measure the transformation of one's deepest self, and because there is so much desperate need all around us, it is tempting to skip the inside work and cut straight to the action part. Lest we establish a false dichotomy, let's be clear—discipleship is both inside and outside. The established tendency has been to skip the former to get to the latter, resulting in a brand of mission work that is helpful but shallow, well-intentioned but self-interested.

WHY SO DIFFICULT?

Most of us are arrested in our discipleship development. We get stuck repeating the same patterns of sin. We have believed

what is a discipleship band?

lies about God and ourselves and they hold us like a prison with bars we can't see. Depth discipleship is hard because human beings have an unfortunate and almost infinite propensity to deceive themselves. The prophet Jeremiah said it best.

The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?

(JER. 17:9 NLT)

Despite our best intentions, the reason we are stuck is we do not have the kinds of relationships it takes to catalyze and sustain the kind of work the Holy Spirit wills to do in our lives. This kind of soul work requires an ever-growing honesty with oneself; the kind of honesty that is next to impossible apart from a few other people alongside. It is why we must band together.

what do discipleship bands do?

1. Bands Read Together

*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our
God will stand forever. (ISA. 40:8 ESV)*

We are a people of One Book. The Word of God is both our constitution and compass. Though a discipleship band is not a Bible study group, one of the ways we band together is through reading a common text. John Wesley once famously wrote this stinging admonition in a letter to a certain Mr. John Premboth.

*Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for
your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler
all your days, and a petty, superficial preacher. Do justice
to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not
starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a
Christian altogether. Then will all children of God rejoice
(not grieve) over you in particular.¹*

¹ Taken from an editorial by J. B. Chapman in *The Preacher's Magazine* (vol. 6, no. 1, January 1, 1931). The note was written to John Premboth on August 17, 1760.

what do discipleship bands do?

There are many ways to go about reading together. What matters is finding a way to get on the same page of Scripture together. Our common text does not function as the center-piece of the band, rather it serves in a circumferential fashion to further band the group together.

2. Bands Pray Together

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. (COL. 4:2)

Our commitment is to watch over one another in love, to be for one another, and to encourage one another and build each other up. Our ongoing prayer life is a fundamental and foundational way we nurture these commitments. Band mates are prayer partners. We pray together in our weekly meeting, but even when we lift one another up throughout the week, we are, in effect, praying together. Over time band mates will know one another in extraordinary ways and will develop the capacity to pray for each other like few others in our lives can.

Every week in the band meeting, each person will have an opportunity to pray for another and to be prayed for. These times of prayer, perhaps more than anything else, will serve to strengthen the bonds of the band in deeply meaningful ways.

3. Bands Meet Together

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

what do discipleship bands do?

not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (HEB. 10:23-25)

A discipleship band has not banded together until it is regularly meeting together. Meeting together is the most critical component of the discipleship band experience. Finding a time when everyone can consistently meet together can be challenging, but in our experience, a consistent time each week works best.

Aim for four meetings a month, but you can settle for a minimum of three. If it slips to two, the meeting time should be reconsidered. This highlights the problem with setting a meeting frequency of less than weekly. Meetings inevitably get cancelled, and when this happens within a bi-weekly or monthly approach it hurts the efficacy of the band.

Meeting together can take on a variety of formats. Face-to-face is obviously the best option, but a video-chat or phone call also works fine. Some bands find themselves all living in different places, making a face-to-face meeting impossible. They meet by conference call or video-chat and work toward an annual in-person retreat together. The point is to do what works and whatever it takes.

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (MATT. 18:19-20)