



The Tree of Life

A Discipleship Process for the Parish of Diamond Creek

Study Guide

What is this Study Guide for?

This guide is designed to introduce Life Groups to the new Discipleship Model (called 'The Tree of Life') which we are implementing in the Parish of Diamond Creek as part of the Strategic Directions in our new Parish Vision.

The studies cover the areas in the discipleship model and process, with questions to prompt discussion and reflection on the nature of discipleship and how group members can get involved in a discipleship growth process.

The guide has been divided into 'sessions' and alphabetised 'sections'. Each session would be suitable to use as a study for a group meeting or a section could be used as part of a group meeting alongside other Bible studies.

SESSION 1

A) Why Discipleship?

We begin by looking at the basic commitments of our Parish.

Our Parish Mission Statement

To Know Christ and Make Him Known

Our Parish Values

The basis of our values is our faith in God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), whom we want to know and experience in all his fullness. This leads all our decisions to flow from these core values:

1. The full revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the Bible.
2. The full experience of God in Christian community.
3. The full mission of God in word and action, locally and globally.

Our Parish Vision

By 2017 we will be actively engaged in the life of our local community and celebrating more people becoming Christians each year.

Strategic Directions

1. Empower church members for mission and ministry.
2. Increase our engagement in the local community.
3. Be more purposeful in our evangelism.
4. Develop a vibrant community of families.
5. Develop a vibrant youth community.
6. Encourage a culture of mutual care.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think our Parish has chosen to express our Mission in this way?
2. What does it mean to you to 'experience God in all his fullness'? What would that be like?
3. How is the Vision related to our Mission?
4. Why is our Strategic Direction 1 (*Empower church members for mission and ministry*) such a key strategy for seeing our Vision actually happen?
5. One of the ways we want to work on Strategic Direction 1 is to develop a process for people to set annual goals for growth in discipleship. Have you ever set any personal goals for your own discipleship growth?

B) What is Discipleship?

The Greek word for disciple used in the New Testament is 'mathetes', which means a learner or pupil. In Jesus's time someone who was a disciple would attach themselves to a teacher and spend time living and learning with them until they had completely absorbed their teacher's knowledge and way of life.

1. How would you describe what it means to be a 'disciple' of Jesus today?

Jesus began his ministry by calling disciples to follow him (Matt 4:18-22). At the conclusion of his earthly ministry he gave his disciples 'The Great Commission', which includes a command to 'make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:16-20).

2. Why was discipleship such an important part of Jesus's method of completing his mission?

For our discipleship model, using our Parish Mission and Values, we might define discipleship as: *following Jesus and learning from him in an intentional and committed way, so that we can know and experience God in all his fullness and make him known to others.*

3. Can you be a Christian without being a disciple of Jesus?
4. Look at Ephesians 2:8-10. What is the relationship between grace and the works that we do as Christian disciples?

SESSION 2

C) The Tree of Life

1. What do you understand by the term 'spiritual growth'?
2. How do you think spiritual growth happens in people's lives?
3. What do people need to learn in order to grow as disciples of Jesus?

Our discipleship model is based on the life of a tree. We have chosen this metaphor because it brings together what we believe are two important features of growth as a disciple – **integrity** and **maturity**.

Integrity means that everything is connected and works together in the way that it should. A tree is only healthy if all its parts are healthy and working together well. A disciple is healthy if they have a balanced integration of all areas of their spiritual life.

Maturity is about natural growth over time. Trees grow slowly, and their strength comes from the gradual growth of new layers and as they adapt to their surroundings. A disciple of Jesus grows over time as well, paying attention to what is going on in their lives, with the goal of being strong and fruitful.

Roots and Branches

We have identified what we believe are the areas of learning (disciplines) that someone needs to grow as a disciple, and divided them into two categories.

'**Roots**' describes the foundational disciplines that we practise so that we can grow in our knowledge and closeness to God. These are the more 'hidden' parts of our spiritual life that give us nourishment. The five Roots in our model are:

- 1) **Prayer** – Prayer involves opening ourselves up to God and asking him into our lives, through actions such as giving thanks, praising, making requests, sharing our thoughts and feelings with God, or spending time in quiet contemplation.
- 2) **Worship** - Worship is an attitude and practice of giving honour to God, and celebrating his presence and actions among us. It happens in our worship services on Sundays, but is also part of everyday life for a disciple of Jesus.
- 3) **Bible Study** - We study the Bible so that we are able to hear what God has to say to us, through those people whom he inspired to compose the writings that make up the Bible.
- 4) **Understanding** - A vibrant faith in Jesus is not just about how we feel, it also involves a growth in our understanding, because we want to know more about God and what he has done for us.
- 5) **Self-Awareness** - This discipline is about our awareness of ourselves as persons, with all the complex background of thoughts, feelings, and stories that

make us the people that we are. What we hope for is a clear and alert awareness of what is going on inside us at any time so that we can bring it to God for healing and strength.

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. Ephesians 3.17-19

'Branches' are outward disciplines, things that we do that manifest the reality of God's Kingdom in our lives. These are the parts of our lives as disciples that people can see. The five Branches in our model are:

- 1) **Vocation** - Our vocation is another word for our 'calling', which is about what we do with our lives, and the gifts and opportunities that God has given us. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit empowers disciples of Jesus to live out their vocation in the world.
- 2) **Ethics** - Our ethics are how we behave according to principles that are important to us. Christian ethics involve living in a way that imitates the values and practices of Jesus.
- 3) **Encouragement** - Not all of us are called to be 'teachers', but all disciples of Jesus have opportunities to share with others what they have learned, and to encourage others in their faith.
- 4) **Evangelism** - 'Evangelism' is telling other people the good news about Jesus, sharing your faith by the words that you say and by the way that you live.
- 5) **Fruitfulness** - In order to live full and productive lives as disciples of Jesus, we need to be healed in our hearts so that what comes out of us is the 'fruit of the Spirit', expressions of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." Mark 4.30-31

4. Are these disciplines sufficient as a description of what we need to learn to grow as disciples of Jesus? What would you add? Are any not necessary?
5. Do you understand what each discipline is about? Which of them are the most meaningful to you?
6. What gives the tree its 'life' and nourishment? What (or who) gives spiritual life to Christian disciples?

SESSION 3

D) Discipleship Growth

1. How can we tell that someone is growing as a disciple of Jesus?

Growth can be hard to see happening, particularly if it is happening slowly. It can also be hard to measure. Christians have often divided our growth as disciples into three general stages – beginners, intermediate and advanced. The apostle John describes the believers he writes to in 1 John as being ‘children’, ‘young men’ or ‘fathers’ (1 Jn 2:12-14).

Using our metaphor of the tree, we have described the three stages of growth as follows:

- 1) **Seedling:** A new or immature Christian who is learning the basics of following Christ.
- 2) **Sapling:** A Christian with some experience in discipleship who is going deeper with learning and personal growth.
- 3) **Tree:** A mature Christian who is strong and fruitful.

1. Can you think of people you know who fit into these different stages of growth? Where might you fit?
2. What stops a tree from growing well? What helps it to grow?
3. What might stop Christians from growing as disciples? Why do we sometimes get stuck in our growth? What helps us to keep growing?

Discipleship Survey

We have designed a survey that members can take to help them figure out where they are ‘at’ with each of the disciplines (Roots and Branches) and therefore start to discern where their opportunities are to grow. This will then help them to set goals for growth each year.

You can find copies of the survey or do it online at www.stjohnsdc.org.au/discipleship.

E) 'Seeds'– Questions of Life

Once we know what stage we are at with various disciplines of the Christian life, we can then think about how to grow in that area.

To help our church members address this, we have come up with a set of targeted questions to prompt a process of learning that will help us grow in each discipline in the way that we need to, according to how mature we are. We call these questions 'Seeds', because they are a small thing to plant into your spiritual life in order to see it grow.

1. Why might a question be a helpful way to prompt us to grow?
2. The 'Seeds' table is provided as an appendix. Have a look at it and see if any questions jump out at you. Which ones are they? And why?

*"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how."
Mark 4:26-27*

SESSION 4

F) Soil – The Place Where We Grow

According to our new Vision and Strategic Directions, the three core structures of our Parish life will be: Worship Services, Life Groups and MATs (Mission Action Teams). In the life of our church at least, these are the 'soil', the place where we plant our seeds and provide nourishment to help them grow.

1. Is attending church on Sunday sufficient to provide enough support for us to grow as disciples?
2. We believe that as we mature as disciples we need to find smaller and more focussed contexts (like small groups and mentoring relationships) to keep growing in an advanced way. Do you agree with this? What type of support do you need to grow at the moment?
3. Pick a 'Seed' question that seems relevant to you and discuss how you might learn to answer it in a Life Group context. What resources would you need?
4. What other contexts outside the Church can we use to learn to grow as disciples?

G) Concluding Discussion

1. Why would you want to engage in a discipleship process like this? What might be the benefits?
2. Read 2 Peter 1:3-11 below. What does the passage say about why it is worth pursuing life as a disciple of Jesus?
3. What could your Life Group do to encourage each other in your growth as disciples?

2 Peter 1:3-11 (NIV)

³ His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

¹⁰ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, ¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Appendix – Seeds Question Table

SEEDS (QUESTIONS)		
GROWTH STAGE	ROOT	BRANCH
	Prayer	Ethics
Seedling	What is prayer?	What are the basic standards of Christian behaviour?
Sapling	How can I pray more deeply?	How should I live as a <u>[insert a role in your life]</u> ?
Tree	How can my whole life be filled with prayer?	What wisdom about living can I share with other Christians?
	Worship	Vocation
Seedling	What is worship, and how do I experience God?	What gifts, talents, and opportunities has God given to me?
Sapling	How can I experience God more deeply?	What should I do with the gifts, talents, and opportunities that God has given me?
Tree	What would it mean to worship God with my whole life?	How can I keep growing in my vocation?
	Bible Study	Encouragement
Seedling	What is the story of the Bible?	What sort of things can I say that will help others grow?
Sapling	How can I learn to understand and apply the Bible to my life?	How can I teach others what I have learnt?
Tree	How can I keep learning new and deeper things from the Bible?	How can I be an encouragement to other Christians at all stages of their growth?
	Understanding	Evangelism
Seedling	What is the Gospel?	What is my testimony?
Sapling	How can I learn more about the meaning of my faith?	How can I share my faith with <u>[insert a particular person or group]</u> ?
Tree	Are there particular areas of theological understanding that I should try to learn about in a deep way?	How can I 'promote the Gospel' in all areas of my life?
	Self-Awareness	Fruitfulness
Seedling	What is my story?	What do I need to get rid of in order to grow?
Sapling	What are my spiritual struggles?	How can I show the fruits of the Spirit in my life?
Tree	How can I persevere in my faith?	How can I keep growing in love for God, others, and myself?