

# How To Create A Discipleship Pathway

[How To Create A Discipleship Pathway - Anthony Hilder](#)

Most churches are busy – they have many programs, events and activities taking place. But when we stop and think about the things we do, we have to ask a key question: **do our activities help people follow Jesus Christ more closely?** I bet the answer, if we're honest, is no. They may well be good things – helpful things, godly things even. But without a discipleship pathway – a process that connects people to opportunities that can effectively develop their spiritual walk – then our churches will just be full of doers who, like Martha, are busy doing 'stuff' yet missing the moment right in front of them. [Jesus is pretty clear in Matthew 28 that the purpose of the church is to make disciples](#). If we aren't doing that, [we aren't doing our job](#).

Assuming that we have going on as churches will grow people is dangerous. Numbers and busyness don't equate to spiritual maturity. We know this is true individually, so is certainly true corporately. **People don't need programs; [they need a discipleship path](#) that is clear to them to follow.** A discipleship pathway will:

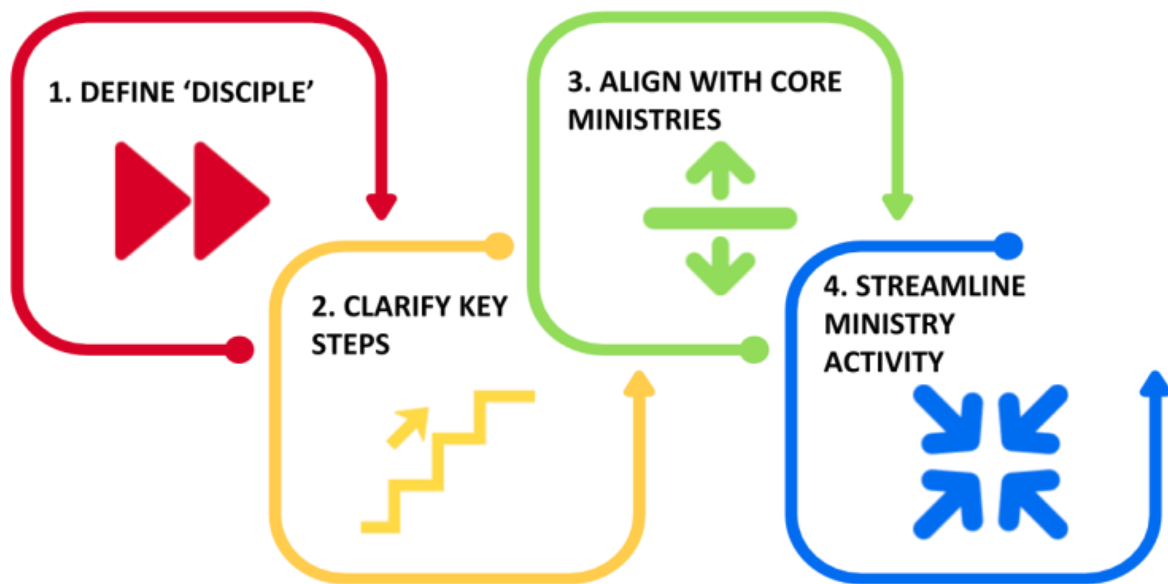
- depict a clear plan for growth
- help you evaluate your disciple-making prowess
- integrate evangelism and discipleship

There will be people in your church who could be attendees or followers but not necessarily disciples. I'm not talking about salvation here, by the way. I'm talking about the people who attend Sunday morning services, but don't join small groups. Or those who attend small groups but don't serve. Or those who do all the courses and classes you offer, but never seem to grow or change. It also, sadly, looks like those who seem to know the scriptures and have passionate opinions about obscure passages but never actually share their faith.

Activities don't cause growth but a pathway that shows what discipleship looks like will. Let's compare two churches: one with a discipleship path, and one without:

Aspect	Without Discipleship Pathway	With Discipleship Pathway
Goal	Number of attendees, volunteers or signups for programs, events or ministries	Number of people on the pathway
Communication	Everything, or as much as time allows – need to tell everyone about everything	Priorities that serve the pathway
Leaders & Volunteers	Structured around ministries, events and programs to keep them running – constantly need a lot of leaders to keep everything running	Strategically deployed on key ministries that serve the pathway
Prioritising	Calendar-driven – if it's on there, it'll happen	Initiatives that serve the pathway take precedence

Anything that prioritises, reinforces or directs people to your discipleship path is **ultimately championing discipleship within your church**. So where do you begin? Here are some steps to help create your own discipleship pathway.



## 1. Define 'disciple'

The word 'disciple' means 'learner'. So it's important to be clear on what spiritual learning is key for believers if they are going to be healthy and mature disciples. If we know what people need to learn, we know what we need to teach! For example, you might decide that a healthy disciple:

- fellowships with other believers
- practices personal spiritual disciplines
- serves others in the church
- impacts the world

If you don't define clearly what a disciple is, then you run the risk of the following:

- Everyone in your church has their own individual definition of spiritual maturity, which could include some interesting things!
- Knowing about God and knowing God can become the same thing
- You have no way of knowing if truths that are heard preached are being absorbed, assimilated and demonstrated

- Celebrating success – [which shapes your culture](#) – becomes trickier if people have different views on what success looks like
- People can feel they are there to serve and grow a program, rather than be part of a program that will serve and grow them

Get clear on what a healthy disciple looks like, so you know what you need to replicate! I'd suggest using your [church core values](#) here. If you aren't clear on those, [get in touch](#) and I'll happily help!

## 2. Clarify the key steps on your discipleship pathway

Think of the pathway for discipleship like a map, showing the steps to take that makes progression obvious and the journey ahead clear. Each step in the process **must be considered essential for everyone in the church** because they lead to deeper spiritual maturity, but also [deeper engagement](#).

It's essential to build your discipleship path for those **who aren't believers but attend your church** (you might be surprised!) and for those **who are new converts**. These people don't speak church, Bible or Christian and won't naturally know to means to serve, connect, or find a small group.

Using our earlier example, we've identified four things for a healthy disciple so our discipleship pathway needs to have at least four steps that help provide opportunities for people to grow in each of the discipleship values we've defined. Our pathway needs to include:

- **connection**, so disciples can fellowship with other believers
- **growth**, so disciples can develop their personal spiritual walk in line with our church's unique [mission](#), [vision](#) and [core values](#).
- **volunteering**, so disciples can connect with serving opportunities in the church
- **deployment**, so disciples can impact the world

### 3. Align your discipleship pathway with your core ministries

Aligning each these steps with a **core ministry** is essential. A core ministry is something that you expect everyone to attend, be part of, or impacted by. A worship service or small group would be a core ministry, whereas a parent and toddlers group wouldn't be. It's not that discipleship can't happen in a parent and toddlers group, but I doubt people who don't have toddlers will be attending.

Using our example, we could say:

- Because we've determined that **connection** is essential, so we develop a strong integration team who excel at hospitality and relationships to make people feel warm and welcomed. This team works with [small group ministries](#) to find a place for new people to fellowship.
- We've determined that **growth** is essential, so we develop a joining class that we run a couple of times a year so disciples can develop their personal spiritual walks. The people that the integration team connected with are encouraged to join this class.
- Our discipleship pathway values [volunteering](#), so after our joining class we'll introduce people to the 'inwards facing ministries' across the church so they can see what is around that suits their passions, gifting and season of life, and make it easy for those ministries to contact anyone who wants to find out more
- We're championing **deployment**, so we'll do something similar with the 'outward-facing ministries' of the church.

### 4. Streamline your ministry activity to make space for your discipleship pathway

If we've got a discipleship path that could work, we need to make sure it is front and center. This means re-evaluating all our existing ministries and asking one key question of each of them:

***Does this ministry help people in one or more of the discipleship steps we've identified?***

If the answer is no, it means the ministry doesn't line up with your discipleship pathway. It means it is using resources – people and finance, for sure – that could and should be used elsewhere. Most churches have too many things running. Why have things running that aren't even contributing to people's discipleship journey? Be ruthless, be intentional and be focused, and stop what needs to stop and change what needs to change. It might be tough, some people might get upset, and it might feel like failing but your church will benefit from it!

This is a big step and is dependent on some key ministry philosophy shifts:

## Moving from *what will people turn up for* to *what do we want people to become?*

Instead of putting on events that we think attract people – Sunday morning worship style and sermon style, anyone? – we change our events so they shape people in a way that lines up with our convictions.

## Moving from *measuring attendance* to *measuring engagement*

The world has changed. Evening meetings aren't going to be full necessarily now, I'm afraid. People's lives are too demanding and hectic. If the only people are going to grow in prayer is through your Sunday evening prayer meeting then I bet you don't see as many people as you'd like! But if you [lean into the positive trends of our culture](#) and embrace technology, why can't you have prayers meetings over Zoom or a prayer list on Facebook? You'll see more engagement that way, which is a better measure of discipleship than attendance is, anyway.

## Moving from *full schedules* to *full lives*

Jesus said we were to go out in the world, but half the time churches have so many events, classes, ministries and activities going on that our people go less into the world, and go more into church! If we are training and discipling people, perhaps we want to give them some kind of margin so they can actually 'go into the world' and impact it! What would you rather see, a twelve-week leadership course every Wednesday that feels slow because everyone attending is tired after long days at work? Or an eleven-week leadership study group who read provided materials and post thoughts online, with one final week being a live meeting where everyone shares what encouraged and challenged them the most? Which one do you think would be more fruitful? Which one would bless your people more?

## Key Questions To Answer

When implementing your discipleship pathway, consider the following:

- Is your first step simple, clear, easy, and not a big ask or challenge? Is it easy for an unchurched person or new believer? You don't want to put people off at the first step!
- Are you promoting and communicating it in clear, accessible and fun/interesting ways? Would the people you are targeting understand the language and style of your communications?
- How would people discover the first step if they didn't read your literature or follow your social media?
- Are the connections between each step in your process robust and streamlined?
- How do you prevent people 'falling through the cracks' after each step?
- What does tracking or measure participation in each step look like?
- How do you follow-up with people who 'drop-out'?
- How will you get feedback from those experiencing each stage of your discipleship path?

## Conclusion

A discipleship pathway creates space for disciples to choose opportunities that will help their growth. There will always be people who don't follow the path, whether intentionally or unintentionally. But if we don't have a pathway or process, we're not doing our part in 'making disciples'. For me, 'making' suggests proactivity and being hands-on. Too many churches fail to make disciples, and instead 'hope for disciples'.

People need to own their own spiritual growth, which is always unique anyway. A discipleship pathway won't formulate a living, dynamic walk with God but it will augment it, especially new converts. It gives a framework and guide for people so they can be clear on what they need to do – whilst also making it possible for churches to support people by meeting those needs.

