

The Discipleship Cycle

formation on the road



Produced by the Mission & Discipleship Committee
of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church

Text © Lawrence Moore & Daleen ten Cate
for further resources contact lawrence.moore@nwsynod.org.uk

Booklet Design: Mike Walsh 2017

a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in

**Walking
the Way**
Living the life of Jesus today

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Dear Lord of Thee three things I pray:
to see Thee more clearly,
love Thee more dearly,
and follow Thee more nearly
day by day.

Prayer of **St Richard of Chichester**

Section ONE:

Following Jesus

The first words we hear directly from Jesus are addressed to the fishermen brothers, Simon and Andrew:

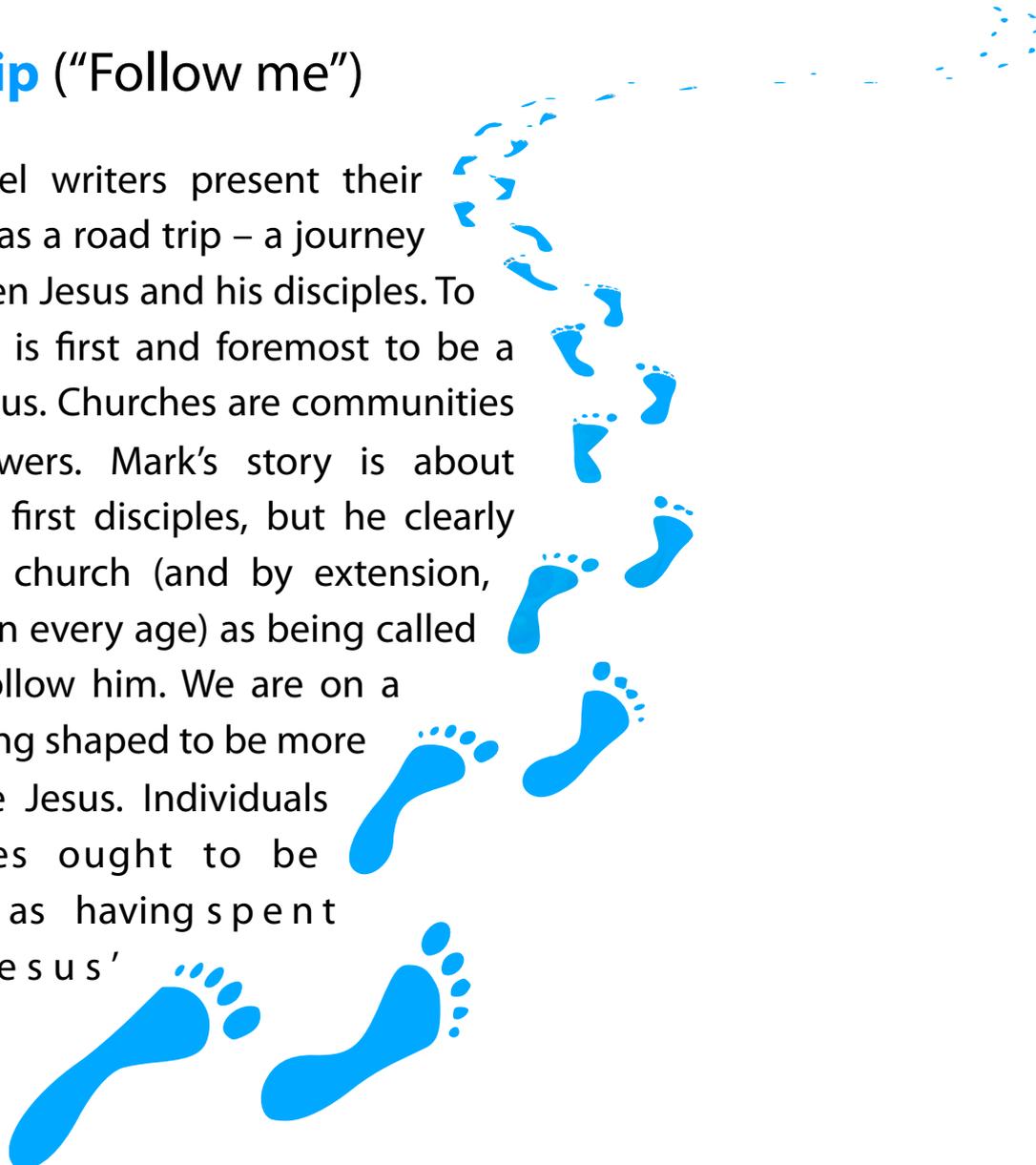
“Follow me,
and I will make you become
fishers of people!”

Mark 1:17

There are three important things to notice here:

1. **Discipleship** (“Follow me”)

All four gospel writers present their story of Jesus as a road trip – a journey shared between Jesus and his disciples. To be a Christian is first and foremost to be a follower of Jesus. Churches are communities of Jesus-followers. Mark’s story is about Jesus and his first disciples, but he clearly sees his own church (and by extension, every church in every age) as being called by Jesus to follow him. We are on a journey of being shaped to be more and more like Jesus. Individuals and churches ought to be recognisable as having spent time in Jesus’ company.



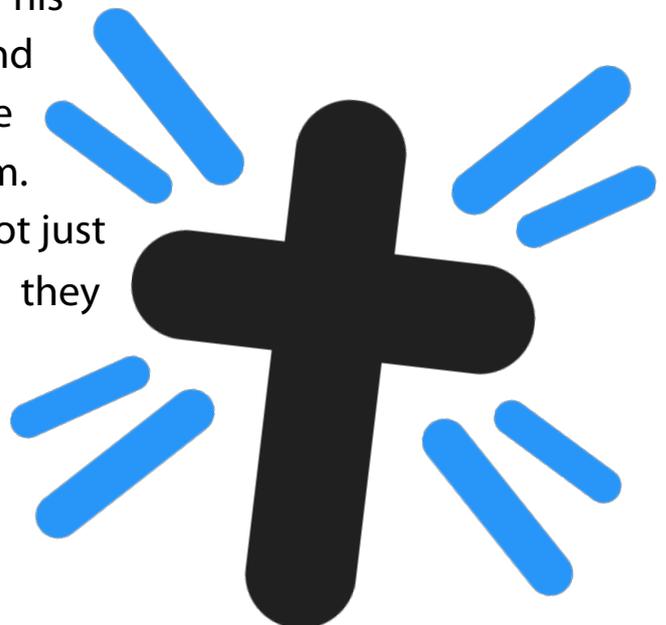
2. **Mission** (“Fishers of people”)



Jesus is in the business of making a difference to people’s lives. He announces the startling news that God is at work to transform the world into the Kingdom of God. “Kingdom of God” is Jesus’ shorthand for “the world as God intends it to be”. That is God’s purpose in sending Jesus. And just as Jesus dedicates himself to proclaiming that news and living it out, he calls us not only to follow, but also to become involved in his mission.

3. **Transformation** (“I will make you become ...”)

Jesus’ mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God is announced as Good News (“gospel” – cf Mark 1:1; 15). But Jesus himself is Good News because of the person he is and the difference that he makes. Not only does he call us to share in his mission; he wants to shape and form us so that we become more and more recognisably like him. Jesus-followers – disciples – are not just meant to proclaim Good News; they are meant to be Good News.

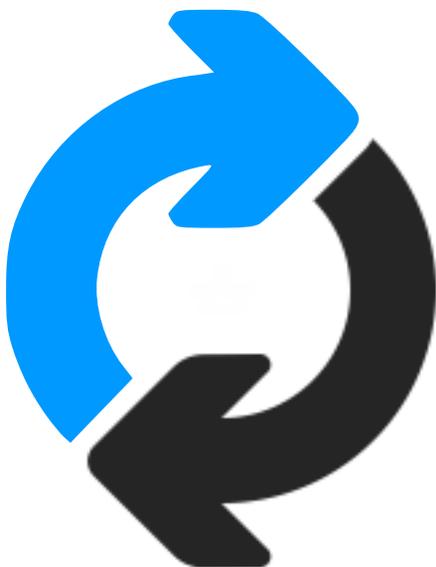


Missional Discipleship

Missional discipleship describes this two-pronged following of Jesus: discipleship (“depth flowing”) of Jesus, and sharing in his mission. It is summed up in Richard Chichester’s prayer to “see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly, day by day”.

It is all about building Jesus-shaped churches, full of Jesus-shaped people, making a Jesus-shaped difference in their communities and in the world. It is a process, not a programme. Setting out on a journey to follow Jesus, allowing ourselves to be shaped by him and taking an active part in his mission is about putting ourselves in the way of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

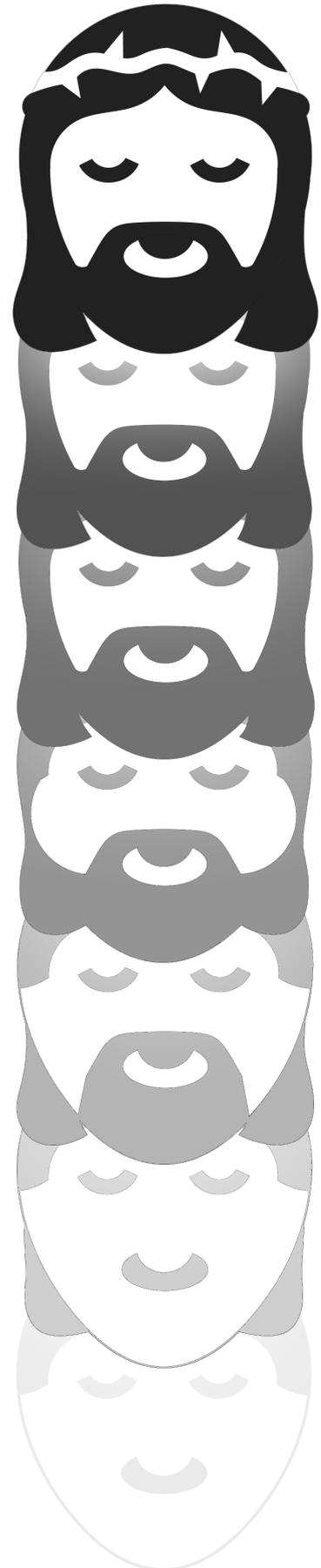
This Spirit-transforming journey with Jesus is not a formula that is guaranteed to achieve particular results, but a process of making a Jesus-shaped difference in our world and being changed to be more like him in the process. That process is best described as the discipleship cycle.



Becoming recognisably like Jesus

Jesus shows us how to live in a world governed by God. We see it in the way he responds to the people and situations he encounters on his missionary journey. This is how he makes the Kingdom of God visible and present. This is why he is experienced as Good News – both in his own person and in his actions. And this is what he wants to teach his disciples as they share his journey. His goal isn't to "impart information"; it is a process of formation – becoming recognisably like him.

That is what we mean when we talk of "transformation". Jesus doesn't intend simply to transform the disciples as individuals: the purpose of transforming them is so that they will transform the situations and people they encounter. This is how Mark and the other gospel writers interpret "being church". The church is most faithfully and authentically the church of Jesus when it is recognisably like Jesus.



Section TWO:

How to use this booklet:



This booklet is not a textbook to give you information: it is an aid to a journey of transformation following Jesus. The Discipleship Cycle is a resource that highlights the significant places of transformation on that journey. You will see that it follows the chronology of Mark's story of Jesus. This is because we need to pay attention to the way in which Mark presents the journey as an unfolding discovery and transformation, by which the disciples as individuals and as a "messianic community" grow in the depth of their commitment to and faithful following of Jesus.

Growing in faith and becoming more and more like Jesus is a process of following: there are no shortcuts and no "instant results". That is encouraging when we look at ourselves and our churches, and are very aware of our shortcomings and failures. It's a reminder that these were never barriers to being called by Jesus, and that the answer lies not in some programme or knack to be discovered: it lies in following Jesus closely on a journey of discipleship and mission.

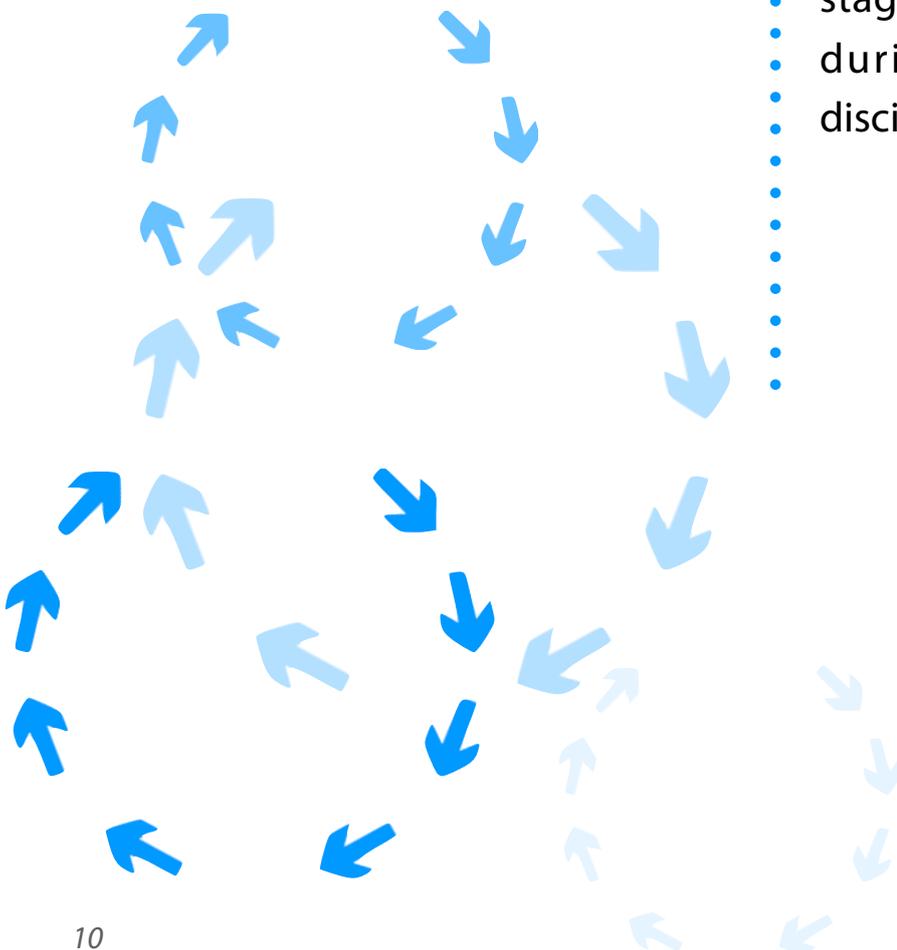
You may be doing it for personal study, or decide to do it as a group (a Bible study series, as elders or house groups). Discipleship is both individual and communal. This is a good journey to undertake with someone else. Find a partner or group with whom to explore.

- 
1. Read Mark's gospel through as a story. This is important to begin to get an idea of what was happening to the disciples as they followed Jesus around. We miss that when we only read the gospel piecemeal, as we usually do for preaching or Bible study.
 2. Read the booklet through. Get a picture of the whole journey. Note down anything that you find significant: anything new; surprising; shocking; challenging; delightful; helpful; unhelpful.
 3. Now go back and spend time with each section. You might want to do it over a number of days, or weeks, or even months. Take whatever time you need to explore these in depth. Look at each passage in the gospel.
 4. Ask yourself searching questions, and answer as honestly as you are able:
 - a. How clearly do I hear Jesus' call to follow on this section of the road trip?
 - b. What in me instinctively and joyfully says, "Yes!"?
 - c. What in me instinctively wants to draw back and say, "I'm not ready yet!"?
 - d. What in me instinctively wants to say, "This is not for me – it's a step too far!"?
 5. Share your thoughts with your companion(s). Talk together about all that you've discovered. Focus on where the journey is leading you, and any sticking points. Pray together. Make concrete commitments about steps you will each take until you meet next. Find ways of sharing your journey with your church.

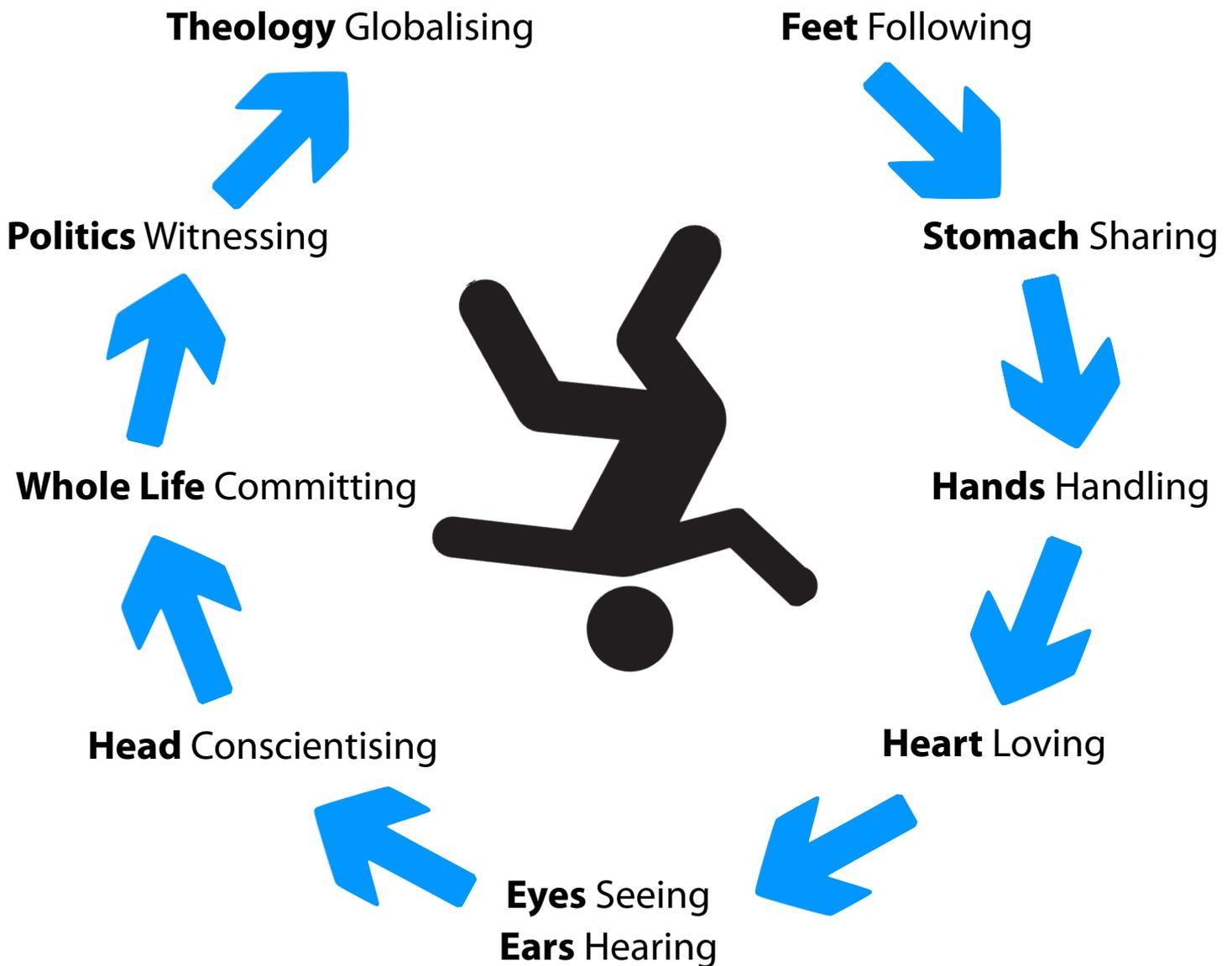
Section THREE:

Transformation through the Discipleship Cycle

- The theological practice of
- the discipleship cycle is
- based upon the imitation
- of the practice of Jesus.
- Jesus does not initially ask
- people to believe in him
- with their heads or love
- him with their hearts: he
- asked them to follow him
- with their feet and share a
- common life. This is best
- expressed through the
- 'upside down' image to
- illustrate the different
- stages of transformation
- during the journey of
- discipleship.



The Discipleship Cycle



Vincent, John J. (2013). Christ in the City (The Dynamics of Christ in Urban Theological Practice, Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit) (Vincent, 2013,60-62).



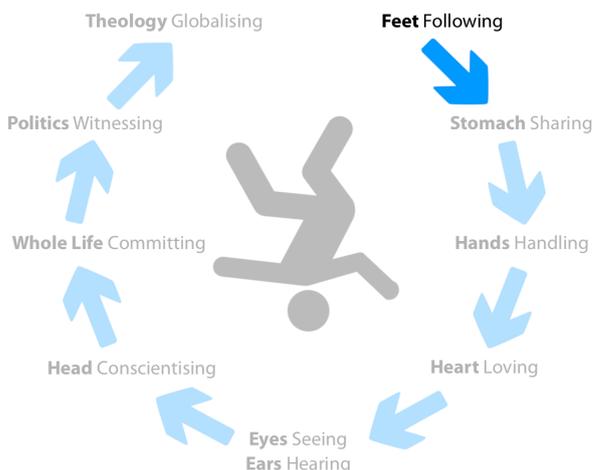
Feet

Transformation through following

Mark 1: 13-17: is about *Walking the Way* with our feet.

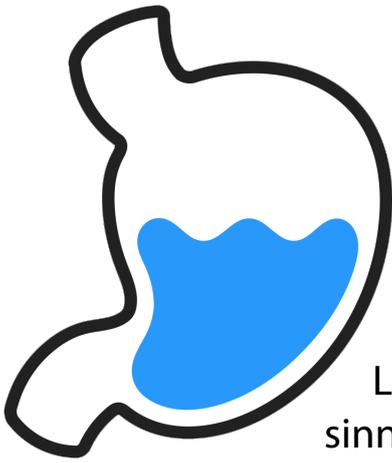
- To be a Christian is to be a
- follower of Jesus; to be the
- church is to be a community of
- disciples of Jesus. It's an
- invitation to join Jesus on the
- journey he is making. Jesus has
- a purpose – a mission. He calls it,
- “the Kingdom of God”. He has
- places to go and people to see.
- This isn't about starting a new
- religion: it's about changing the
- world. Jesus has just announced
- that God is transforming the
- world into all that God intended it
- to be from creation: the Kingdom
- of God, not the Roman Empire; a
- place of life and flourishing, not
- death and despair (Mark 1:15).
- As people are about to find out,
- Jesus makes a real difference. He
- doesn't just announce Good
- News, but does Good News and
- is Good News!

His call to follow is to be part of that story.



Note that Jesus says, **“Follow me”**, rather than, “Sit down, get out your notebooks and pens, and take careful notes”. What Jesus wants them to learn can’t be taught in a classroom or church building. It has to be experienced. He doesn’t just want them to learn things; he needs them to unlearn a whole way of thinking, living and acting, and discover a new way – the new world of the Kingdom of God. This is about transformation, rather than education. He’s not inviting them to a seminar, but asking them to join him on a road trip.

“Disciple” comes from the Latin *disco*, meaning, “learn”. It’s a much more powerful word than “pupil”, where the stress is on “acquiring knowledge”. A disciple is shaped by the master: the aim is to share the master’s life; become like the master; live like the master; share in the master’s mission and fate. Sharing in the master’s fate will become the crunch point when the disciples realise that Jesus is taking them on a journey, *Walking the Way* to the Cross.

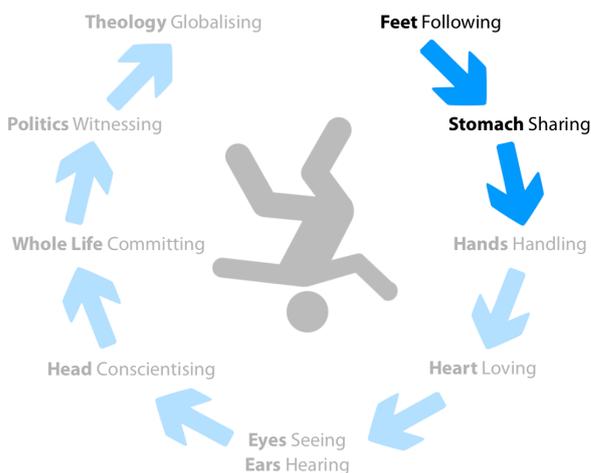


Stomach

Transformation through sharing

Mark 2.13-17: Jesus calls and shares a meal with Levi, a tax collector and many other “tax collectors and sinners”. This scandalised his hearers: tax collectors were Jewish sell-outs who made a living collecting Roman taxes from their fellow Jews in order to fund the military occupation.

- On this road trip, Jesus teaches us
- generosity, compassion and care as
- new norms for living. Engaging with
- others transforms us, as well as the
- lives of the people we encounter on
- the road. That is seen most clearly
- when he is at the meal table.
-
- A shared journey and shared meals:
- we are “companions on the road”.
- “Companion” literally means,
- **“bread-sharer”**. The sharing of
- food is a constant reminder to us of
- Jesus sharing the bread and wine
- during the Last Supper. It nourishes
- us as we travelling alongside him
- from the upper room to the great
- feasts in God’s New World; from the
- horror and despair of Calvary to the
- resurrection triumph of Easter day;
- and on to the final victory over
- death itself.



At every celebration of the Jesus-meal, God's past saving actions in Jesus become present realities again, and God's future for creation in Jesus summons us to fresh following. This is how Communion nourishes us: it gives us strength to go on every week; to pray; to live differently; to discover this God in every surprising and shocking place and person; to rejuvenate us; to empower us to live and work to God's praise and glory. The church's mission is an essential part of the context and drama of the Jesus-meal. Communion reminds us that the Last Word belongs to God and is a word of Resurrection and Life.

At the same time, it challenges us. The Easter Jesus reminds us that proclaiming and living by the standards of the Kingdom means that the Roman authorities killed him. It is a reminder of the cost of discipleship: the journey of *Walking the Way* of the Cross may well lead to suffering and death. Communion is our own Caesarea Philippi, where we hear Jesus' stark reminder: "If anyone wants to be my disciple, they have to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it!" (Mark 8: 34-5)



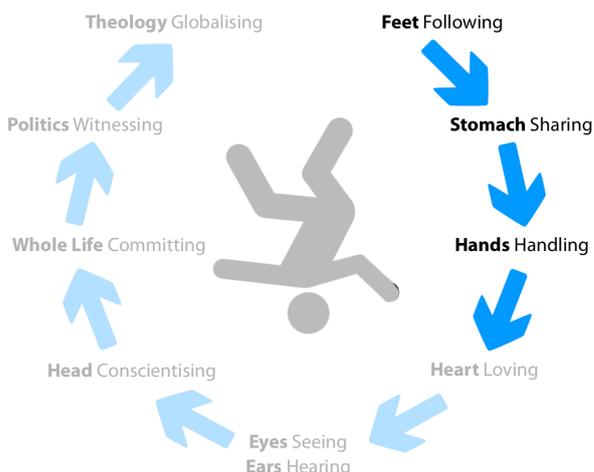
Hands

Transformation through handling

Mark 6. 7-13: Jesus invites us to share in the action when he sends the disciples out to participate in his mission.

- His own focus is the marginalised
- and dispossessed (Mark 2:17). He
- identifies with these people. He
- celebrates his messianic banquet
- with the excluded people (Luke 4:
- 7-25). His gospel is especially Good
- News for the people who have
- nothing to hope for from the social
- and religious system of their day.
- Shockingly, he declares that these
- people are particularly blessed by
- God – not excluded and rejected
- (see, for example, the blessings and
- woes in Luke 6: 20-23).

- Jesus pulled down the walls of
- exclusion that were rigidly
- maintained by the Purity System –
- the way the Law was interpreted by
- the priests, scribes and Pharisees.
- According to the purity code, eating
- with Gentiles and sharing their
- unclean food contaminated Jesus
- and his disciples. Touching unclean
- people and spending time in
- unclean places particularly
- contaminated Jesus.



He also ran roughshod over the strict “honour culture”, which established a person’s “rightful place” in the social hierarchy.

He was prepared to be touched by a bleeding woman (Mark 5: 25-35), to touch lepers and a corpse (Mark 5: 35-43), and treat the Syro-phoenician woman as someone of equal value as a Jew (Mark 7: 24-30).

Honour codes and purity systems are alive and flourishing in our churches today. Churches reproduce our society’s social values uncritically, making it almost impossible for people “not like us” to feel genuinely welcomed. So many of our responses to people and situations are based on the fear of contamination (think, for example, of the sexuality debate). Yet Jesus literally gets his hands dirty, and challenges the status quo in doing so.

He calls on his disciples and the communities that claim his name to do the same.



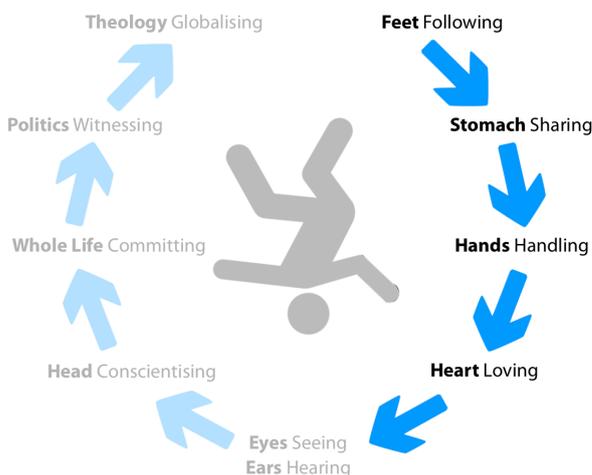
Heart

Transformation through loving

Mark: 6: 30-44: Five loaves, two fishes and a **compassion**-filled heart.

- Jesus was clear that the heart of the Law was the dual commandment to love God and neighbour. He shared this conviction with his theological opponents, the Pharisees. For Jesus, though, love is **compassion**-driven. Compassion is based on grace: it responds to people according to their need, not to what they deserve.

- The key moment in the story of the feeding of the five thousand is when Jesus looks at the great crowd and “has **compassion** on them” (Mark 6: 34). They are lost and bewildered - “like sheep without a shepherd”. They need Good News and they need feeding – and Jesus responds with both.



Compassion literally means, “suffering with”. The Greek word is far stronger: it means, “to be twisted up in the guts with empathetic suffering”. **Compassion** won’t rest until the suffering of the other person is alleviated.

This is love. It is not a “fluffy feeling”, but a driving force that is determined to change the circumstances, regardless of the cost to the **compassion**-driven person. It is transformative: it transforms the person you love but also you yourself. There is precious little room for **compassion** in purity systems and honour codes. Jesus offended the religious leaders of his day by proclaiming that **compassion** mirrors God’s own heart, and acted it out in all his dealings with people.

Compassion-driven love transforms how we respond to the world. It is integrally connected with how we treat the planet, immigrants, the marginalised, politics, money etc. On the road trip, Jesus teaches that God’s love is extravagant and wasteful because it is driven by **compassion**.

As his followers, we need to learn to love in the same way.



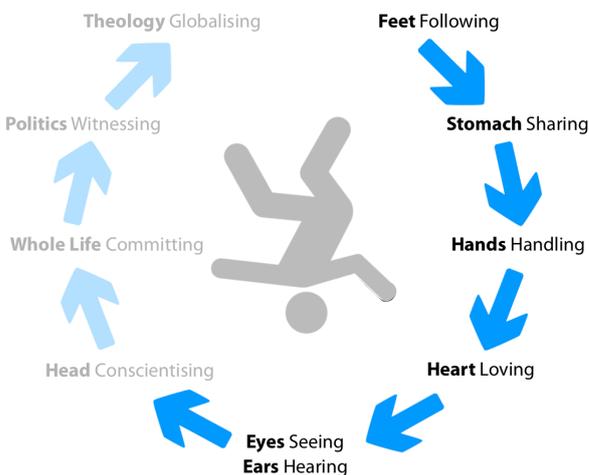
Eyes and Ears

Transformation through seeing and hearing

Mark 8:18: "Are your eyes blind and your ears deaf?" Compassion transforms the ways in which we see and hear the world.

It is a conversion experience: when our hearts are converted to love, our eyes and ears are "converted", too. We begin to see "the other" through Jesus' eyes as a fellow human being, a creation of God who has infinite value. They become valuable to us. We begin to listen out for their pain and need, rather than hearing them as an inconvenient call upon our time and resources.

On this road trip we meet the God that sees and hears. God is vigilant - listening out for the groans and cries of pain and seeing suffering.



This is the Exodus God, whose salvation (liberation from slavery) happens because of this divine attentiveness to the situation of a group of unimportant slaves in the brick pits of Pharaoh:

“The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them”

(Exodus 2: 23-25).

Jesus mirrors this same concern for the invisible people in the Beatitudes:

“Blessed are the poor ...
Blessed are the hungry ...
Blessed are those who weep ...
Blessed those who are reviled
Blessed are those who hunger
and thirst for righteousness ...”

(Luke 6: 20-22/Matthew 5: 3-12).

As followers of Jesus we are converted to see and hear the world through Gods eyes and ears.



Head

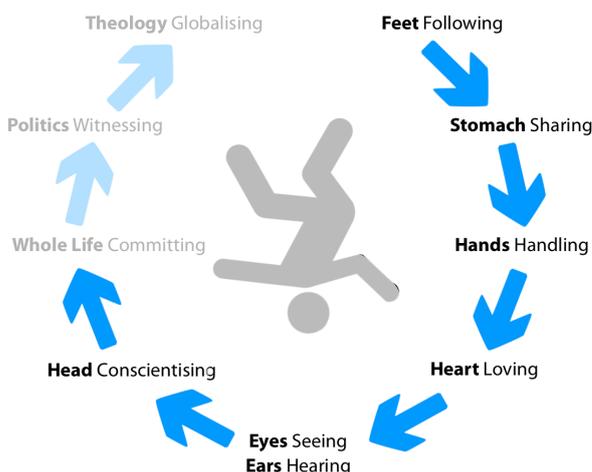
Transformation through conscientising

Mark 8: 29/9:7: "You are the Messiah!"/ "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

- Seeing and hearing the world
- through God's eyes and ears by
- giving priority to the pain and
- suffering of "the least" begins to
- uncover the underlying systems of
- power, wealth and greed that make
- the world go round in ways that
- always seem to favour the "haves" at
- the expense of the "have nots".

As Desmond Tutu says:

"It is not enough to keep rescuing drowning people; at some point we have to go upriver to discover who it is who is throwing them in!"



Transformation happens when we begin to see and understand the ways in which systems and suffering are connected. Jesus is the Messiah – God’s Liberator. When the heart touches the head in this way, we begin to understand that God’s salvation is not only about forgiveness of sin, but also about liberation from those who sin against us. Then we begin to see possibilities and opportunities to enable Jesus’ Kingdom on earth, not only in the hearts of people.

Jesus comes not only to alleviate the suffering of the very least (the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the demon-possessed and the law-breakers); he comes to call time on the political, economic and religious systems that ensure that they are always the people who pay for the power, privilege and lifestyle of the “haves”.



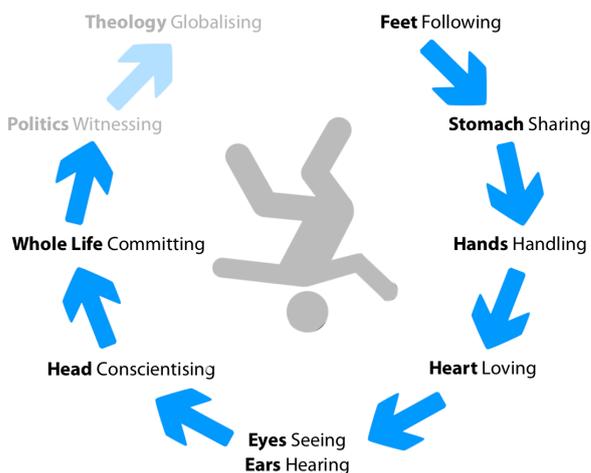
Committing

Transformation through
giving your whole life

Mark 8: 34-37: "If you give up your life for me and the gospel, you will save it".

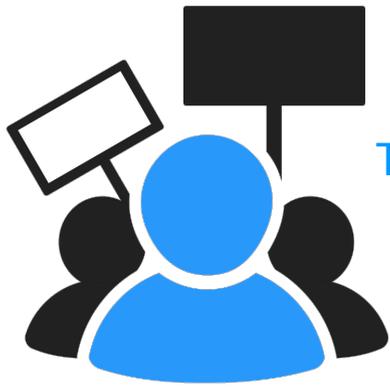
- The more deeply we come to
- understand Jesus and his mission,
- the more we realise that we can't
- have our cake and eat it: we can't
- have the new world of the Kingdom
- and hang on to the bits of the old
- world that we like.

- The Kingdom of God is the world
- turned upside down for the benefit
- of the very least first. **This means**
- **that following Jesus and**
- **being church is about a life**
- **lived on behalf of others, not**
- **for ourselves.** That is cross-
- shaped living. And Jesus, looking
- this full in the face, warns his
- disciples that there is no way
- around it. Dying to the old life is the
- only way of finding the New Life of
- the New World of the Kingdom of
- God.



Note where this incident comes in the Jesus story (and in the Discipleship Cycle). This call to whole-life commitment is the second time that Jesus calls his disciples. It is half way through the story – after they have answered his call to follow him and share in his mission. They have been on the road with Jesus a long time. It is only now that Jesus considers them ready to recognise the full extent to what they have signed up for. So much of our evangelism puts this call to whole-hearted commitment at the start of following Jesus; Jesus himself only places it a long way into the journey, because it is only at this point that the disciples are ready and able to hear it.

This is why we talk about the Discipleship Cycle: the gospels present the long journey of transformation that the original disciples undergo on their road trip with Jesus. And they do so because this is the process by which the church becomes the sort of community that Jesus intends. It is a long process of living with Jesus – not a short seminar at which we're expected to take copious notes! It is through this process of formation – of deepening commitment to a life lived on behalf of others at our own expense – that the church gradually becomes a visible sign of the Good News of Jesus.



Witnessing

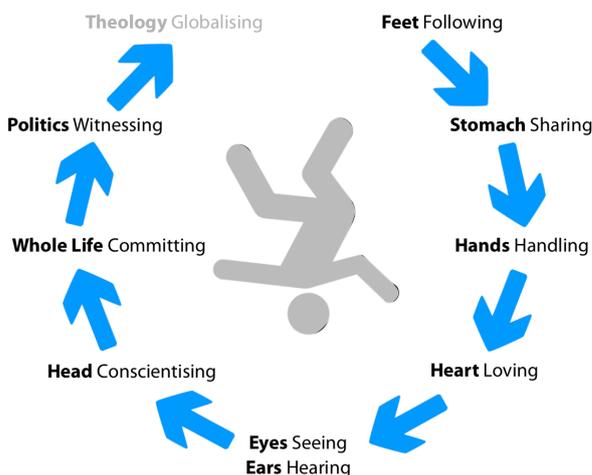
Transformation through politics

Mark 9: 30-32: Confronting the powers.

- This is the first of Jesus’ passion predictions: this road trip is not going to end well! Jesus’ mission ends in Jerusalem on a Roman cross – a public execution reserved for the political opponents of the Roman Empire. He is crucified as the victim of an unholy alliance between the Roman occupation and the religious powers, centred on the Jerusalem Temple.

- The message that God is transforming the world into the Kingdom of God is Good News to the “little people”, but it is Bad News to those whose power comes from their place in the political, economic and religious systems. For them, Jesus and his gospel is a threat that needs to be eliminated at all costs.

- Politics is about the way in which we order our society and distribute power. Jesus engaged directly with the politics of his day by creating an alternative community (the disciples) that literally “lived in a different world” – a world governed by God.



This is a world away from the idea that Jesus' mission was to "prepare us for heaven". To pray for the coming of God's Kingdom – doing God's will on earth – means engaging in changing the world. It is intensely political. Jesus called his followers to an alternative personal existence and also an alternative community. The church is called to be the living alternative to a world structured to favour the powerful at the expense of the powerless. This is what it means to be counter-cultural.

What does Jesus-shaped politics look like? There are two key characteristics: making the flourishing of the very least the priority and acid test for policy-making, and "critical solidarity" with parties and groups that champion their cause. In Apartheid South Africa, Desmond Tutu was a passionate advocate of the ANC, because they fought for a South Africa that benefitted Apartheid's victims. But he disagreed with them fundamentally over the Armed Struggle - the use of violence, He challenged them publicly over this, but "from the inside", as someone already standing firmly with them. This is "critical solidarity": it recognises that no one party or system can deliver the Kingdom, but that some will make more of a Jesus-shaped difference than others.

Churches transformed by following Jesus bear powerful witness to the New World of the Kingdom -

**not by opting out of politics,
but by doing it differently.**



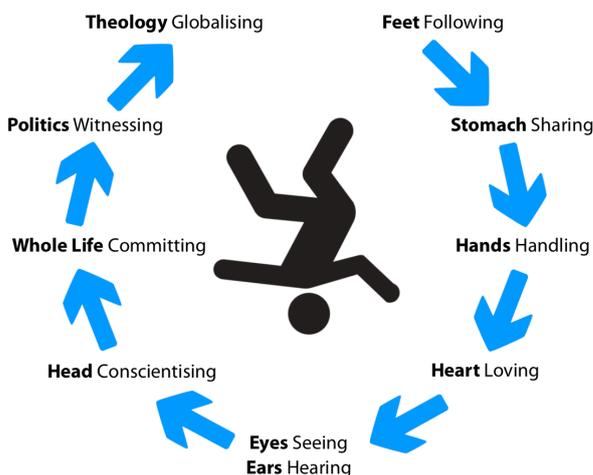
Globalising

Transformation through theology

Mark 10-28-31: Life in the new world. When Jesus promises “Life in the world to come”, he isn’t talking about heaven, but about a world transformed into all God intended it to be at creation. **This is heaven: heaven come down to earth!**

- We often preach as though God’s
- concern was to rescue some of
- humanity for life after death (and
- argue about the numbers).
- Typically, different strands of the
- church through history have seen
- themselves as “the true church” –
- the people whom God will
- obviously save. This is rather like the
- Israel of Jesus’ day, that assumed
- God’s chief and only concern was
- with the career of the Chosen
- People. What we need to learn on
- this road trip with Jesus is that
- God’s concern is nothing less than
- global – cosmological, even.

- Having our horizons constantly
- expanded: this is part of the
- transformation on the journey of
- following Jesus. The early church
- had to discover to its shock that the
- Good News of God’s salvation in
- Jesus extended to the Gentiles: it
- needed to spread from “Jerusalem,
- Judea, Samaria and the uttermost
- parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8).



We live in a global village. We operate in a global economy, make global alliances and face global problems – not least, climate change and the very real threat of global extinction. We cannot opt out of global issues because of the scale of the issues involved: the church also has a global God and a global gospel.

What this means concretely is that anything we say about God’s saving actions in the world is only credible to the extent that it is able to address any problem in any part of the world on any scale. If not, then God becomes simply some sort of tribal deity – in this case, the tribal god of the Christians - not the Lord of all creation.

Christians ought to be news addicts. Churches ought to be places where the needs and issues of the day feature prominently in the preaching, praying and evangelism. This is not an issue about “trying to be relevant”: it happens naturally as our understanding of God (our theology) is expanded and transformed to recognise God as the creator, redeemer and Lord of all that is. This God and the message of the Kingdom is Good News for a world in serious trouble on a global scale.

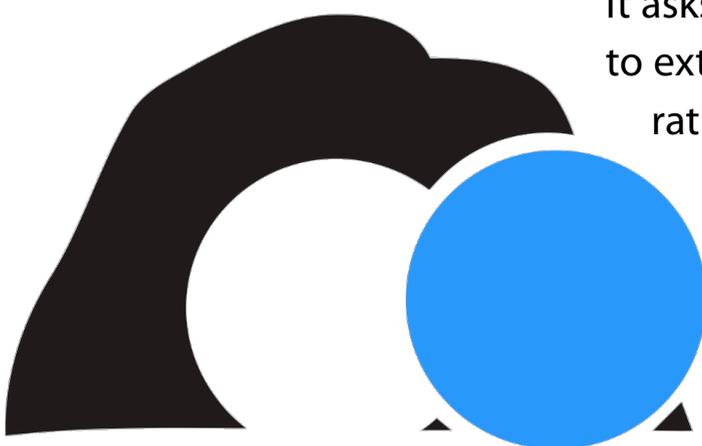
Section FOUR:

Transformation vs Survivalism

Discipleship is about learning to live an Easter-shaped life: Jesus' own Easter pattern of dying and rising that he calls us to learn and follow. It isn't easy, to be transformed by the gospel, to make a difference for Christ's sake, yet it is the only way to discover the life God has for us in Jesus.

The church will not be renewed to look like Jesus until it recognises that it is addicted to survival. Survivalism is the greatest temptation for a church under pressure, and is the direct opposite of the process of *Walking the Way* of the Cross. It is driven by anxiety and prioritises self-preservation. The salvation of Easter would not have been possible, had Jesus prioritised his own survival. A church in survival mode makes decisions based on prolonging its life. It asks, "How can we use our resources to extend our life as long as possible?"

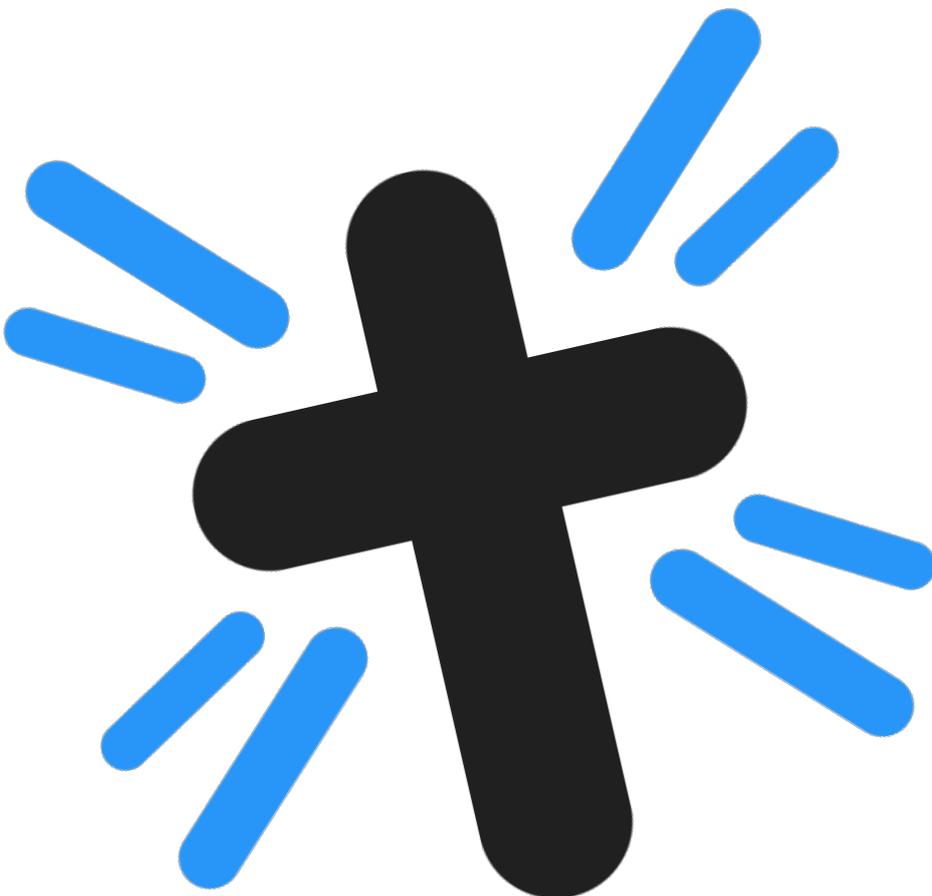
rather than, "How can we use our resources most effectively to make a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of our people and communities?"



Section FIVE:

Transformed people, transformed churches

Churches that are *Walking the Way* of the Cross are liberated to focus on making the world more like the Kingdom of God, because they are prepared to sacrifice themselves if necessary in order to do so. They are freed up to take risks for the gospel and make costly decisions in order to make a Jesus-shaped difference. These sorts of churches and disciples emerge only after a long journey of close following and sharing in Jesus' mission. It is a transformative journey. And the churches and people that emerge are part of the Good News they proclaim. They are church as Jesus intended - because they are recognisably like Jesus.



Space:
for your thoughts and reflections



The Discipleship Cycle: *formation on the road, is a marvellous tool for individuals and groups wanting to get moving on **Walking the Way** of discipleship.*

It joins a growing number of books to service this new emphasis in the United Reformed Church, Anglican, and Methodist Churches.

Anyone can use it. Just get a few friends together among your neighbours and we'll really start changing the world - from the bottom.

John. J. Vincent
Ashram Community
Author, *Christ in the City*



Discipleship

