

**discipleship
bands**
a practical
field guide

by mark benjamin and j. d. walt



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discipleship bands

quickstart guide

WHAT IS A 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.

STARTING A BAND

We've created a Discipleship Bands app specifically to help you start a band and provide a private place for you to communicate and share together.

1

Visit discipleshipbands.com/app and download the Discipleship Bands app. You can also find it by searching "Discipleship Bands" in your smartphone's app store.

2

Create your account in the app. When finished, click on the Bands tab to create a Band and easily invite others to join you.

3

Decide on a shared reading your band will go through together, and pick a regular meeting time each week when your band can meet in person or on the phone.

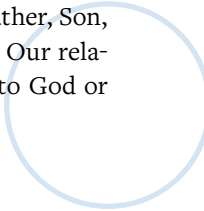


why discipleship bands?

In a post-Christian world, the content of the gospel will have little impact on unbelievers if people do not see it actualized in the relationships among its believers.

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 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:

“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. What did he command? Jesus did us a great service in responding to the question about the greatest commandment.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matt. 22:37–40)

On the eve of his crucifixion, after washing his disciples feet, Jesus brought the entirety of his commandments down to one command.

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:12–13)

The supernatural, holy love of God is not a soft and fuzzy thing as some have thought. It is the hardest and most glorious thing we

will ever do. It requires clear intention, keen attention, and focused practice over a long period of time. Most of all, it takes a particular kind of relational framework to flourish. Why love? Because it's the bottom line of discipleship. We have come to believe the love of God is the power of God. This kind of love cannot be learned in the crowd. It can best be learned through banded discipleship.

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. We do not have a content problem. We have a connection problem. 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. On one occasion Jesus made a shocking prediction concerning his disciples: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). As noted, and worthy of repetition, he would tell them the secret of this power in the next chapter: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one

than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13). Jesus' ambition is not to create a bunch of autonomous individual 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.

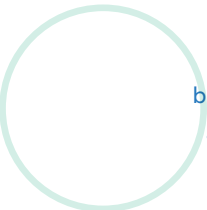
We will see the greater things of the gospel in the world as the greater love of the gospel finds its way into our relationships. This is what banding together is all about. The first half of the gospel is about believing in the love of God for the world. The second half of the gospel is about becoming the love of God in and for the world. We stand on this conviction: the world will awaken to the first half of the gospel as the people of God awaken to the second half of the gospel. In a post-Christian world, the content of the gospel will have little impact on unbelievers if people do not see it actualized in the relationships among its believers.

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.



how do people grow?



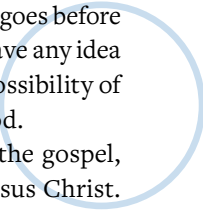
Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

The gospel doesn't just save us; it changes us. The gospel of Jesus Christ happens in four epic movements of grace. The first half of the gospel is the movement from prevenient grace to justifying grace. The second half of the gospel is the movement from sanctifying grace to glorifying grace.

Prevenient grace, as indicated by "pre," is the grace that goes before salvation. The gospel begins in our lives long before we have any idea of it. The Holy Spirit frees our wills, opening us to the possibility of not only perceiving, but participating in the grace of God.

Justifying grace, the completion of the first half of the gospel, happens when a person first comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ. It begins when a person comes to the realization that their sin keeps them from a relationship with God and nothing they can do will ever overcome this separation. Salvation progresses as one begins to comprehend the reality of grace, which is the unconditional love



of God that cleanses us from our sin and brings us into a living relationship with him. Salvation is sealed by the Holy Spirit as a person confesses their sin and receives the grace of God through the forgiveness of Jesus Christ offered through the cross and enters into a right relationship with God.

Unfortunately, for far too many, this is where salvation ends. The gospel, however, is only getting started. There is a vast expanse of grace beyond the gift of justification. We call it sanctification—the second half of the gospel. Sanctification is the ongoing process of being remade in the image of God. In short, it's participating with the working of the Holy Spirit to make us the kind of person Jesus would be if he were us. As justification is the gift of God by grace through faith, so is sanctification the gift of God by grace through faith. Though we have much work to do, it is not our work that saves us but God's grace. Glorifying grace, which completes the second half of the gospel, is the gift of God at our death, marking our passage into the fullness of eternal life.

While we are justified alone before God, we will only be sanctified together. Christian maturity is not a solo journey, but a community process. This is the reason for so much arrested development in our faith—we think we can go it alone. We cannot. That's where this guide comes into play. Small groups are helpful and provide a great context for fellowship and study, but they lack the capacity to lead us into the fullness of the life God has for us. We need something smaller with the capacity for more depth and growth. For discipleship to reach its full potential, we need something deeper than small groups, something richer than an accountability group, and something beyond another study group. We need a band, which 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. We must band together with a few other people to help one another to persist in the journey of the second half of the gospel.

The first half of the gospel is about believing in the love of God for the world. The second half of the gospel is about becoming the love of God in and for the world. The world will awaken to the first half of the gospel as the church awakens to the second half of the gospel.

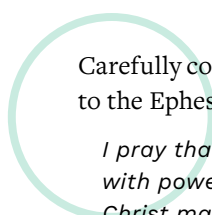
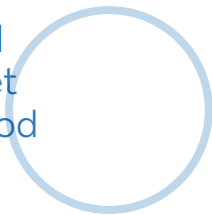
Change is long. Change is hard. Change is slow. And change is glorious. If we want to pursue the fullness of life as a new creation, we must meet one another at a new level. Go this way with us. It will not be the easiest thing you will ever do, but it will be the most powerful and one of the graces for which you will be most grateful.

This booklet is designed to guide you in practical ways to commence and pursue this pathway of banded discipleship.



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. (Eph. 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 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.

- We want to be strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit in our inner being.
- We want Christ to dwell in our hearts through faith.
- We want to be rooted and established in love.
- We want to have power together to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.
- We want to know this love in a way that surpasses knowledge.
- We want to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Do you want these things too? If so, we invite you to start a discipleship band.

A discipleship band is not traditional small group. It is not another Bible study group. It is not a classic accountability group. It is not a community service group. 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.

why so small?

It's not that reading and praying and meeting can't happen in a larger group. They can and do. 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

permissible but not advisable; two-hour meetings become difficult to manage.

why same gender?

Can we be honest? This is not the fifth-grade version of girls in one group and boys in another. It's far more sophisticated. Remember in the garden of Eden the way Adam and Eve responded after their disobedience? They first covered themselves, hiding from one another, and after that they hid from God. Sin leads to shame and shame leads to hiding.

While sin is common to the human race, at times it takes on different character and qualities when it comes to different genders. At the risk of oversimplifying, we sin differently. 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. In our considered judgment, mixed gender bands are not advisable.

why so simple?

Small groups have become many things to many people. They satisfy many needs across the span of one's life. Often a group begins with one purpose and slowly adds layers of other commitments and activities over time, causing the original purpose to be obscured in the process. 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. It is relatively easy to teach people what God has done for us. It's not hard to motivate and persuade people to respond in kind by trying to do something for God. The big challenge of discipleship centers around the work of God in us. It brings us back to the foundational text, which, remember, is a prayer.

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.

Discipleship is an inside job. We must be strengthened with power through his Spirit. Christ must dwell in our hearts through faith. We must be rooted and established in love. We must have power to grasp the incomprehensible love of Christ and to know it beyond knowledge. And, yes, we must be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Note where all of this must happen—in our inner being. Discipleship is an inside job.

The test of discipleship is whether it leads to outside action. 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 arduous 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. Easily distracted and discouraged, we tend to wander from one program or study to the next. Our knowledge increases while at the same time our spiritual muscular system atrophies. We have believed 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. If we have the relationships we have not leveraged them effectively for this kind of soul work. It 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?



A discipleship band is neither a traditional small group nor a typical accountability group. The primary curriculum is the lives of its participants, joined together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.



BANDS READ TOGETHER

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Isaiah 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

There are many ways to go about reading together. What matters is finding a way to get on the same page of Scripture together. The Discipleship Bands app is a great place for this to happen. We recommend using the *Introduction to Discipleship Bands* study to get started with daily readings for the first four weeks. The Daily Text is also available in the app for free or by subscribing through e-mail. Each day we provide a Scripture text along with a short devotional commentary, a prayer, and a few probing questions for discipleship. We also offer a growing collection of resources written specifically for discipleship bands. These are accessible in a variety of formats, through e-mail, print versions, or through our Discipleship Bands app. These aren't required and a band can choose other reading plans per their shared interest. Remember, these are not studies around which groups meet for further discussion. Our common text does not function as the centerpiece of the band, rather it serves in a circumferential fashion to further band the group together.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

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.

BANDS PRAY TOGETHER

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Colossians 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. They pray together whether they are actually together or not. 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.

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, 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.

Hebrews 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. In this distracted and over busy age, finding a time when everyone can consistently meet together can be challenging. In our experience, a consistent time each week

works best. Try to make this time as sacrosanct as possible. From time to time something will come up and one of the band members will be unable to attend. As a rule, if half or more of the band cannot make a meeting, the meeting should be cancelled. Do not worry about rescheduling. Meet again at the set time the following week. Life happens. Aim for four meetings a month. Settle for a minimum of three meetings per month. 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 biweekly 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. A video conferencing service like Skype, Google Hangouts, or Zoom will work well for a band meeting. A voice-only conference call also works fine. The point is to do whatever works and be open to varying the format as the need of the week demands. If only two people from the band can meet in the same place, allow the other members to Skype or call in. In our experience, a number of bands find themselves all living in different places, making a face-to-face meeting impossible. They successfully 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. The band meeting is the make or break point of the whole thing.

“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)



what happens in a discipleship band meeting?

The weekly band meeting is simple in structure and format. It is critical that it **remain** so. Budget for twenty minutes per person in the band. Some small talk and group banter is fine, but the band must reckon with and respect the time allotment. The meeting should be formally opened with the following words. Once this happens, it's band business to the end.

opening

ONE VOICE:

Awake, O Sleeper and Rise from the Dead.

ALL OTHERS:

And Christ Will Shine on You.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we pray that out of your glorious riches you would strengthen us with power through your Spirit

in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And we pray that we, 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 we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

questions

- 1. How is it with your soul?**
- 2. What are your struggles and successes?**
- 3. How might the Spirit and Scriptures be speaking in your life?**

WHEN YOU ARE READY TO GO DEEPER . . .

- 4. Do you have any sin that you want to confess?**
- 5. Are there any secrets or hidden things you would like to share?**

In the interest of keeping it simple and memorable, think of the questions as: Soul, Struggles/Successes, Spirit/Scripture, Sin, Secrets.

At the conclusion of each person's time of sharing, someone from the band will offer a prayer for the one who shared. This is also an opportunity to seek clarification, offer encouragement, and to speak

into one another's lives. When sin is confessed, we urge someone in the band to speak words of pardon (i.e., "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven"; see 1 John 1:9).

It may be advisable for a new band, particularly among people unfamiliar with one another, to start the first four weeks by just using the first three questions, and then add questions four and five as the band is ready to move deeper. Go at your own pace and pay attention to relational dynamics. Focus on building trust and always maintain confidentiality.²

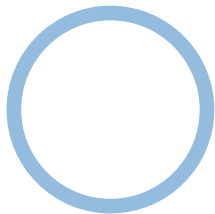
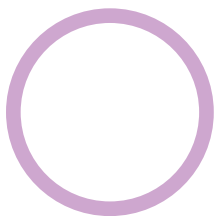
closing

PRAYER

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

(Meeting prayers adapted from Ephesians 5:14 and 3:16–21.)

² The original band questions as written by John Wesley were as follows: 1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting? 2. What temptations have you met with? 3. How were you delivered? 4. What have you thought, said, or done of which you doubt whether it be sin or not? 5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?



the seven commitments

The Seven Commitments are the foundational rules of engagement for how band members should respect and honor each other. Many Celebrate Recovery communities kick off their small groups by reading the five guidelines, and Alcoholics Anonymous similarly reads the Twelve Traditions at the start of their meetings. In each model, there's a framework to help set the tone and focus of their time together. They create a safe culture from which to share. While we are not suggesting that a discipleship band is a recovery group, we have learned much from these contexts about the true nature of discipleship—namely, that in highly relational environments, honesty is key and the culture must be safe and affirming.

We suggest reading the Seven Commitments at the start of each meeting for the first four weeks, and then revisiting them at least monthly from then on.

1. Respect the clock

You have 15–20 minutes to share. Please do your best to stick to that time frame.

2. Challenge by choice

You have permission to skip a question at any time. For example, you can say, “I don’t have anything on question 4 this week.”

3. No cross-talk

When someone is sharing, don’t give advice or interrupt.

4. One Counselor (come Holy Spirit)

When someone is sharing, listen deeply and pay attention to how the Holy Spirit might prompt you to pray.

5. Comfort with empathy

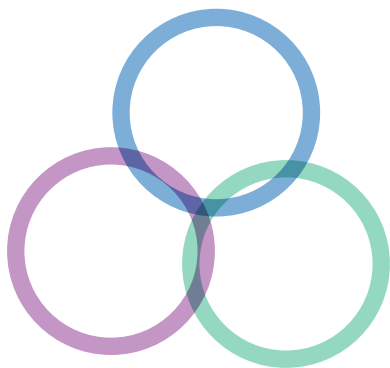
Hold space for others with open hearts. Rather than offering pity or sympathy, show up and tune in—bless, encourage, and build up.

6. Community of grace

When someone confesses sin, pardon by saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.” If someone shares a secret, thank them for their courage and never judge.

7. Strictly confidential

Never share another person’s story, struggles, successes, sins, or secrets outside the group.



how do I decide who to band with?

The righteous choose their friends carefully.

Proverbs 12:26

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.

Proverbs 27:17 NLT

You might have heard the quote often attributed to motivational speaker Jim Rohn: “You’re the average of the five people you spend the most time with.” In other words, the people we spend the most time with have a huge influence on who we are becoming. Numerous studies confirm this very basic but powerful idea: It’s not the quantity of our friends that makes the difference, it is the quality of a few friends that can have the deepest impact on our lives.

Choosing who to be in a band with is a very important part of getting started. In fact, it’s one of the most common barriers to moving from appreciating banding as a concept to investing in banding as a practice. First and foremost, pray about this and consider what you most need in this season of your life. There are three general types of people you should consider:

Peers: These are generally people who are a similar age and in a similar stage of life as you.

Spiritual Mentors: Spiritual maturity is very subjective. Neither age nor the length of time someone has followed Jesus necessarily indicate spiritual maturity. Rather, these are people that have a depth of maturity and love for God that you feel drawn to learn from or be supported by.

Spiritual Mentees: Jesus called his followers to make disciples. He modeled this for us relationally with a few people at a time. These bandmates would be people you are drawn to support in their spiritual growth, recognizing first and foremost that we never place ourselves above or ahead of anyone.

Your band may include people you have known for years, or it may be people you have only known for a short time. Both types of groups can be successful because they each require establishing a new type of relationship. However, there are some relatively consistent interpersonal qualities present in successful bands. These can serve as a bit of a framework as you consider whether or not a friend or acquaintance is right for this kind of unique relationship.

- You feel like you can be your true self around this person.
- You feel encouraged after spending time together.
- You get the sense that this person cares about your well-being.
- You feel like you can share things about yourself without feeling judged or critiqued.
- This person listens well, but also seems willing to share about themselves.
- This person has qualities about their life that you genuinely admire.

- This person has a desire to grow as a disciple of Jesus.
- You feel like you would understand if this person doesn't want to be in a band with you.
- You do not know this person very well, but someone else you know and trust feels this person would be a good fit.

Below are some caricatures to illustrate who might not be the best fit to band with. Keep in mind we are all in process and nobody is perfect. When a potential bandmate has some of these qualities, it shouldn't be an automatic disqualifier, but it does mean you may want to proceed with much prayerful discernment.

Fix-It Fred: Fred is well meaning but he tends to have a solution for all my problems. I often feel like when I'm sharing with him, I just want him to listen. Instead, he is always giving me advice and relating it to a similar problem he once faced.

Vampire Velma: I spent an afternoon with Velma recently. She had some errands to run and I tagged along. Without fully being able to explain why, I got home feeling emotionally drained. I want to be a good friend to Velma, but I often feel like she wears me out.

Critical Carl: Carl has high standards for himself and others. He gets annoyed with people frequently and tells me all about it. I sometimes wonder if I get on his nerves. I often find that I can't quite be myself with him because I worry he will find fault in me too.

Interrupting Irene: Irene is talkative. I like listening to her and she is really good with words and makes me laugh a lot. The problem is that when I'm talking I don't feel like she listens well, and sometimes interrupts or changes the topic before I have finished what I am saying.

Busy Bill: Bill is a great guy, but he is really overextended. The last time we met for coffee, it took us three weeks to find the time, we had to reschedule twice, and then he showed up twenty minutes late. I have grace for this, but it has been a consistent pattern and it just doesn't seem like Bill has much room in his life for our friendship.

Gossip Glenda: Glenda sometimes shares things with me by saying "Don't tell anyone I told you this, but did you hear what happened when . . ." Sometimes it makes me wonder what parts of my life or story she might be sharing with others.

Again, no single individual will be a perfect fit. We have all had busy seasons, have all been critical, have all tried to fix things for others often with good intention. However, if your relationship with someone has consistently demonstrated some of these patterns, that experience will likely carry over into the discipleship band as well. You are not looking for perfect, but you are looking for someone with whom you can safely share more deeply and someone who will make time in their life to commit to the group.

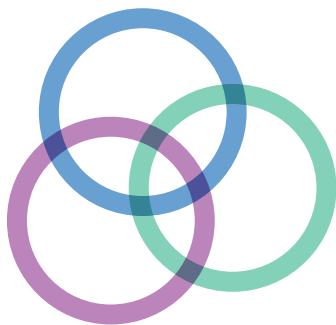
At the most basic level, band members have encouragement, love, and grace for one another's present state, while also believing in and encouraging one another to be who God has most deeply created them to be. Martin Buber captured this beautifully when he said, "The greatest thing any person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing in him, in her—to take the time and have the discernment to see what's most deeply there, most fully that person, and then confirm it by recognizing and encouraging it."³

When you start out, consider determining an amount of time as a trial period. Four weeks of reading, praying, and meeting consistently

³ Eugene Peterson used this quote from Jewish theologian Martin Buber in his book *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 54.

is usually a good test. On the Discipleship Bands app is an introductory study you might consider. After four weeks of meeting, decide if some adjustments need to be made to the time, structure, or process before diving into the next four weeks. Also, give people an out. Be honest with one another about whether this kind of unique relationship is helpful and something to be continued. Give grace to one another. Let your band know you are truly okay if they want to step out (and truly be okay with it).

Remember that connection frequently has a spontaneous component. We often cannot predict with whom we will click. It is possible to love and support one another in a group like this even if you do not become the closest of friends outside of the group. Let the relationships develop naturally. Just because you are in a band together doesn't mean you will now take family vacations together. Some people journey together for six months, learn how to relate in a group like this, and go on to form other bands. This can have a powerful multiplying effect. Other groups form deep friendships and stay together for decades while encouraging others to start bands. There's no pressure. Let it be what it naturally becomes.



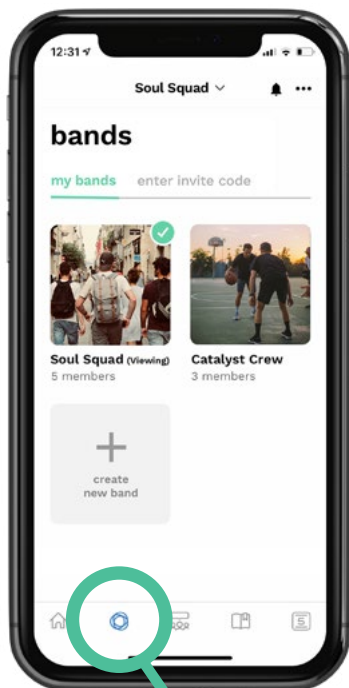
(the all-new)
**discipleship bands
app**

In today's world, we always seem to be just an arm's length away from our phone. Some argue that this virtual connectedness actually causes us to be lonelier than ever. What if there was another way? What if our phones really allowed us to live out Deuteronomy 6:6-7 in all of its fullness?

“These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”

Our phones are with us when we sit at home and when we walk along the road. Our phones are the last thing we put down at night and the first thing we grab when we get up. That means that our close, spiritual, and life-giving relationships are always that close as well. The Discipleship Bands app allows you to read, share, and pray with your band whenever the Spirit moves you. They're only a swipe, press, and notification away.

The Discipleship Bands app facilitates deep, meaningful band relationships in two ways. First, it delivers discipleship content to you every day; second, it brings your band together into a private online group to interact around that content.



create your band

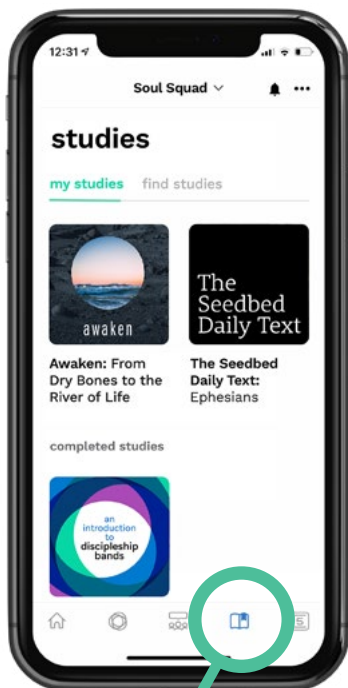
Jump in with your existing band, a set of old friends, or new friends drawn together by a desire for deeper discipleship.



stay connected

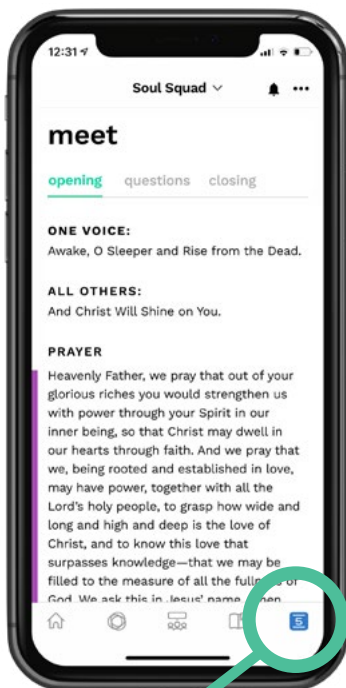
You never know when you'll receive a word from the Lord or when you'll need support and encouragement.

It's that simple. Visit the app store for your device and download the Discipleship Bands app.



read together

Daily notifications come each morning, so you won't forget a reading.



go deeper

When truth enters into our togetherness through the five questions, it produces transformation



how to get started

recommendations for the first four weeks

INVITE

Asking someone to be in a band with you can be intimidating. One of the challenges is that most people are unfamiliar with the general concept, so not only are you inviting them into an important relational experience with you, you may also feel like you need to explain exactly what it is. Don't put too much pressure on yourself at this stage. When inviting someone, you do not have to give them every detail—rather, just the basics. We have drafted a sample invitation that you can use via text or e-mail. Feel free to adapt to make it your own:

I hope you are doing well. I wanted to invite you to consider being in a discipleship band with me (if there are others in the band, include them here). A band is a group of three to five people who meet together once a week to support each other in following Jesus. They are same-gender groups and have the flexibility to meet over the phone or video chat if we can't meet in person. There's a really simple weekly

format based around a set of questions we ask each other when we meet: How is your soul, what are your struggles and successes, and how might the Spirit and Scriptures be speaking in your life? After four weeks we will decide if this is something we want to continue doing together. Let me know if you have any questions or want more information. I completely understand if this is not something you want to try at this time, but I would love to have you join me if you can.

DECIDE WHEN AND WHERE YOU WILL MEET

As simple as it sounds, in today's busy world it can be challenging to find a consistent time each week to meet. Early mornings or lunch hours can work well. Some bands choose to meet by phone or over video chat even if they live close to one another. (If this is the case, still try to get together in person at least once a month.) If your band will meet in person, a quiet place like someone's home or church can allow everyone to feel safer when sharing, but plenty of bands prefer to meet at a coffee shop or restaurant. If your band has three people, plan for an hour. For each additional band member, add fifteen minutes to your meeting allotment.

THE FIRST FOUR MEETINGS

We suggest that you start with the *Introduction to Discipleship Bands* study available free on the Discipleship Bands app (discipleshipbands.com/app). This study has daily readings for the first four weeks and is designed to orient the group to the core what, why, and how of banding. It is very practical and assumes a person getting started knows nothing about the process. As you go through the study, ease into the standard questions used in weekly band meetings. What follows is a recommended outline for your first few weeks of meeting together.

WEEK 1

Since banding is likely new to everybody and some bandmates may be new to one another, we recommend that in lieu of any of the standard five questions you take a different approach to your first band meeting. Start with the opening prayer. Then each take 15–20 minutes sharing about the following:

1. Your key relationships (i.e., kids, spouse, family, friends)
2. Your key relationships growing up (i.e., three or four people you were close to)
3. Your story of faith and the role church did or didn't play in it
4. What you hope to get out of being in the discipleship band

WEEK 2

Start by taking turns reading through the Seven Commitments and addressing any confusion or questions that may arise. Then read the “Awake, O Sleeper” verse and opening prayer. Remind the band that in these early weeks the conversation will focus on the first three questions. Then go around the group each taking turns responding to the first three questions in order and all at once. After a person shares, a bandmate will offer a prayer for that person.

WEEK 3

Start by reading through the Seven Commitments, the “Awake, O Sleeper” verse, and the opening prayer. Again, take turns responding to the first three questions. With it only being a week later, some people may feel that not much has changed. Encourage everyone to share anyway, even if things are similar. If someone is briefer in sharing that week, ask them to share some prayer requests or concerns and give more time to praying for that person.

WEEK 4

Start by reading the Seven Commitments followed by the opening “Awake, O Sleeper” and prayer. Again, take turns responding to the first three questions. Save some time at the end of this meeting to discuss how the group feels it is going so far. Let people know they have freedom to not continue if they want and that you will understand. If people are ready to advance, suggest that you continue for another three months and check in again then. Starting next week we recommend opening up the options of questions 4 and 5 as people decide to share. Remember that if you are helping facilitate you will likely have to go first. We also recommend you discuss which study you would want to do next.



frequently asked questions

where did this practice of banding come from?

John Wesley was originally introduced to a form of band meetings by the Moravians in 1738. His meetings gathered a small number of people together and divided them by marital status and gender. Our desire is not to replicate his band meeting model exactly, but rather to find a new model to live out what was at the heart of the band meeting—namely, deeper discipleship in the context of strong relationships.

Wesley has an often quoted, but frequently misunderstood, statement: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁴ In other words, a holy life cannot be lived out alone, but only can be lived out in relationship to other Christians.

He encouraged members to use the band meeting as a place to pour out their hearts without reserve, especially “the sin that so easily entangles” (Heb. 12:1). While he maintained that one could not be sanctified (or live a holy life) apart from faith through grace, he also

⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, volume XIV, preface to poetical works (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 321.

knew that this didn't mean a believer should simply sit passively and wait for this gift. Instead, he believed firmly that there were many practices God made available for his people to pursue holiness, whereby they could encounter the Holy Spirit. We are convinced we have the best chance at holiness within the context of a supportive community of believers.⁵

The band meetings had a very simple format back then—to meet once a week, to begin with song or prayer, then to each take turns sharing “freely and plainly the true state of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.”⁶ Following this, they would end in prayer, praying specifically for the state or situation of each person who shared. (See Kevin Watson and Scott Kisker's book, *The Band Meeting: Rediscovering Relational Discipleship in Transformational Community*.)

For Wesley, the purpose of the band meeting was summarized in James 5:16a: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

who is a discipleship band for?

Anyone who desires to grow in love for God and neighbor. It is for those desiring to share life on a deeper level with a few others. It is for those who wish to share joys and burdens and pray and be prayed for. Most important, these groups are for ordinary, everyday people who face real life and want to journey with real people.

what if I am not comfortable going this deep?

We recommend that you view the questions as an aid to your sharing time—it is not required that each person answer all the questions each time that you meet. For a season, the group could decide

⁵ Kevin Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2014), 1–2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

to just answer question one for the first month of meeting. Then add question two and five, and when you are ready, begin answering questions three and four. We find it usually requires someone in the group being willing to go first to be vulnerable which will open up the permission in the others to go there as well.

do discipleship bands require a leader?

Bands do not necessarily require a leader, but they do require that someone familiar with the process help facilitate the group off to a good start. We also tend to believe that it takes a disciple to make a disciple. A group will be stronger if it is being facilitated by someone who is well on their way to exemplifying characteristics of a disciple of Christ—namely a growing love for God, obedience to his Word, and love for people. Part of the appeal of being in a band is that it has a very simple format. Typically, there will be someone who helps initiate the group and gently facilitate the meetings, but these groups are ultimately centered on each person having the opportunity to share with the others in the group, therefore they do not really require an official leader. The simple answer is that these groups require a bit of planning and facilitation, but do not need an official leader. We are finding that offering training to a group of people wanting to start bands can be very beneficial. Use this guide in your training, model for them how a band meeting works, and answer any questions they have. As bands begin in your community have a point person who can answer questions that may arise from those facilitating.

who should I ask to be in a discipleship band with me?

We consider this a matter that you should enter with some level of prayer and discernment. There may be people in your life who you already feel a sense of spiritual connection with. There may be friends whom you have known for some time who also have a desire to grow deeper in their faith. There also might be people whom you

already have been encouraging toward deeper discipleship who come to mind. There might be someone whom a pastor or leader in your church would recommend to join you in this.

what if I am already in another type of study or small group?

Our hope is that your band is complementary to other groups you are involved with. Likely, this group will be smaller than those other groups and with a different focal point. By the nature of being small, it gives greater opportunity for you to share about your life more personally. Discipleship bands are not intended to be a replacement for other types of groups. Some who are already in a larger group may choose to form bands from within that larger group. For example, we have heard of existing small groups which break off into bands from within the group to have band meetings (men with men/women with women). This can be an effective way to go deeper as a group and try out banding from within a small-group structure.

how frequently should a discipleship band meet together?

We recommend finding a set time to meet weekly. If more than half the group can't make it, just cancel for that week. We have found that on average if you plan to meet four times a month you will at least get two in.

once formed, how long is the commitment of being in a discipleship band?

People tend to be hesitant when we invite them into a commitment that seemingly has no ending or exit point. We recommend setting an initial trial period of four weeks. If after four weeks the group wishes to continue they can re-up and commit to meeting together in their band for at least three more months. This should be enough time to establish some rhythms and get a sense for whether the group

is a good fit. At the four-month mark, we encourage an open and honest conversation asking how it's going. Some may wish to start another band with other persons after this experience. Others may decide this is not working for them at this time. Groups with the most success will adjust as necessary and find patterns that work for the group, and with this our hope is that people will discover groups they can meet with for years and years to come.

are discipleship bands supposed to be same gender?

We recommend bands be single gender in order to increase the possibility of sharing with openness and honesty. While we strongly support the practice of mixed gender mentoring relationships, this is not the vision of banding. In our experience mixed gender bands can lead to under-sharing on the one hand, and over-bonding on the other; both of which can distract from the essential purpose of banding.

what if I am not comfortable sharing personally in front of others?

For some, the invitation to take fifteen minutes and share about yourself with others sounds like your worst nightmare. You may choose to share less on any given week and this will be fine. Perhaps, if you feel you have nothing to share, you may simply take a pass or just ask to have people pray for you. This is okay as well.

why use the discipleship bands online platform or app?

We created the discipleship bands online platform recognizing that our current culture of busyness can often have a negative effect on our spiritual growth—but it can also be harnessed for good. Therefore, our hope is that the online platform can be a tool to help facilitate more relational connection with one another, while also delivering discipleship content within the context of real relationship.

The online platform is not intended to be a replacement for live person-to-person connection, but rather to help facilitate continued relational growth between meeting times. It also delivers content in short snippets each day, which helps individuals develop a daily pattern of spiritual reading and reflection, rather than only a weekly, biweekly, or monthly rhythm revolving around when a group might meet in person.

must a discipleship band meeting be face-to-face?

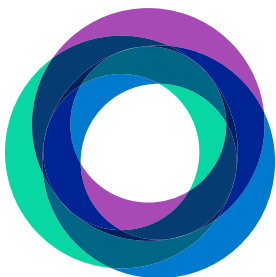
The key is not so much face-to-face as it is person-to-person. Face-to-face is, of course, the gold standard. However, we know of many bands who meet by phone or video conference each week with great success. With the complexity of scheduling in our current society, we also see bands taking hybrid approaches. They may determine from week to week what can work: in-person, video conference, or phone call. Still other bands who meet by phone each week have developed rhythms of an annual or bi-annual in-person retreat together. Be flexible and innovative while staying true to the spirit and purpose of banding.

is there a suggested way for a discipleship band to have a meeting?

Yes, see the detailed instructions in the earlier section entitled, “What Happens in a Band Meeting?”

how long should a band meeting last?

The length of the meeting will depend on how many people are in your band. We suggest a minimum twenty minutes for each person in the group. For example, a group with three participants would be about one hour.



the bigger picture: the why behind the why

There's a famous conversation from history we reference often in our work. It happened between the celebrated preacher George Whitefield and a man by the name of John Pool, an unknown member of the Methodist movement. Here's the dialogue.

“Well, John, art thou still a Wesleyan?”

Pool replied, “Yes, sir, and I thank God that I have the privilege of being in connection with him, and one of his preachers.”

“John,” said Whitefield, “thou art in the right place. My brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.”⁷

⁷ W. H. Gilder, ed., *The Philadelphia Repository and Religious and Literary Review Volume 1* (Philadelphia: Orrin Rogers, 1840), 189.

The awakening we long for will not come from gathering larger crowds at bigger conferences. It will not come as more and more people salute the big thing we hope God will do among us. Awakening will come as more and more people do the small thing. As thousands and then hundreds of thousands begin banding together and doing the big work of awakening at the smallest level of disciple-making relationships, the scales will one day tip and not only will a great awakening be upon us, but the Holy Spirit will have organized us into the kind of fellowship wherein awakening can grow, sustain, and multiply itself.

The New Room is not an organization we are trying to build, though it does represent an effort to organize ourselves. We aren't trying to start a new movement but to better participate in the ancient movement of Jesus Christ. The vision is not for another associational entity of loose-knit connections but a fellowship of strong ties. The imagery of a fishing net comes to mind. A net is the opposite of a rope of sand. A fishing net is simply a constellation of closely tied knots. Jesus' first disciples left their nets behind to follow him. They would soon become the net themselves. This is how he would teach them to fish for people, not with bait, but with the literal net formed by their relationships with one another. When he told them to throw their nets on the other side of the boat, into the deep water, it prefigured what he would do with their banded relationships in the larger world. The gospel works most prominently and powerfully through the kind of extraordinary relationships formed among us by the Holy Spirit.

Think of a single square of a net as one discipleship band, or perhaps the band is the knot itself. Now imagine the effect of hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of knots and squares. This is a picture of the church as it was founded and as it spread across the earth in those early centuries. The church did not spread and grow as a function of its institutional structures or its professional clergy or

impressive buildings or its budget surpluses or deficits. The church multiplied in breadth as the relationships among its people grew in depth. The little churches in Philippi and Corinth and Ephesus and Thessalonica and Colossae were like so many fishing nets. It was the winsome constellation of their distinctive relationships in the deep waters of these bustling irreligious and often uber-religious cities that captured the attention of seekers and persecutors alike.

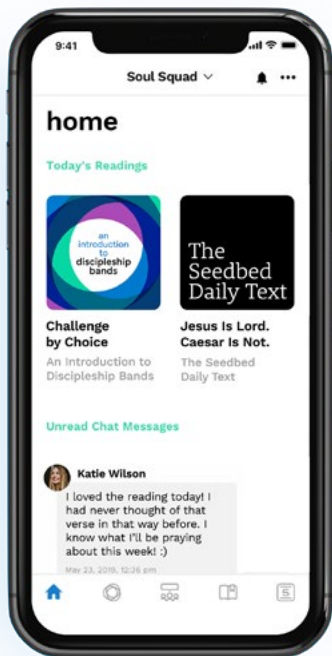
To be sure, Jesus dwells in our individual lives, but he multiplies his movement through the bonds between us. It's where two or three are gathered in his name that he presences himself in powerful ways. As he knits and nurtures divine bonds of holy love among small bands of people who have little in common but their relationship with him, the world awakens to the wonders of heaven touching earth.

The vision is to join the awakened together in bands and to join the bands together in sowing for awakening. Everywhere we see a discipleship band, we see an incubator of awakening, a place where a deeper way of love can take root in a community.

This love will begin as a way of praying. We see bands coming together to travail in prayer for the awakening of local churches. As a consequence, we see local churches banding together to travail in prayer for the awakening of cities and regions. It will take years. It may take decades. We must take the long view. We are sowing for a great awakening for generations yet unborn.

If your heart is as ours, let's give each other our hands. Might we go this way together? All we need to know is who you are, where you are, and how we can stay in touch. There are no joining fees or secret handshakes or any other shibboleths that create insiders and outsiders. You don't have to be in a band to join, but be advised, we intend to encourage you in that direction. We will invite you to gather, help you connect, and bless you with resourcing. In turn, you will resource the fellowship with the stories of awakening in your places of sowing.

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.



download the all-new discipleship bands mobile app!

we've built everything you need to start a band and take the first steps down the path of depth discipleship.

discipleshipbands.com/app



time + trust = transformation