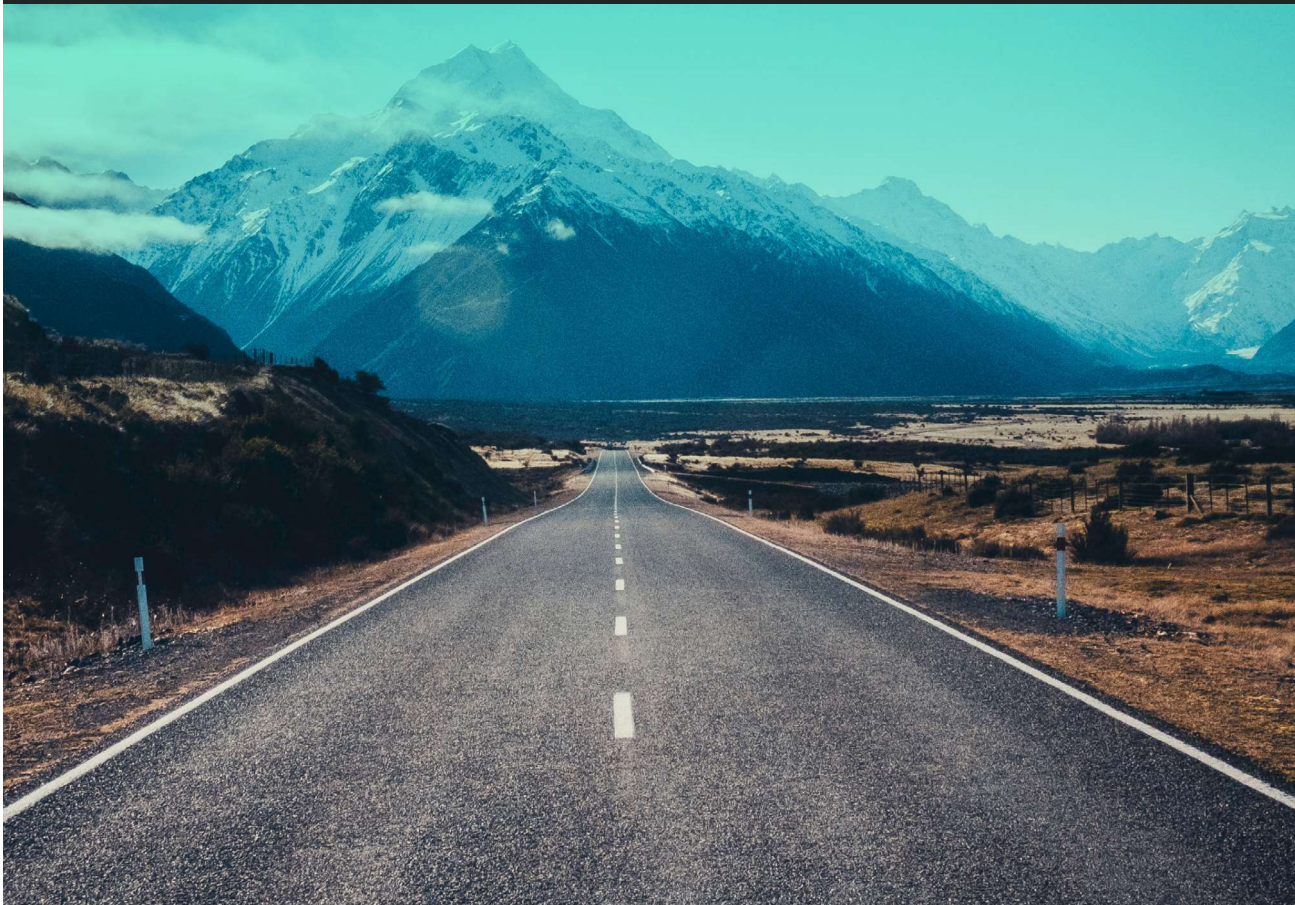




EMERGING TRENDS IN

Discipleship

A reflection on the data and insights from
the Seed Summit on Discipleship



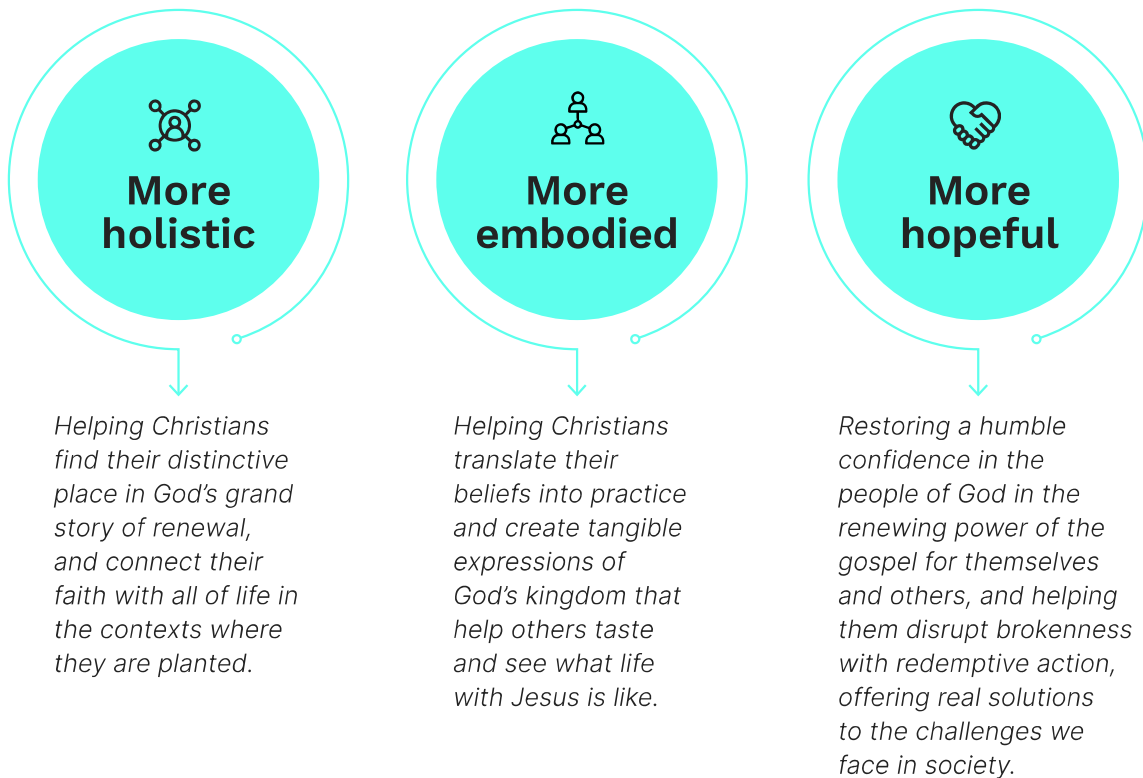


BACKGROUND & INTRODUCTION

In November 2023 a group of 70 Christian leaders from across Australia gathered in Sydney for Seed's Summit on Discipleship. The group represented a variety of vocational contexts, including social services, education, marketplace and church. Together, over two days, we engaged in a design process focused on the question;

How do we reimagine approaches to discipleship, so that we grow disciples who more effectively engage the world around them?

This question was designed to contribute to Seed's broader vision to see a shift in the discipleship landscape in Australia to be:



The question and the Summit sought to both prompt and then gather insights from this important group regarding the current discipleship landscape and make a contribution to developing insights that could inform best practise in the coming years.

 A summarised outline of the design process can be found [here](#)

This report builds on the data gathered from that design process and brings it into conversation with other material. The report begins by highlighting a series of emerging trends in discipleship. This is followed by analysis of some potential implications of these discipleship trends for the life of faith communities and Christians.



A FUTURE FOR DISCIPLESHIP

One key outcome from the Summit design process was a compelling picture of an imagined future. This imagined future (outlined below) provided the framework for our discussions at Summit and it also gives both framing and life to the insights in this report.

In 10 years we long for disciples that are:

- **Deeper** in their walk with Jesus, with more agency and more ownership of their faith and discipleship.

- More **communal** in their understanding and expression of faith, with a shift from more individual understandings and expressions.

- **Engaged** in their communities and workplaces.

- **Wise**, meaning they are not captivated by culture. Rather, from their deep relationship with Jesus they are Curators and Creators of culture. They bear light, shine like stars (Phil 2:13).

- **Confident**. They have the tools to connect all of life with their faith. They are able to inhabit difference and are comfortable being uncomfortable. They listen, discern and respond in context.

Discipleship like this will shape church/faith communities that are **less monocultural** – with diverse ages, stages of life, ethnicities and social groups represented.

10 years from now, discipleship like this will give us a sense of **movement**. This movement will be comfortable with slowness, brokenness and less control, yet we will be wide-eyed as we see the Spirit of God at work in our midst.



WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

One final thing before we begin. Much has been written on defining discipleship, and we don't intend to contribute anything more to that discussion here, except to say that this report assumes and affirms the notion that to be Christian is to be a disciple. There is no graduation to discipleship, it is both the process and the goal of our faith.

A disciple in Jesus' day was a learner. A disciple did not just learn things about their rabbi/teacher, they followed their teacher, learning all of life from them. And this is the clear calling of the contemporary church that follows in the footsteps of the first disciples. We are to go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded (Matthew 28: 18-20). To be a disciple, therefore, is to choose to follow Jesus, to give our allegiance to him, and to learn all of life from him.

We hope the insights in this report will aid the church in Australia to do just that.





CURRENT *Trends* IN DISCIPLESHIP

TREND 1

There is a thirst for greater depth in our churches, which a greater focus on discipleship could satisfy.

In recent times there has been widespread recognition that discipleship has been largely ignored in most churches over the previous generation. Some have even referred to this as a crisis of discipleship.

People are longing for depth.

One of the critical issues identified at Summit was the need for a mindset shift where Christians are taught to be disciples in all of life, not merely believers in Jesus.

This is especially the case for Gen Z. Carey Nieuwhof, commenting on a similar trend in North America, highlights that those from Gen Z who have stuck around post-Covid “want to go all in on their faith. They’re not interested in Christianity ‘light’ or the ‘we attend church’ faith of their parents. They want to follow Jesus with passion and are ‘all in’ on community...Gen Z is a generation hungry for God, hungry for hope, and a generation done with hype.”¹

This longing for depth in discipleship is likely to continue, especially in Australia and the so-called West, as the church continues to be nudged to the margins of institutional power in society. In this context, where the temptation for church leaders might be to water things down to reduce the barriers to engagement with faith, this generation want the opposite. They want greater depth, more community, and all-of-life approaches to faith.

TREND 2

There is a growing interest in formation and the idea of being/becoming as a valid goal of discipleship within evangelical churches.

Alongside the thirst for depth in discipleship, there is growing recognition that God is not only interested in what we believe, how we behave or how much we achieve. God is deeply interested in who we are becoming, both individually and collectively.

Increasingly, faith communities are focusing on the formation of their people to become the community of people God has created us to be.

While this remains conceptual in some parts of the church, over time this focus will likely result in a growing understanding of what the fruit of our discipleship and formation should be. There will be increasing definition given to what a mature disciple might look like as they grow.

There was a clear call at the Seed Summit for the church to view itself less as the end point of discipleship and more as the pathway to encountering God. That is to say, the goal of discipleship is not to increase service at church, rather the goal of engaging at church is to increase our engagement with God.

This shift in mindset has the potential to drastically alter a church’s practice.

¹ <https://careynieuwhof.com/church-trends-2024/>



TREND 3

There is appetite for approaches to discipleship that are more diverse, personalized and contextualized.

In his 2018 book *Simple Discipleship* Dana Allin notes that 'In the name of making disciples efficiently, we have adopted an assembly-line mind-set to create disciples in our church.'²

There is growing recognition that making disciples is not like building a car. It is not a linear process. The church's commission to make disciples takes on as many forms as there are people. There is no one-size-fits-all model.

Certainly, there will be core and consistent components of any discipleship process. For example, every discipleship journey will involve deep engagement with the biblical story, as the place where our stories and hearts/wills are shaped in alignment with God's revelation of Godself. However, from this foundation discipleship needs to take a person's context, and the application of faith to that context, seriously.

TREND 4

There is increasing appetite for approaches to discipleship that are more relational.

While there has been a negative reaction to one-size-fits-all approaches, there is also dissatisfaction with the hyper-individualised nature of our culture.

Easy access to content and information is leaving people increasingly disconnected. Loneliness and social isolation are being referred to as the great epidemics of our time.

People are longing to be known and valued for who they are individually – but they want this to happen in the context of authentic community.

This is creating appetite for apprenticeship models of discipleship such as coaching or other forms of intentional community.

However, there are significant cultural barriers to these models working. People are not used to sharing their lives intimately with others, and our busy lives leave little time for slowing down and paying attention to the things of the heart. It remains to be seen how faith communities will respond to this felt need for deep and meaningful community, and whether these responses will satisfy the longings in our culture.

TREND 5

There is appetite for approaches to discipleship that are more participatory.

The longing for depth of discipleship is accompanied by a desire for greater agency and ownership in people's faith. Christians are increasingly dissatisfied with being mere passengers and recipients of someone else's teaching and agenda.

In the light of multiple leadership failures, there is a longing for communities that are less about the superhero pastor. People want a seat at the table of their own formation.

There is potential in developing more mutuality in church communities, seeing them as places where all are disciples, growing together as we learn all of life from Jesus as our collective purpose.

² Allin, D. *Simple Discipleship*, Navpress, 2018



TREND 6

AI (and all things digital) will continue to disrupt our methods of discipleship.

In his analysis of church trends in 2024, Nieuwhof notes that there is a clear call for better discipleship across the church, yet “very few churches are discussing how digital ministry fits into the discipleship framework. The subtext of the dialogue has been, “Let’s just get everybody in the building, and we’ll figure it out.”³

Digital can’t be ignored. Most people in churches now access much of their content online, from sources outside of their local context.

The digital world represents perhaps both the biggest disruption and the biggest opportunity for discipleship in the next ten years.

We need to capture the power of digital, without becoming beholden to it. There is an opportunity for the humanness and authenticity of Jesus and his ways to stand out in an increasingly digital world. The key question is how we can utilise a digital world to convey our authentic and very human gospel.



³ <https://careynieuwhof.com/church-trends-2024/>



IMPLICATIONS OF THESE TRENDS FOR DISCIPLESHIP *practise*

Perhaps the author garnering the most popular attention at the present moment with regard to discipleship is John Mark Comer and his *Practicing the Way* materials.⁴

The introduction to the *Practicing the Way* website states that ‘The modern church is facing a crisis of discipleship. It’s not that people don’t *want* to become like Jesus, or that people aren’t trying to become like Jesus, it’s that we don’t know *how* to become like Jesus. We need a pathway to formation for the modern era.’

If this is true, then we need to look at the implications of these emerging trends for the discipleship practise of the church and individual disciples. This is not intended in any way to be an exhaustive list, only to highlight some important implications that have emerged from this design process and our reflections on it.

1

FOSTER LEADERSHIP CULTURES THAT FOCUS ON INTEGRITY AND ALIGNMENT

The leaders gathered at the Seed Summit were insistent that more focus is needed on the alignment between leadership and discipleship.

In order to foster fruitful discipleship in a church or organisation, leaders need to be disciples themselves.

A new generation of leadership seems to be emerging that embodies the deep desire for authenticity that their peers are longing for. Nieuwhof reflects on this trend, noting that many of the key leaders emerging in the Christian community “embrace a totally different style than their predecessors.

They’re:

- Less top-down and more consensus-based.
- Less interested in popularity and platform and more interested in local ministry.
- Less concerned about their name getting out there and more concerned about leading well in their context.
- Less focused on bringing back the past, and more focused on building a new future.
- Less fixated on size and more fixated on health. Ironically, with that focus, many are now leading a church larger than that of their predecessor.”⁵

For discipleship to bear sustainable fruit in faith communities, investment into the ongoing spiritual formation of leaders is of utmost importance.

⁴ <https://www.practicingtheway.org>

⁵ <https://careynieuwhof.com/church-trends-2024/>



Put simply, leaders need to apprentice themselves to Jesus in order to model that to others.

This goes beyond simply encouraging our leaders to pray and study the bible more. Spiritual formation is the deep process of shifting the way we walk in the world (Eph 2:10), what Dallas Willard refers to as our *embodied will*, such that our automatic responses to things are aligned with Christ, and also with the reality of who God has made us to be.⁶


It is making our desires (heart), our will (what governs our decisions), and our embodied actions (that which we do without even thinking about it) all captive to Christ over time.

That does not happen in isolation or simply through acquiring more knowledge. The implication is that we need to create environments where our leaders can learn from Jesus, alongside others, how to become more peaceful, more joyful and more loving humans.

2

EMBED FORMATION INTO THE STRUCTURES OF OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES

John Ortberg, building on the work of Dallas Willard, asserts that ‘the main thing God gets out of your life is *the person you become*.’⁷



‘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 Cor 3:18

This emergence of being and becoming as a priority for faith communities needs to get embedded in the structures of our communities. It will be important for faith communities to gather around common processes/practices of discipleship while leaving space for more contextualised outcomes. That means relinquishing some control and allowing God’s Spirit to meet people where they are. Rather than models that seek to get everyone to be the same, act the same and serve the same, there will be consistency in processes yet greater diversity in application and outcome.

This may also bring a challenge and corrective to an excessive focus on numerical growth. However, measurement will continue to be important. Greater importance will be placed on measuring changes in the desires and actions of people as they become more like Jesus. Churches and organisations will need to become more informed regarding how people grow, and increasingly aware of how their activities and teaching interact with the psychosocial stages of human development.⁸

God-willing, this will yield more diverse faith communities. It will help form communities who are more comfortable with slowness and brokenness. These communities will

⁶ <https://dwillard.org/articles/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done>

⁷ <https://becomenew.com/>

⁸ One example of this from a Christian perspective is the work of Hagberg and Guelich in *The Critical Journey, Stages in the life of faith*.



still be passionate about mission, but will be less driven by external goals and quick fixes. These will be less controlling environments, more focused on being with Jesus as they participate in his redeeming and renewing work in their communities.

3

FOSTER GREATER PARTICIPATION IN CHURCHES

As highlighted above, there is increasing interest in approaches to church and community that are less hierarchical and more participatory.

In more participatory models, there is still an important role for leaders to play. They create the communal environment where the members of their community are seeking to learn life from Jesus and grow together. This posture gives agency to all the members for their own formation, while also nurturing a shared responsibility for the formation of others.

In such communities there will still be delineations of maturity, and important roles for various people to play based on their calling and giftedness, but the members will work hard to minimise power imbalances.

These communities will embody the reality that discipling is never used as a verb in the scriptures. It is not an action of one having power or dominion over the other. While we are commissioned to go and make disciples, there is always an invitation for the individual to commit oneself to following Jesus and learning life from him alongside other disciples.

As communities foster participation, they will also be more effective at vocational integration. As they focus on laying the foundations for discipleship, they will also provide pathways for ongoing formation that can better help their people faithfully practice the way of Jesus and bring renewal in their specific vocational contexts.





4

DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES WORSHIP

Proper discipleship is hard and it requires commitment. In order to make such a significant commitment, people need to believe the commitment has *value*. That means that a prerequisite for discipleship is that we are compelled by Jesus and compelled by his vision for life. Therefore, faith communities need to model and call people to worship. Our experience of community needs to be dripping with Jesus.

Tim Keller, reflecting on Lovelace's *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, which examined the key elements present in historical revival movements, says; 'When individuals and churches see the immensity of God's love and believe the gospel deep down, they are more open to the Spirit's renewing work.'⁹

A community that models and embodies anything less than wonder at the person of Jesus will not be able to sustain a discipling culture. By contrast, a compelling presentation of life with Jesus gives the community a common vision, a common purpose, and a common call. Fixing our eyes on Jesus will foster a shared desire to move toward the same destination as we work out the pathway together.

This focus on worship also allays any fears that some might have that a greater focus on discipleship and depth will undermine our efforts for evangelism. Learning life from Jesus and participating in God's work of renewal will foster a deeper conviction and commitment to evangelism. Faith communities who foster deep formation in their people, connected with a sense of awe at the person of Jesus, should have no fears about an accompanying passion to see others come to salvation and share life with Jesus.



⁹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/dynamics-spiritual-life-richard-lovelace/>



FINAL reflection

For some there may be little that is new in this report. The call to be a community who share life together as we spur one another on to follow Jesus is not a new one. As is often the case, it will be our ability to embed faithful thinking into faithful practise that will be a key challenge in the coming years.

Yet I believe there is a real sense of possibility in the trends outlined here. At the heart of it is a deeper integration and connection between God's work in us and God's work through us.

Willard captures this possibility in a compelling way when he shares his hope that people might be "inwardly transformed in such a way that the personality and deeds of Jesus Christ naturally flow out from them when and wherever they are. In other words, it can be understood as the process by which true Christlikeness is established in the very depths of our being. Thus multitudes of men and women could be brought forth from generation to generation to be, unapologetically, Christ's redemptive community: the true "city set on a hill," of which Jesus spoke, established in the midst of the earth now, as it shall be for eternity in the midst of the cosmos. (Eph. 3:10; Rev. 22:5) We could become a true "society of Jesus." We could be the life-transforming salt and light in a darkened world which God has always intended his covenant people to be."¹⁰

May it be so.

¹⁰ <https://dwillard.org/articles/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done>

