



**Many people look to ministers to disciple them. But what of a minister's own discipleship?**

**Tim Fergusson offers a reflection on its importance - and suggestions for how it might happen**

**D**iscipleship is a shared task. As Matthew and Mark tell it, no sooner had Jesus decided to call one person to follow him than he called two. And within a further paragraph, two more. The gospels present discipleship as an exercise in group learning, a sometimes glorious, sometimes faltering formational course in how to be like Jesus.

So, let me ask a question aimed especially at the ministers among us – with whom do you share your own discipleship?

Certainly, three of the richest times in my own attempts to follow Jesus have been shared with others. At 20, I spent a year as part of a team of interns. At 30, I joined a class of ministers-in-training at a Baptist college. And at 40 I spent time on an ecumenically-mixed leadership development programme. In each case, I was walking the discipleship pathway together with others.

However, these high points of shared discipleship have not been the norm. For the bulk of my church ministry, people generally looked to me to disciple them. It's what a pastor is expected to do – teaching, guiding, encouraging and empowering others to follow Jesus as best they can. Of course, some may say that in a healthy situation, minister and church should disciple each other. And

this is true – pastoring churches has certainly sharpened my faith. But though fortuitous, this mutual discipleship is a bit haphazard. Not all churches nurture their ministers, and those of us who are pioneers and chaplains spend the bulk of our time with those who are not confessing disciples at all.

So, again, if you are a minister, with whom do you share your discipleship?

I ask because I am not sure that personal devotional practices are enough. I hope as ministers we are all committed to various solo spiritual habits such as study and reading, prayer and worship, journaling, going on retreat, and so on – we each have our blend. These are all good habits for the journey. But I think we are wise if we travel with others.

For example, in John's version of the calling of the disciples, as soon as Jesus invited Andrew to come with him, Andrew recruited Simon for the cause. Perhaps this makes Andrew a very early evangelist. But I wonder whether he was simply looking for a buddy for the adventure. Or, when in Luke's gospel Mary sat at Jesus' feet to listen to his words, she may have just wanted to catch a little of his teaching. But I wonder whether she had a deeper desire – to be part of his travelling group so that her eyes, like theirs, might be blessed to see what prophets had longed to see.

In other words, travelling with others is good, but as ministers it can be hard at times to identify peers for the pilgrimage from among those we serve.

In which case, surely, we must accompany each other, minister to minister. Not only so that we might be disciples together, but so we might disciple one another.

The methods by which we accompany each other are hardly new (and they are all spelt out in the handbook for Continuing Ministerial Development. [baptist.org.uk/cmdhandbook](http://baptist.org.uk/cmdhandbook)) Let me offer four, but concentrate on one.

For a start, many of us accompany each other in **'cluster' meetings for ministers**. These can and ought to be supportive, prayerful, compassionate spaces for sharing what is enriching or demanding in our ministry. We have to take care that they do not become in any way competitive, and are never dominated by just a few. If you are in a cluster, take a close look at how the group welcomes, nurtures and honours each

member. Does it foster in every person a closer walk with Jesus?

Then there is **structured accompaniment in the form of pastoral supervision, spiritual direction, or mentoring**. I won't tire of saying it, but this accompaniment is so important for our well-being and walk with God. It asks questions of our calling, ministry, vision, spirituality and resilience. If you are a minister and you haven't got a supervisor, director, or mentor, then get one! If you a church member or leader, please do all you can to give your minister both the time and the budget for accompaniment, as your church will benefit from their enrichment. We now have a list of ministers-discipling-ministers through pastoral supervision or spiritual direction, which you can find here. (<https://ow.ly/OVQs50SI9Ti>)

**Thirdly, some ministers engage in learning communities** where there is an intentional, time-bounded, shared exploration of a certain theme, concept, or theological idea. The Fresh Streams network, [www.freshstreams.net](http://www.freshstreams.net), in particular uses this model to foster the discipleship of groups of ministers and other Baptist leaders.

But I want to highlight the fourth form of shared discipleship. Some call it **peer mentoring**, others describe it as **having a soul friend**. I am talking about a fellow minister (or maybe more than one) who journeys with us over a prolonged season. Their concern is not just to sympathise, though no doubt this is part of what they offer us. With our permission and even encouragement, they also provoke, challenge, and question us. They occasionally raise an

eyebrow, puncture our balloon, and name our delusions. In other words, they do whatever it takes to help mould us into the disciple Jesus wants us to be. They do so out of a profound knowledge of what makes us tick and a deep concern that we should know fullness of life.

Such soul friends are God's gift to us. If you are fortunate enough to walk with one, pause for a moment and maybe send them a message to say how much you appreciate them. If, however, you are wondering how to find a soul friend, my best advice is to realise it won't happen by accident. The grace of God is involved for sure, because we cannot summon up from nowhere people who commit to us in the long term. But for the same reason, it requires us to be intentional, working to sustain important friendships in ministry, even as we or our friends move around the country. Take a moment to think – is there another minister to whom you could offer your companionship for the journey?

If we as ministers are to encourage the discipleship of others, we have to pay attention to our own. And one way is to lean on each other, making real and particular the covenant between us. As fellow followers, let's prompt each other into deeper discipleship.



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