

# Whole-life discipleship in our churches

**As President of Baptists Together in 2019-2020, Ken Benjamin asked 'Where do we grow from here?'**

**A recurring response was a greater emphasis on whole-life discipleship. In his role with The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC), he has created a suite of resources called *Vital Signs* to help us all move from good intentions to best practice on discipling.**

**He offers this reflection**

**A**s a church leader I always knew discipling was essential, but I also found it tricky. Discipleship is hard to prioritise and sustain against competing demands in church life.

Sometimes we make it even more challenging by starting off with misconceptions. It's all too easy to define discipleship too narrowly. We've often used the word to refer to a specific, boxed-off discipleship course, or to implement certain spiritual disciplines, or we've unintentionally implied that it's a 'next level' stage for super-keen Christians. In reality, following Jesus was always meant to impact all of our lives.

Growing disciples who seek to follow Jesus in every part of their lives is vital for mission in the UK and beyond. The greatest opportunities are where we all spend the greatest amount of time.

In my time serving as President of Baptists Together, I had the privilege of spending time across all of our associations. I asked the question, 'Where do we

grow from here?' We recognised that there are some great stories of growth in some of our churches, but overall, we're still ageing and declining. We simply can't be OK with that.

Part of the answer we highlighted was encouraging a greater emphasis on whole-life discipleship. A repeated message throughout that year was: 'We will never get anywhere until we equip God's people for their everywhere.' It was so encouraging to see this message resonate with so many of our associations, colleges, and churches.

At the end of my time serving Baptists Together, I was invited to join LICC (The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity) and lead their work across churches and denominations. Essentially, this has given me an opportunity to research whole-life

disciplemaking further and seek to embed it within both Baptists Together and the wider UK church. My time working across the church streams has confirmed that this emphasis on discipleship in the whole of our lives is compelling and relevant for all God's people. It brings meaning and purpose to our everyday places and roles.

We've also found it's often the vital missing element that will help younger generations commit to following Jesus more fully. LICC's research conversations with millennials and Gen Z have revealed their particular yearning for a holistic understanding of the gospel. These are the generations leaving the church at the fastest rate – and we so often find they're not running away because they don't believe. Instead, they're drifting away because they don't see the relevance of faith to their everyday lives. They are looking for an integrated way of life that empowers them to be consistent in values and action in every area of life – and therefore to be authentic. That is precisely the kind of life Jesus lived and wants for us all, and precisely what we mean by whole-life discipleship.

So, we know discipleship is important – vital even. We therefore want our churches to grow disciples who follow Jesus in every part of their lives. But we also know that's easier said than done.

Part of the problem is that when a church emphasises discipleship in all of life, it's highlighting something that goes largely unseen. 'Gathered'

church activities tend to shout for attention, whereas 'scattered' mission, in all of our workplaces, homes and leisure activities, whispers. People in our churches will notice if there's someone missing from a rota on Sunday, if there is no one to play the piano or operate the sound system, but they might not complain (or even notice) if the content of Sunday doesn't encourage and equip them as disciples for Monday.

## *Imagine the impact this could make in our churches, if the vital element of disciplemaking became increasingly embedded throughout all we do*

However, if we simply add 'making whole-life disciples' to our already-full to-do list, it may feature for a while, but it will never become a long-term emphasis in our churches. Or worse, we may drift into feeling that we've 'done' whole-life discipleship because we ran a single series or event on it several years ago.

Instead, for whole-life disciplemaking to survive in our churches, it must be more than just another good idea that slips away from our priorities. It must be embedded into the whole range of church life rather than added; built in rather than bolted on. We've found that when we do this we are not adding more burden to a church leader's to-do list. We are, instead, bringing new perspective to what they already do.

To help leaders make that vision a reality, we've just

launched *Vital Signs*, a suite of resources helping us all move from good intentions to best practice on disciplemaking. The lessons come from the thousands of churches and church leaders we've connected with at LICC. We've listened and observed what actually makes a difference, and distilled our findings into these 20 vital signs: 20 practical things that help establish a church culture that nurtures whole-life disciples.

The three key elements of *Vital Signs* are:

### **The assessment tool**

You start by checking your church's vital signs at [licc.org.uk/vitalsigns](http://licc.org.uk/vitalsigns). You'll answer 20 quick questions, and then receive detailed analysis of your strengths and areas for improvement (all for free). Leadership teams can also get group scores, which give an even greater insight – plus our team at LICC is on hand to give advice and consultation to help you make the most of your findings.

The emphasis throughout is to offer a helpful checklist rather than a burdensome to-do list. The aim is not to make anyone feel guilty about areas where they need to see change, but to highlight straightforward ways to make gains in the season ahead. You don't have to be thriving in all

20 areas to make good progress. Every small gain found in any of these chapters towards the vital goal of whole-life discipling is worth celebrating.

### The book

Twenty chapters unpack each of the vital signs in detail: why they matter, common pitfalls, and how to approach each one for maximum impact. Every chapter starts with a simple summary to quickly get to the heart of the matter, includes a real church example and a relevant Bible thought, and closes with a simple prayer – because nothing good happens in our churches and in our discipling endeavours if prayer isn't fuelling it.

The 20 vital signs are grouped into four sections.

*'When it's just us'* looks at the elements of church leadership that happen when we're on our own, or at least when most people in our church won't be together observing what we're doing. This includes aspects from personal prayer to one-on-one pastoral work.

*'When we gather'* deals with the main group activities of the church, from services to small groups and beyond.

*'When we plan'* explores the crucial role of team meetings in the culture of the church.

And finally, *'When we respond'* looks at the occasional but significant moments that crop up in the life of every church, including times of transition, crisis, and accidental encounters.

### The videos

There are also 20 short videos to give practical advice from one church leader to another on how to improve on each vital sign. The assessment tool results will point your team to the videos most relevant to you – both areas where you are already strong and areas with the greatest opportunity for improvement.

Imagine the impact this could make in our churches, if the vital element of discipling became increasingly embedded throughout all we do. If discipling whispers for attention, *Vital Signs* is designed to turn up the volume.

May our gathered church times increasingly be informed by and equip us for our scattered times. May we grow as disciples and grow as disciplers.



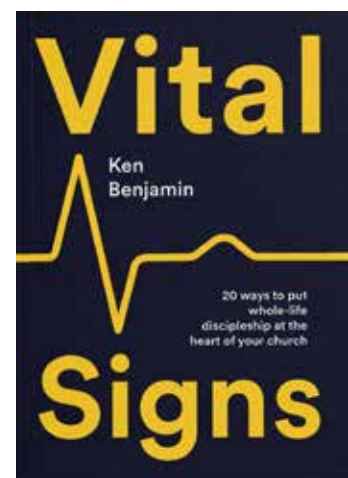
**Ken Benjamin was Baptists Together President 2019-2020. He is Director of Church Relationships with The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.**

### A church view on *Vital Signs*

Ellen Wild is the minister of Chichester Baptist Church. She said, "As a church we hold a high value on preparing our people for living out their faith in their every day. Whole life discipling is key for us and we see our gathered times as part of equipping each other for our frontline places. But it's hard to evaluate how well we're doing on that!

*"Vital Signs* has been really helpful to that end. Working through the resource as a leadership team gave us the chance to honestly examine how we're doing and appraise various areas of church life and culture. We have made some practical changes and found some helpful reminders as we continue to strive to share this message consistently."

**Access the *Vital Signs* discipling tool at [licc.org.uk/vital-signs](http://licc.org.uk/vital-signs)**



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