

# The shape of discipleship

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**Discipleship is a process of becoming. As people know Jesus better, through the Holy Spirit they become more like him, more like the people they truly are. They are being transformed into his likeness. How effective the church would be at spreading the good news of this possibility if everyone joining in was noticeably like Jesus!**

The church down the ages has put a lot of emphasis on the need for evangelism. The message of God's love for all is an urgent one, a life or death one. There is such delight when this message becomes real for someone and they respond to God. We talk of being a new person, a fresh start, seeing things with new eyes, even 'born again', but actually the great commission was (and is) to go and make disciples, which is not quite the same thing (Matthew 28:19). If we find ourselves alongside people with a new-found faith in Jesus there is a pressing need to support them within the church community so that they grow in faith and are built up by being loved, knowing they are loved and loving others. It comes back to love: John 13:34 'as I have loved you so you must love one another', the love which surrounds all and is in all 'in Christ' (Ephesians 1:3-14). Equally, for those who have been around longer but stalled in their faith, new growth is needed. Church is made up of disciples in various stages of development.

In our context we are asking how we can enable discipleship. Is it through teaching or by example? The answer is probably both. The danger is that we run to an off-the-peg discipleship course and assume that this will 'fix' our need for discipleship. It may be part of what is needed, but not the full shape of it.

Paul gives us a wonderful model in his letter to the Ephesians: '... I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love

of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses all knowledge – that you may be filled to all the measure of the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:17b-19).

This speaks of four-dimensional life, within the love of God: life in all its fullness (John 10:10). Not only is this life to be HIGH (developing spiritually, which could include reaching up to God through prayer, Bible study and growing knowledge of him through his Spirit) it is also WIDE (reaching out to others through communication and actions) and DEEP (developing true personal identities, growing together in fellowship and through pastoral care). That's three dimensions. We are also called to a fourth dimension of living, which is LONG and this means that our story is being lived out in history, we are the stewards of our inheritance in those who have gone before, and the stewards of the resources of the earth we share. This is four-dimensional life in all its fullness (Wide, Long, High and Deep: WLHD).

Viewing life within these four dimensions is quite intuitive for people, to the extent that its importance can be overlooked. Let's take 'HIGH'. Looking up to behold God is a familiar concept ringing out in the Psalms, but also found in our basic longing as humans for the warmth and light of the sun above, and indeed in our sense of 'other-ness' and searching for those mysteries beyond our immediate world. HIGH is a simple term for 'transcendence', a key part of human spirituality (In 2001, John Swinton identified the central features of spirituality as Meaning, Value, Transcendence, Connecting and Becoming). Looking DEEP within ourselves and at our identities, finding healing, and caring for one another as family: this is not the opposite of 'High' but a different way in which transformation happens. DEEP concerns the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in individuals and communities bringing pastoral care to each other.

Looking WIDE requires that boundaries are not barriers, and that the 'insiders' exist for the 'outsiders'. The processes in WIDE are concerned with reaching out to others and becoming connected. All these are in the context of looking at the LONG story, focusing on history and on the narratives that give us meaning.

The diagram shows how this WLHD model has been fleshed out in our church setting at the moment, though it is fluid and evolving. The dimensions are interdependent and some people may be more drawn to one aspect than another, so capturing the concepts flat on the page may give the false sense that one dimension takes priority over another. Indeed, placing 'HIGH' at the top may be natural for those who feel an active part of the worship in the church, whereas 'WIDE' may be a natural starting point for those who feel on the edges (and the church deliberately blurs those edges). In our setting, for example, even before becoming part of the church family some people have chosen to help a church-led initiative called 'LoveCully', which is 'a weekend of extravagant outreach and service in our community fuelled by prayer and worship, involving practical projects, free gifts and acts of loving kindness. In each of the four dimensions our church has adopted the principle of Vision groups as an extension of the PCC (Parochial Church Council) to try to 'see what God is doing and join in'. This has enabled people to be drawn in according to their particular gift and passion to help each of the groups, involving a far wider section of the church than is possible with the PCC alone.

Initially in our application of the model, 'Discipleship' was placed within the DEEP dimension. Now as the vision groups have evolved, it seems that Discipleship, in order to be effective within the church, needs to straddle all the dimensions. For each person there

may be different ways of becoming transformed. Some may naturally want to reach out to others most of all (WIDE), while some may want to develop their prayer-life (HIGH). Some may want to make sure the church building is maintained and provides a welcoming place (LONG), and others may want to focus on visiting those who are ill (DEEP). Everyone needs to develop in all of the dimensions to some extent so they become well-rounded, but people will naturally be drawn more to some activities and ways of being than to others because of their personal gifts. This is the 'body of Christ': the church with its many parts that work together (1 Corinthians 12).

The vision groups enable the church to identify key aspects where growth and change can be catalysed. This is a fluid type of leadership, where those at the centre help to steer, but enable people to move in and out of particular aspects working together. It would be unreasonable to expect a small group of core leaders to develop the vision and bear all responsibility for bringing it about, but in the vision groups it becomes much easier to share and involve newcomers.

## Ed Hobbs explains:

*'A number of years ago my curate and I were looking at the make-up of our Leadership team (PCC) in the light of our desire to grow high, wide, long and deep. And what we noticed was that most of our PCC were those whose natural leaning was towards LONG: resources, buildings, staff, and logistics. Other whole areas of the life of the church were under-represented, and therefore under-valued. As a result, as we approached the next annual church meeting (APCM) we encouraged people with other passions to join us, those who naturally look high, wide and deep, in order to better reflect our vision as a church. We also augmented this by three times a year inviting other leaders, not on PCC, to join us to help own, develop and shape the life of the church in these directions. It's still early days, but it feels as though we are heading in the right direction ... in all directions!'*

*'We are realising that supporting growth and development in any of the dimensions requires deliberate "stepping stones". For example, it is hard for an unchurched mum, who*

*comes to toddler group, to find her way to Sunday church, let alone to faith. Or it's hard for an unchurched guy who maybe comes to a men's breakfast, to step into a Sunday, they just aren't ready for such a large leap. And even when they find their way into church, it can be hard to step into a home group or to go deeper, as this involves stepping out of the more anonymous crowd, and becoming known.'*

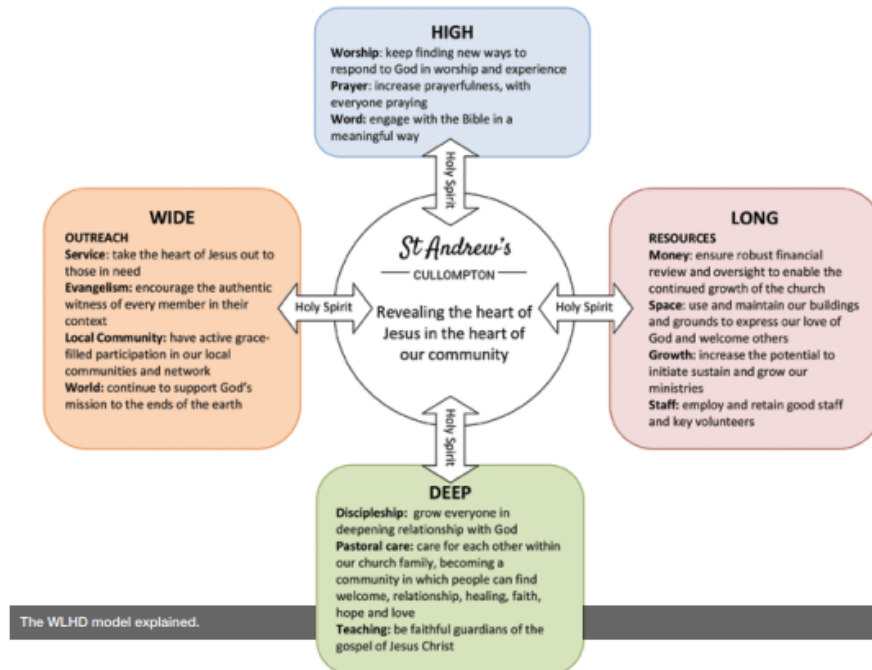
The challenge is to identify the stepping stones in each dimension and involve the people who no longer need that stepping stone to be an example and a guide to those who do. Surely this is the shape of discipleship.

## Reference

Swinton, John (2001) *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a forgotten dimension*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd

## Further information

If you would like to contact the authors about the process described in this article, you can do so through the St Andrew's Church website: <http://standrewscullompton.com>



The WLHD model explained.