



DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE

River Oak Church

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	02
Church Vision	03
The Life Cycle of Discipleship	04
Call	03
<i>Becoming a Group Leader</i>	06
<i>Group Leader Guidelines</i>	07
<i>Group Coach Guidelines</i>	08
Create	09
<i>Types of River Oak Groups</i>	09
<i>How to Launch a Group</i>	10
<i>How to Lead a Group</i>	12
<i>Group Roles</i>	13
Cultivate	14
<i>Marks of a Healthy Life Group</i>	14
<i>Habits of a Healthy Life Group</i>	14
<i>Marks of a Healthy Study Group</i>	15
<i>Habits of a Healthy Study Group</i>	15
<i>Marks of a Healthy Care Group</i>	15
<i>Habits of a Healthy Care Group</i>	16
Commission	16
<i>How to Multiply Your Group</i>	16
<i>When to Conclude Your Group</i>	19
Discipleship Tools	20
<i>How to Engage the Bible</i>	20
<i>How to Pray</i>	21
Recommended Resources	22
Contact	23

WELCOME

We want to see Hampton Roads captivated and changed by Jesus. We believe the best strategy to see this hope realized is to implement the commission of Jesus just before he ascended into heaven: "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20, ESV)

After receiving this call, and the Holy Spirit, we witness the disciples practicing the strategy of Jesus in Acts 2, "42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, *attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes*, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." Notice their habit, they attended the temple as a whole people and then scattered the gospel across the community in homes.

At River Oak, we gather each Sunday as a whole church to stand in awe of Jesus. Then, throughout the week, we scatter the gospel into homes, coffee shops, playgrounds, and restaurants. *This guide is designed to equip you with the knowledge of what to do when you gather, so that we can teach generations to observe what Jesus has commanded.* As we go, may the Lord add to our number, each day, those who belong to the family of God. Though this vision is great, we are assured by the promise that Jesus is with us, to the end of the age.

With Hope,

River Oak Church Discipleship Team

CHURCH VISION

MISSION

Living everyday captivated and changed by Jesus

VALUES

*We are about the gospel
We grow together
We impact the world
We are a place of grace*

MEASURES

*Am I following completely?
Am I changing continually?
Am I living generously?
Am I multiplying disciples?*

STRATEGY

*Worship with us weekly
Connect with others
Serve on a ministry team
Go on mission with God*

THE LIFE CYCLE OF DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship begins with an invitation. Through Christ, God has invited the world to be reconciled to Himself. When we receive his grace, we are spiritually born again, and similar to the growth of a child, there is a pattern to reaching maturity. This pattern, the life cycle of discipleship, will be the framework for this guide.

THE CALL TO FOLLOW

After receiving the call to trust in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, we begin to follow him. God uses other Christians to invite us to a life of Christlike imitation. As we grow, God uses us to call others into deeper closeness with Jesus.

CREATING A GROUP

In the gospels, Jesus models the selection and dedication of ministering to a small group of disciples. In this stage of the life cycle, we pray, invite, and commit to a group of people for spiritual growth and missional living.

CULTIVATING BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

After a group is formed for a mutual dedication to discipleship, they need the soil and sun of scripture and prayer to thrive. This stage in the life cycle is messy. We practice the "one another" statements in scripture, which include hard moments like weeping, correcting, and bearing burdens. But along the way, we will also share sweet moments such as encouragement, singing, and love.

COMMISSIONING THE GROUP

After three years of intimate friendship with Jesus and learning his practices, he commissioned his followers to go into all places to make more disciples. Following this pattern, we begin the discipleship process with the mindset of multiplication. When groups demonstrate signs of readiness, we will send out members to create new groups, saturating Hampton Roads with the gospel.

CALL

"And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him."
(Mark 1:17, ESV)

To accept the call of Jesus for discipleship, you must count the cost. The men who received this initial invitation were fishers by trade. This profession was their livelihood, family priority, and comfort. And yet, they considered the opportunity to follow Jesus worth the cost of leaving their normal routine.

Before accepting the call to discipleship, consider what you will leave behind...

You Leave:

- *Time*
- *Energy*
- *Resources*
- *Routine*
- *Comfort*
- *Selfish pursuits*

Though there is a legitimate loss, consider what you gain...

You Gain:

- *Walking in the spirit*
- *God-centered friendships*
- *Using your gifts to make an eternal difference*
- *Caring for souls*
- *Spreading the good news*
- *Living for a kingdom that will never fade*

We hope that, like these initial disciples, you will find the opportunity to be with Jesus so appealing that you follow him immediately. Knowing that the greatest reward is not amazing results, but greater closeness with Jesus.

BECOMING A GROUP LEADER

The desire to lead a group in discipleship mirrors the heart of God. If you are approved to lead a group, you will advance God's desire for the world to learn of His love displayed in the gospel.

If this description seems supernatural, it's because the work of discipleship is supernatural. However, we want to make the supernatural practical. Here are the initial steps to becoming a group leader.

We will guide you every step of the way.

1. *Become a member of River Oak Church*
2. *Belong to a River Oak Group*
3. *Apprentice a group leader*
4. *Apply to become a group leader
(application, background check, conversation with
a discipleship team member, sign guidelines)*
5. *Begin or complete discipleship training*



GROUP LEADER GUIDELINES

As a group leader, you further our hope to saturate Hampton Roads with the Gospel. In groups, relationships will grow, knowledge will deepen our love for God, and time will be devoted to practicing “one another’s” (praying, confessing, bearing burdens, encouraging, etc).

Guidelines

- Pray consistently for your group members.
- Meet care needs within your group and communicate pastoral needs to the discipleship team.
- Promote unity by emphasizing whole-church gatherings and deferring group events to church-wide initiatives.
- Arrive prepared to guide the discussion; do not improvise.
- Take attendance each week.
- Follow up with guests within the week.
- Check in with those who attend infrequently to see if the problem is practical or spiritual.
- Ensure that your content choice aligns with River Oak’s beliefs (we will contact you before the semester if a different choice is needed).
- Prevent the discussion from diverting to distracting conversations.
- Lovingly correct comments that do not align with scripture.
- Allow for moments of silence as people collect their thoughts.
- Be available for follow-up conversations.
- Faithfully attend training and leader meetings.
- Recommend and identify potential group leaders to the discipleship team.
- Aim to end your group on time.

I will aim to implement these guidelines

Sign Here

GROUP COACH GUIDELINES

Group coaches strengthen the discipleship strategy by serving and caring for our group leaders. Similar to how a sports coach encourages and guides athletes, our coaches will be attuned to the needs of our groups to excel in the mission we have received from Jesus.

Guidelines

- Be up to date on the spiritual condition of your group leaders and their groups.
- Aim to contact each leader once per month to pray and check in on needs.
- Ensure group alignment with our marks and habits of healthy River Oak Groups.
- Aim to visit each group once per semester.
- When called upon, join the discipleship team in the groups area in the lobby after services.
- Assist in the starting and multiplication moments for groups in your area of responsibility.
- Join interviews for new group leaders in your area of responsibility.
- Aid in pastoral correction and care cases; communicate these needs with the discipleship team.
- Faithfully attend training and leader meetings.
- Recommend and identify potential coaches to the discipleship team.
- Help leaders identify and start missional projects.

I will aim to implement these guidelines

Sign Here

CREATE

Types of River Oak Groups

At River Oak Church, we recognize three different types of groups that are important to a person's spiritual growth—Life Groups, Study Groups and Care Groups.

These groups share commonalities: they all use the Bible as a primary resource, they all practice prayer, and they all strengthen relationships. What makes them unique is their primary purpose.

Life Groups - *focused on relational discipleship*

- Method:** group discussion
- Time:** weekly, year round
- Size:** ideally less than 20
- Location:** homes and on-site

Study Groups - *focused on gaining Biblical knowledge*

- Method:** teaching and training
- Time:** intentional season
- Size:** unlimited
- Location:** on-site and local gathering spots

Care Groups - *focused on caring for a specific need or audience*

- Method:** group discussion and equipping
- Time:** intentional season
- Size:** unlimited
- Location:** on-site

HOW TO LAUNCH A GROUP

As you begin to plan the launch of a new group, imagine what may happen as a result. People may find healing from shame. The lonely may discover community. Those who are drifting may return to God. Whole neighborhoods may become saturated with the hope of the gospel. These possibilities all start with a plan.

Here are a few questions to help clarify your direction.

1. Who will I invite?

Write down a few names of friends who have complementary gifts. Who can join you as a co-leader or future apprentice?

2. When will we meet?

For this question, it is vital to be as practical as possible. If you aim to reach young parents at 9pm, none will come. If you plan to gather corporate employees from 9am to 5pm, it will be difficult to grow the group. Ask your friends to check availability.

3. Where will we meet?

For neighborhoods to have a gospel presence, we prefer for life groups to meet in homes. However, River Oak facilities are useful when space and childcare are priorities. Contact the church office to check availability. Wherever you meet, prioritize safety, warmth, space, and accessibility.

4. What will we use for content?

You know your group members well, so we trust you to select content that will target their spiritual needs.

Options include the weekly discussion guide, curriculum, books, and video series. If you need inspiration, contact the discipleship team for resource recommendations. Before the semester, you will be asked to identify your plan. If an adjustment is required for theological alignment, we will reach out with alternative options.

5. Will we have food?

Jesus shared meals often with his followers. Meals were the setting of some of the crescendo moments of the gospels. We recommend sharing a weekly meal. Meals are a natural moment of fellowship. However, shared meals can be less comfortable for guests and messier for the host. Try it and ask for feedback from your group to decide if this long-term practice fits your group.

6. How will we provide childcare?

It is the group's responsibility to coordinate childcare. Here are some ideas to help. Create a rotation for group members to watch the children. Share the cost of babysitters. Meet on-site during children's ministry events. Ask grandparents to join for childcare on rotation, and invite them to share the meal as a way of saying thank you.

7. How will we communicate?

Without communication, there is no community. This will be your most important tool as a leader. Select a communication tool that lets you send out weekly announcements and allows for group dialogue around prayer and life needs.

Text? GroupMe? Email? Social Media? Other?

Once your plan is ready, communicate the details to the River Oak Discipleship Team so we can support you on this new journey!



HOW TO LEAD A GROUP

Character

Before Jesus asked Peter to lead the church, he asked him, “Do you love me?” If our groups are going to have an eternal impact, we need to let go of all motivations outside of love for God and love for people. Do you love Jesus? Do you love your neighbors? These motives are the foundation of being ready to lead a group.

Prayer

Before Jesus selected his disciples, he spent a whole evening in prayer. Re-read that sentence. As you call, create, cultivate, and commission your group, let prayer under-gird all of your labor and decisions. Prayer is the best form of preparation we can give to this ministry.

Relationships

Instead of spreading himself thin, Jesus’ strategy was to invest time with twelve disciples for a dedicated season so that they could replicate this ministry after the Great Commission. If you seek to disciple everyone, your efforts will be diluted. Choose quality over quantity.

Content

The Bible is living and active. There is no resource more relevant and timely than God’s word. Books, curriculum, and video series will come and go, but God’s word will remain.

If the Lord delays his return for another millennium, Christians will be exploring the Bible 1,000 years from now. Whatever medium you select, choose a resource that is rooted in scripture. We recommend gravitating toward tools that promote discussion and teach group members to engage scripture themselves.

Gathering

As the leader, you are the thermostat that sets the warmth of your group. Be consistent. Arrive early. Stay late. Show no favoritism. Greet members with warmth. Learn their names.

Shepherding

No one will know your group members' highs and lows as well as you. Celebrate birthdays, weddings, and births. Grieve losses and disappointments. If a group member is hurt or in need, you are the front line of care. Communicate care needs with the staff so that we can equip you well and support your ministry.

Mission

God has given your group unique gifts, passions, and opportunities on purpose. Seasonally, challenge your group to select one doable missional project. An effective missional project will be simple, consistent, and contextual. For example, a group may share meals (simple) with a local basketball team (contextual), three games per season (consistent). All to saturate Hampton Roads with the gospel.

GROUP ROLES

Group Leader(s)

The primary spiritual guide for the group. This leader communicates most frequently, leads discussions, and initiates plans.

Apprentice

Life group leaders select apprentices to help co-lead group time. These growing leaders are in view for group multiplication. As a group nears the need for replication, apprentices should be entrusted with opportunities to lead while the group leader observes and coaches. Eventually, the apprentice will aim to guide a group themselves.

Group Coordinator

To share the weight of leadership, we suggest selecting a life group coordinator to help with administrative needs. This member can help with meal planning, childcare, or missional projects.

Host

We suggest that the host be a family other than the group leader(s). Both roles are weighty enough to deserve their separate attention. A member gifted in hospitality, with a warm environment, can cultivate a space of healing for those who attend.

CULTIVATE

What makes a River Oak Group different than a local book club, hobby group, or coffee hangout? The content, practices, and purpose of our gatherings are distinct from the world. We learn from the Bible. We follow the way of Christ. We gather to saturate Hampton Roads with the gospel. Because our mission is larger than a friend group get-together, our metrics of success also look different. We will value spiritual health over visible results. Here are the River Oak marks and habits of healthy groups inspired by Acts 2:42-47.

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

(Acts 2:42-47)

Marks of a Healthy Life Group

Awe - when we meet, we also meet with God.

Unity - the same Spirit and the same scriptures promote harmony.

Generosity - we sacrifice time, energy, and resources to meet needs.

Holiness - we are salt and light in Hampton Roads.

Dedication - we are devoted to the scriptures and one another.

Habits of a Healthy Life Group

Scripture - our discussions are rooted in the Bible.

Fellowship - we practice the biblical "one another" statements.

Prayer - we prioritize prayer as a regular rhythm.

Care - we care for one another during trials.

Meals - we eat together often and share life's big moments.

Mission - we seek purposeful opportunities to advance the kingdom of God.

Multiplication - we aim to reproduce disciples.

Marks of a Healthy Study Group

Timely - the content complements our church wide sermon focus and has a clear direction.

Biblical - the scriptures are the primary resource.

Transformational - we teach with the hope of heart transformation beyond intellectual knowledge.

Equipping - we consistently show our members how to discover the truth themselves so they can multiply the message.

Habits of a Healthy Study Group

Teaching - we teach our group members to observe all that Jesus has commanded.

Training - we equip our group members to know how to teach others.

Marks of a Healthy Care Group

Biblical - the Bible is considered the ultimate source of wisdom and guidance for understanding people, their problems, and the process of change.

Gospel-centered - recognizing Jesus and the power of His grace is the source of healing and hope found in a relationship with Him, and ensuring the Gospel message is the true functioning center applied to the details of daily life and struggles.

Church-empowered - the belief that the local church is God's primary context for change and seeks to equip individuals within the church to engage in wise and loving care for one another, discipleship, and helping relationships.

Transformational - believing that the Heart-Centered Approach of identifying the underlying issues of the heart, and confronting idolatry and the ways sin manifests in thoughts, words, and actions, is necessary for transformation with the ultimate goal of not simply problem resolution but glorifying God as a transformed life through repentance, faith, and obedience.

Ownership - individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their choices and actively participate in the process of change and growth that includes honest self-examination, confession, and repentance.

Grow in humility and love - recognition that we are dependent on God, there is value in others' wisdom, and the importance of compassionate and humble interactions.

*Marks of a Healthy Care Group cont.

Redemptive - committed to cultural sensitivity and engaging with culture in a redemptive way.

Equipping - providing formal training, developing resources, and empowering individuals to offer Christ-like discipleship, help, and care.

Integrity - we practice and maintain high ethical practices, uphold clear boundaries, and ensure confidentiality (with the exception if there is risk of harm to the person or others, or when mandated by law).

Long-Term Perspective - We recognize that transformation is not about quick fixes but rather a process of ongoing growth and sanctification, cultivating habits of worship, discipline, and reliance on God's grace for sustained change.

Habits of a Healthy Care Group

Love - we build grace-filled relationships.

Know - we connect with hearts, identify with suffering.

Speak - we communicate God's truth in love.

Do - we disciple with wisdom and accountability.

COMMISSION

To commission a group is to appoint people to a particular task. It is directional and purposeful. Consider this question: "What is the end goal of the group?" We want to propose two outcomes: reproducing your group or concluding your group.

HOW TO MULTIPLY YOUR GROUP

Think about the blessing of belonging to a group. You are encouraged. You are equipped. You are lifted during hard seasons. You are known. You are loved. Right now, there are people in our community who are not experiencing these blessings. If we decline group reproduction, those who do not belong may miss out. However, if we go through the mess of multiplication, the gospel will further saturate homes in Hampton Roads.

Consider this verse: "Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox." (Proverbs 14:4, ESV)

This verse provides two options. You can have a clean manger and a few crops. Or you can have a messy manger, but abundant crops.

We'd choose the Ox.

Multiplying your group will be messy. Some will stay. Some will join the new group. New details will need to be worked out. You will see some friends less often. But the strength of the Holy Spirit can turn this mess into an abundant harvest of new believers, deeper discipleship, and more missional opportunities.

Here is how to multiply your group:

1. Share this aim from the start.

Even in the early months of your group, share the vision and importance of multiplication. This will keep the group missional in their focus and give the leaders an eye for apprentices to train.

2. Raise up an apprentice.

Does a member have a teaching or leadership gift? Ask them if they would consider sharing some of the responsibility of leadership as an apprentice. If they accept, let the group know. Be clear about the invitation for them to consider leading a group of their own. As the apprentice guides the group, observe and offer coaching.

3. Look for signs of readiness.

Is there a target group that God has put on the hearts of some of your members (i.e., empty nesters, new believers, etc.)?

Has your group grown numerically beyond the point of whole-group relational closeness? Are there several potential future leaders in your group? Is God blessing a missional project that could lead to the formation of a group? These are all signs that a group is ready to multiply.

4. Communicate the opportunity.

When you communicate the readiness to reproduce, focus on the opportunity and not the problems. For example, talk about the opportunity to reach new people with the gospel. Dream about new areas of Hampton Roads that will hear the Good News. Do not focus the conversation on a lack of relational closeness or the group being too large.

5. Set the target date.

As a leader, propose a target date for your group to decide upon with the new group leader(s). Give ample runway for people to pray and decide. When you multiply, it will be each person's decision on where to go.

6. Celebrate and commission.

Though it is bittersweet to branch off into a new group, starting a new discipleship community is cause for celebration. We suggest throwing a "birthday party" for the new group. At this party, you can share testimony of what God has done, pray over the new group, and share birthday cake!

7. Start the new group.

Use the first evening to get to know one another and share the purpose of the group. Let it be warm and welcoming. It is okay if it takes a few weeks for people to decide which group they want to join.

8. Follow Up.

The good process of multiplying is an opportunity for the bad potential to drift away from the community during the shuffle. Communicate with the sending group to ensure that all people are accounted for. Reach out to those who do not attend during the initial month post-launch.

Commissioning Celebration Date

Launch Date

WHEN TO CONCLUDE YOUR GROUP

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches, “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning”. When a group reaches its end, there are several positives. You are able to look back on what God has done. You have fulfilled the purpose of a unique season. There is a sense of completion. Here are the signs that it’s time to conclude your group.

1. When you have fulfilled your group’s intent.

Some groups are designed to serve a particular season. If your group has met this need, it is fitting to conclude. Celebrate this ministry and link to an ongoing life group for continual discipleship.

2. The group is no longer spiritually healthy.

If a group has drastically drifted from the marks and habits of a healthy group, the group should end. James teaches, “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” We do not want bad roots to produce toxic fruit.

3. The leader needs to pause.

There are seasons when the leader needs to rest or pursue a different ministry. Ideally, apprentice leaders will step up to continue the group, but if this is not a possibility, the group can conclude. Because of our commitment to group leader character over group leader activity, the door to pause for spiritual health is always unlocked. If you need care or guidance, reach out to a Discipleship team member.

4. A unique missional call.

Sometimes God will call a person or a people to a new mission opportunity. We celebrate this reality because it advances the gospel. We pray for individuals, families, and even whole groups to start churches, ministries, and go on mission.

End Date

DISCIPLESHIP TOOLS

How to Engage the Bible

The Bible is a large book. It can be intimidating to know how to meaningfully and accurately engage with a passage. We recommend the 7 Arrows tool as a simple and effective method. If you know how to teach the Bible, this is a valuable tool to help others achieve a similar level of understanding.

7 Arrows by Donny Mathis and Matt Rogers



What does this passage say?



What does this passage demand of me?



What did the passage mean to its original audience?



How does this passage change the way I relate to people?



What does this passage tell us about God?



What does this passage prompt me to pray to God?



What does this passage tell us about man?



How to Pray

In the gospels, the disciples did not ask Jesus how to teach. They did not ask him how to lead. They did not ask him how to perform miracles. They asked him how to pray. There was something so compelling about his prayer lifestyle that they wanted to imitate it. Here was Jesus' response:

"Pray then like this:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

¹² and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil." (Matt. 6:9-13, ESV)

Here is how to mirror this prayer in your discipleship journey.

1. Start Praying

Groups often spend 10 minutes talking about prayer requests and 1 minute praying. Satan will do everything he can to keep you from simply praying. The best way to pray is to start.

2. Pray Together

Notice that the Lord's prayer says, "our and us," not "my and me." We are taught to pray together, out loud.

3. Begin with a *God-centered focus*

Half of our prayer needs are immediately resolved when we remember the holiness and priorities of God. When we remember that we have a Father, anxiety calms. When we remember heaven, we have hope on earth. When we prioritize God's kingdom, our private problems seem less daunting.

4. Share your *needs* with the father

God cares about your needs. Share your daily needs with him. This is the step that often comes most naturally to groups.

5. Talk with God about your *relationships* through the lens of the gospel

We pray for our family. We pray for our enemies. And we remember that God adopted us into His family. God loved us while we were enemies of the light.

6. Ask for *protection*

Jesus is realistic about the darkness of this world. In humility and dependence, we pray for protection.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- River Oak Church Website - Groups Page
- The Master Plan of Evangelism by Robert Coleman
- Discipleshift by Jim Putman and Bobby Harrington
- Rediscovering Discipleship by Robby Gallaty
- ESV Study Bible

CONTACT

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Live for More