

Disciplenmaking

WITH
GIRLS

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THE YOUTH CARTEL

Disciplemaking with Girls

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For Abby

I wanted to give you what I wished someone would have given me when I was 22 and just starting out in youth ministry. I am sure you are wishing I would give you a higher salary, but you'll have to settle for these wise words instead.

Introduction



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I met Allison as a sixth grader at our church's summer camp. She was eleven years old and homesick. I remember her wearing a yellow sweatsuit, a small fact that she disputes to this day, I think because it was an embarrassing-looking yellow sweatsuit. I remember that detail so vividly because it was the reason she initially caught my eye. She was sitting on a bench outside of her tent, crying. I walked over, sat beside her, and asked why she was crying. She launched into a tearful retelling of her past twenty-four hours. She told me her camp counselor had broken up with her boyfriend right before camp and therefore was emotionally unavailable to the eight sixth-grade girls in the tent. In Allison's words, "she is really sad and doesn't want to talk to us."

She went on to tell me she was feeling a little homesick and had just thrown up in the bathroom. Gotcha. The smell, the tears, the pale face, it all made sense. (Also, is there anything grosser than students in your ministry throwing up at camp? It's one of those things you didn't know you were signing up for, and you just gotta figure out a way to stay present even though you want to run away.) All this to say, she wasn't having the best week. We sat together for a while on that bench. We chatted, I worked to make her laugh, she told me about her family, and that she could sing, and then proceeded to sing for me, and I think I prayed with her? (It feels like something I would do, but I was nineteen and this was a long time ago, and I might be remembering this story with me as a super spiritual hero. But I promise the other details are accurate!)

I had no idea at the time, but that moment was the beginning of a thirty-plus year discipleship journey with Allison. It began when she was in sixth grade and it is still going today, just a few months shy of her fortieth birthday. Allison was the first student I discipled. She was the first student I wanted to "make a disciple," and I first committed myself to the discipleship process with her. I didn't fully know what I was doing, I didn't have a road map, but I knew I was called to help her fall deeper in love with Jesus and become a stronger disciple of him.

As I look back over the role I played in Allison's life, I can see some very intentional steps we took, and then a huge collection of unintentional "life together" type moments that can absolutely still fall under the "discipleship" label.

Our time together included, in no particular order, church services, middle school small group, mission trips, camps, travelling around the world together, lunches, dinners, laughing, crying, prayer, more church, support, worship together, serving together, navigating pain and grief, questions and doubt, working together on a church staff, and the list really does go on and on. There was a lot of encouragement, prayer, letting mistakes be made, loving without expectation, loving her for her, always meeting her where she was, and trying not to say, “I told you so” but “how can I help now?” There was also lots of dyed hair and fashion choices that some might say were a mistake, but not me. I’ve always been her fan.

I also wasn’t the only one in the discipleship process with her. I was part of a village of people who surrounded Allison: her mom, her youth pastor, two other small group leaders, and a musical worship mentor. All of us were discipling her in the ways of Jesus. The village. Every person pouring into her in different and yet equally important ways.

Allison loves Jesus. She has had a full journey so far, and yet she continues to grow as a disciple of Jesus. She is curious and is not afraid to ask questions. She is empathetic and compassionate and loves God’s people well. She is a servant leader, someone who serves first and then leads from there. She is a gifted singer with a gift for ushering people into beautiful worship experiences. She is administrative and organized and creatively leads inside and outside the church with those gifts. I look at her now and I think, *Wow. I got to be a part of her story. I played a role in making her a disciple.*

Stories like that are what this book is about. Helping every girl become a strong disciple of Jesus through a deeper personal relationship with him, a village of consistent godly adult voices, and a pathway filled with intentional and unintentional practices and experiences in faith. In many ways, being part of Allison’s journey and walking with her over the years gave me a road map for discipling other girls God brought into my life later. That road map is what I’ll share with you in the pages ahead. I wish I had a resource like this when I first started in youth ministry. It would have saved me a lot of trial and error. Because for all of the great moments I had with Allison, I can also pinpoint some where I blew it and got it wrong. Thankfully, we serve a merciful, loving

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God who covers up all our blunders with his goodness and faithfulness.

MAKING DISCIPLES OF TEENAGE GIRLS IS FOR THE BRAVE

I've believed for a long time that only the bravest people serve in ministry to teenage girls. I realize that sounds a bit dramatic, but that's fitting. I am, after all, a former teenage girl. The word *brave* also comes to mind when I think of all the women and men who disciplined me when I was a teenager. I gave my life to Jesus when I was fourteen and knew *nothing* about following him. I was the first Christ-follower in my home, so I needed a lot in the way of discipleship. Oh also, did I mention I was kind of mess my freshman year of high school? I was fresh off my parents' divorce, deep wounds, hurts, grief, failing in school, and looking for love and authentic friendships without a lot of luck. There are four people who intentionally disciplined me in high school. As I think now of the people who disciplined me, I see them as brave, godly people who stepped right into the middle of my messy story. They pushed past my teenage angst, mess, and any fears or intimidation they felt, jumping right into helping me become a stronger disciple of Jesus. It took courage on their part, and I know it wasn't easy. I think that's why I believe disciplemaking is for the brave. This is "on the frontlines" ministry. And it's not for the faint of heart. (Yeah, I know that sounds dramatic too—I like drama.)

It's true, though. According to Barna,

Families, churches and parachurch ministries must recognize that primary window of opportunity for effectively reaching people with the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection is during the pre-teen and teen years. It is during those years that people develop their frames of reference for the remainder of their life – especially theologically and morally. Consistently explaining and modeling truth principles for young people is the most critical factor in their spiritual development.¹

Which paints a picture of how important it is to disciple girls in their teenage years. THIS IS WHY DISCIPLESHIP IN THIS SEASON IS SO SIGNIFICANT. (This is my last dramatic statement...in this paragraph, at least.) This is a crucial season of faith development, this is identity formation and the search for purpose, this is when adolescent

development turns teenagers upside down in order to prepare them for adulthood, this is faith passed down to the next generation, and this is the crossroads season that might leave a girl on the trajectory toward a lifetime of following the way of Jesus.

That is why it requires women and men who love Jesus and are seeking to make a bold impact for the kingdom. Countercultural, loving, kind, courageous Christ-followers in daily pursuit of the King. Our girls need spiritually mature adults who are consistent, intentional, and willing to teach, guide, point them to Jesus, and help them navigate their world as a disciple. It will require buckets of time, energy, and every fruit of the Spirit, but I can't think of anything that is more worth our time. Again, this ministry isn't for the faint of heart, it's for the brave.

WHERE I AM COMING FROM

I am a youth pastor

I have been at the same church since I was thirteen—Saddleback Church in Southern California. I started serving as a small group leader in the junior high ministry when I was seventeen, interned in the same ministry when I was nineteen, and then joined the full-time staff in that same ministry when I was twenty-one. I have been there ever since (with a short departure to another church for a year). As of today, that's twenty-six years serving at my home church in a vocational capacity. I now serve as the student ministries pastor overseeing college, high school, and middle school ministries. Now, if you google my church, it has a history of being a fairly large congregation. But this is not where it began. When I first started going there, the church and various ministries were significantly smaller. When I think back, I feel like I grew up in a small youth ministry. When I was in junior high, the ministry was six students and when I was in high school, the ministry was twenty-five. The reason I am telling you this is because I think sometimes people look at where my church is now and who I am as a youth pastor now and believe that it's always been this way. That's not the case.

It's easy *and human* to sometimes feel like we can't do something because of context, numbers, and resources. I want to encourage and reassure you that everything I am going to share is not based on the setting I am in or the resources I have been given as a youth pastor.

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Don't get me wrong—I am grateful for my church, my pastor, and the blessings I have. But disciplemaking isn't really based on any of that. When I discipled Allison our youth ministry and looked very different than it does today. My approach to discipleship has always been relationship centric and does not revolve around a number or a large room. If anything, the high numbers have been my biggest challenge in my setting. I am a one-on-one, small group kind of a gal, and big rooms of people cause my palms to sweat. No, really. It's the Lord's sense of humor that has me where I am.

All this to say, the church I serve has impacted me and influenced me beyond measure. But the principles I'll share are meant to be transferrable to any setting or context. There will be times when I tell stories from my church, but I am hopeful the big picture principles can find their way into your setting.

The last youth pastor-y thing you should know about me is that I love and believe in the local church. I am called to it. I love youth ministry and feel like I have the best job in the world. Over the years, many have asked me why I haven't moved on to bigger, more important platforms in our church, such as adult ministry. My response has always been the same: I believe I AM serving in the most important area of the church. There is nothing more worth my time than making disciples of the women of the next generation.

I am a mom

I've got a bunch of kids. Well, three. But there are times when that feels like “a bunch.”

My husband, Ron, and I have Abby, our oldest daughter who is twenty-two, Ella, our middle daughter who is nineteen, and the baby, our eleven-year-old son, Cooper. This feels important to share with you because I cannot talk about discipleship and disciplemaking and not think about my own kids.

For Ron and me, one of our greatest desires for our kids is to see them become dedicated disciples of Jesus. We know the best life ever is a life lived with and for Jesus and we have wanted that for each of them since the first day we met. As their parents we have always understood

our role as the primary disciplemakers, but we also knew that we were never meant to do it alone.

A few years back, when our two daughters went through our middle school and high school ministries, we experienced the blessing of partnering with the church in the discipleship process. Honestly, it was the greatest season and yet, one of the most difficult as a parent. As both a mom and a youth pastor, I have a few scars from those years. Sometimes I flash back to the eye rolls and slamming doors and stomping away and I get shivers. Sometimes I can still hear the faint sound of my daughter's voice telling me how annoying I am. Again, shivers.

All that to say, though, we made it. But not alone. We had a village of adults whose voices spoke into our teenage girls, all playing different roles in the disciplemaking process. Going through the tween and teen years with my own kids was a turning point for me. It was in this season that I had a front row seat to witness the power of the discipleship process in my own home. Watching my girls as teenagers only grew my desire to see every daughter find her way to Jesus and a life with him.

Today, I can see with a little more clarity how our role as parents and their relationships with others have shaped our girls. Over the years there have been a lot of faith ups and downs, but in hindsight I can see the series of intentional and unintentional discipleship moments with our girls that contributed to them becoming the disciples they are today. Real talk: They are both still in the discipleship process and still have their weekly faith ups and downs. I don't want you to get the impression I've got perfect angel daughters who are getting it right all of the time. They are not that, but they are my very favorite two women who walk the Earth.

SHOULD WE DEFINE SOME THINGS?

I realize there are many books and resources out there that talk about discipleship. I fully understand I am not blowing your mind with the topic here. However, I do think this conversation is always relevant and there are always new perspectives, stories, and ways to help us understand our role in this process. So, before we do anything else, I

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think I should define some of the key terms and phrases we are going to talk about to make sure we are on the same page.

When I talk about a **DISCIPLE**, I am talking about a dedicated follower of Jesus who is striving to learn from him, stay close with him, and be led by him in daily life.

Whew, that feels like a tall order for teenage girls, but notice I used the word “striving.” At this stage we are not working toward being a fully developed follower, we are working toward being dedicated and striving, putting girls on a trajectory toward a lifelong walk with Jesus.

When I talk about a **DISCIPLEMAKER**, I am talking about a dedicated disciple of Jesus who is striving to lead by example and live with integrity, someone who is committed to pass down the ways of Jesus to the next generation.

Again, feels like a tall order, but you will see the word “striving” again here too. Why? Well, just because the disciplemaker is further along in their journey with Jesus does not mean they will always have it all together or won’t make mistakes. We are all always in the sanctification process. The word “striving” is important in both definitions.

When I talk about the **DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS**, I am talking about the process of becoming a disciple through relationships. *Relational discipleship* is the process of discipleship through which we see teenage girls become stronger disciples of Jesus.

I understand that this is a broad topic influenced and shaped by many different insights, schools of thought, beliefs, and approaches. This is just ONE way to view this conversation.

These might not be definitions or ways of thinking you have used before, but these are the terms we will use as we move ahead together.

OKAY, SO WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

The chapters ahead break down disciplemaking with girls into four parts.

Part 1: Understanding Teenage Girls

This is a hilarious header. As I type, I am giggling. As if any of us could ever fully understand a teenage girl. That's not a burn, it's just the truth. As a former teenage girl, I feel like I can say that because I was nuts and a puzzle and awesome all at the same time. However, that's a different book. But it is important for us to understand our audience, learn as much as we can, and commit to continuing to learn as we disciple girls. These chapters will deep dive into the knowns—and call out the unknowns—of teenage girls. The more we understand, the more effective and thoughtful we can be in the discipling process.

Part Two: With is the Way

If we want to see girls become strong disciples, they need mature, godly women and men to give them examples to follow and show them the way to a life with Jesus. But who are these people and where do we find them? What characteristics are crucial in someone who is going to disciple teenage girls? In these chapters, we are going to spend some time unpacking the powerful impact of relational discipleship, building a team of disciplers, and equipping that team to disciple teenage girls. With relationships being a key component of discipling, it's worth our time to think about WHO we are asking, WHAT they will do, and HOW they will be the most effective in their role.

Part Three: The Ingredients That Make Up a Disciple

Every person is unique, but there are some crucial ingredients that help put a girl on the trajectory toward becoming a devoted disciple of Jesus. Since there is no one-size-fits-all approach, these chapters will focus on four key ingredients that we mix together to make disciples: building relationships, practice and experience, partnering with parents, and intentional rallying points for relational discipleship.

Part Four: Let's Make Disciples, People!

Content dedicated to deepening faith plays a very important role in relational discipleship. It's not the only piece, but the subjects of our conversations, the content we teach, and the ways we dive into God's Word together are all crucial pieces of discipling. In these chapters we are going to unpack how to choose content, some vital elements to know about that content, and how intentional conversations can open the door to utilizing content for making disciples.

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PUT EVERYTHING INTO YOUR OWN CONTEXT

I understand that we are all coming from different places and spaces. As you journey through this book, my prayer is that you would be able to take some of these pieces and implement them in your setting. The thought of your girls becoming stronger disciples of Jesus just warms my heart. I hope this book encourages you, inspires you, gives you courage, and leaves you with some practical starting points for discipling teenage girls.

Okay, are you ready? Let's make some disciples, people!