

Leader's Guide for

Stride: Creating a Discipleship Pathway for Your Life

Congratulations and thank you for leading your small group, Sunday school class, or other group on this journey to grow as disciples. Our prayers are with you!

There are many ways to use this curriculum. You are encouraged to use your best judgment on how the materials will work best with the group you are leading. Here are just a few options to get you thinking:

1. Ask each person in your group to read the assigned section prior to your scheduled meeting.
2. Read that session's spiritual discipline section during your meeting. If possible, go around the room and have everyone read a paragraph or two.
3. Ask everyone to read the assigned section prior to your meeting, and then during the meeting, read a few key paragraphs again as a refresher prior to asking the questions.

Here is a sample agenda for you to use or adapt as needed:

- a. Spend time in fellowship. (10-15 minutes)
- b. Open with prayer and scripture based on that session's spiritual discipline. Each section starts with several verses.
- c. Facilitate a conversation based on the questions at the end of each section of the book. Based on your reading, experience, and preparation, you may want to add a question or two. Be sure to hear from each person in the group and avoid having anyone dominate or take the group off track. (This conversation should be the main part of your time together.)
- d. If you are reading the sections together, you may want to pause and interject a question from the last page when it feels appropriate during the session instead of waiting until the end.
- e. Encourage each person to write down a next small step they are planning to take based on where they are currently in this session's spiritual discipline.

- f. Ask everyone to share their next step with either the whole group or at least one other person in the group.
- g. Where appropriate, ask each person to share how they are doing on previous next step commitments. (Celebrate as much as possible!)
- h. Share prayer concerns.
- i. Close in prayer.

Please adapt this to create an approach you feel will work best with your group.

The image on page 3 showing the eight spiritual disciplines in a wheel with Jesus at the center should be your guide throughout this whole study. We recommend that you refer back to that image at least once during each of your sessions. While growing into the likeness of Christ is everyone's target, as the group leader, you will need to keep everyone focused on just taking their appropriate next step. Since the study covers eight different spiritual disciplines, there could be a tendency for people to try and take eight steps, one in each of the disciplines. **That is not our intention.** A person might be able to take a small step in two or three disciplines during the same season of life, but trying to take eight steps all at the same time would probably cause more harm than good. As the leader, try to help each person in your group prioritize their appropriate next steps. For example, each person in your group may identify a step they want to take in each of the disciplines. Part of your conversation will be to help each other determine whether this is a step to take now or later. Each of us is at a different place on our spiritual journey. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to growing as a disciple. Use the collective wisdom and experience of the group to help each other discern the most appropriate next steps for each person in the group. Pray for God's Spirit to guide you.

While all of the spiritual disciplines are important, we feel that the disciplines of reading scripture, serving, and financial giving are catalyst to someone's journey to growing into the likeness of Christ. Our experience has shown that when a person grows in those disciplines, they don't just take a small step—they tend to take a **stride** forward! We encourage you to treat those three sections a little different than the others. Here are a few suggestions for ways to emphasize those three disciplines:

- **Spiritual Discipline of Scripture.** Find several different versions of the Bible you can use during that section. Try to find at least one very old, very large Bible. A Hebrew Bible would be a great addition also. You may also want to have a smartphone app or two of the Bible to share with the group. The YouVersion app from Life.Church or Bible Gateway from HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc. are outstanding options. Talk about the different versions and translations of the Bible. Explain the difference between a word-for-word translation and an idiomatic translation, like The Message. If you have time, share the story of John Wycliffe, the person often credited with translating the whole Bible into English.

- **Spiritual Discipline of Serving.** Schedule a group serving project as soon as possible before or after the meeting on this topic. Look for something local like a homeless shelter or soup kitchen, maybe a work project of some type. An experience that is new to everyone in the group works best. If you do a service project in the community prior to your meeting, you might want to schedule a group serve at your church the weekend after you meet.
- **Spiritual Discipline of Financial Giving.** This is a very personal and private area for many people. Our goal is to keep the focus on giving as a spiritual discipline and not make it all about money. Partner with your pastor or church staff to obtain information about how the financial resources of the church are used. If your church is part of a larger association or denomination, locate the same type of budget information. During your meeting, have each person in the group list a ministry or church event where they feel lives are being changed (Celebrate Recovery, children’s ministry, baptisms, food pantry, etc.). Be sure to add some of your own ideas based on the church information you obtained. Emphasize how financial giving makes all of those life-changing ministries possible! (Yes, financial giving also pays for things like facilities, utilities, and salaries—but the connection to life change can be more challenging with those areas.)

Here are a few notes and suggestions for the other sections:

- **Discipleship Overview.** The intention of this section is to lay the groundwork for all of the following chapters. While you can certainly do the chapters in any order, we do recommend you start with this chapter. Be sure to spend an appropriate amount of time allowing people in the group to complete the spiritual disciplines self-reflection if they have not already done so. Remind everyone that this is not meant to be a complete listing of all spiritual disciplines, but it is a good starting point for most of us on our journey. If you have the book *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, you may want to bring it to the session so you can read the closing section right from that book.
- **Spiritual Discipline of Prayer.** The three B’s of prayer at the beginning are not mentioned again in the chapter. You may want to facilitate a discussion about them at some point during your meeting. Ask the group for times in their lives when they have experienced answered prayers. Discuss times when people have actually felt people praying for them. In our book *Stride: Creating a Discipleship Pathway for Your Church*, we talked about prayerwalking. Take your group on a short prayerwalk. Debrief by asking them what they heard from God during their time of walking and praying.
- **Spiritual Discipline of Worship.** The word *worship* is used in many different ways in churches. As your group talks about this topic, be sure to keep the focus clearly on our worship of God. Depending on the makeup of your group, there is a possibility

that this session could be a discussion of music styles, worship technology, order of worship, or other areas. We encourage you not to brush those off but to try and have an honest discussion about them. (As long as the conversation is not too negative or taking too much of your allotted time.) For most of us who grew up attending church, the type and style of worship we experienced early in life became the “right” way to worship. Anything else is at least uncomfortable. Scripture clearly encourages us to worship in many different ways, as long as it is all directed at God. We need to be careful we are not worshipping a style of music, type of service, or even the facilities of our local churches. You may want to show a few minutes of different types of worship from videos on YouTube and then talk about only the positive aspects of each.

- **Spiritual Discipline of Sabbath.** This is another section where some people may be feeling a lot of guilt. This is one commandment most of us have broken. Remind the group that we cannot go back and change our past, but we can start now and change our future. Like all of these spiritual disciplines, it can start with a small step. A half-day Sabbath is better than none at all. Facilitate a discussion about what a real Sabbath would look like for each person in the group. Look for ways they might go from where they are today toward that goal, one step at a time.
- **Spiritual Discipline of Community.** There are some interesting videos available on YouTube concerning social media facts and statistics. Even the ones that are a little dated are still cool. You may want to start your session with one of these. Before this session, you might want to find out how many people attend your church and approximately how many of them are in some type of Christian community (small group, Sunday school class, etc.). Based on that information, you may want to discuss how your group might help others in your church connect to a group. One of the best ways is for someone in a current group to start a new group. The most important part of this chapter might be the last section where we share several key elements of effective Christian communities. Be sure to spend an appropriate amount of time discussing each of those elements.
- **Spiritual Discipline of Witness.** Consider starting this session with a video of the song “Amazing Grace.” Too many Christians only think of this discipline in terms of taking a person who has never heard the good news and getting them baptized. While that may be the case for some, for most of us we should just focus on reaching “ONE” and helping them take a step closer to Christ. Our “ONE” is usually going to be someone we already know very well—in many cases, a member of our family. We encourage you to spend some quality time helping people in your group write their personal story of what has changed in their life as a result of following Jesus, and who in their “fishing pond” they will begin to pray for and speak to as the Holy Spirit leads them.

- **Spiritual Discipline of Presence.** This chapter is not one of the main eight, so you and your group may or may not get to this discipline. We provided it in the appendix because we know it is a challenge for many Christians today. The average churchgoing person today in America attends their home church about twice a month. In our denomination, The United Methodist Church, members of a local church take a vow before God to support their local church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. It is still a challenge to get members to attend each week. Life today is busy, but where we spend our time always comes down to priorities. For those in your group who are attending church every week already, you may want to challenge them to still find a way to grow in this discipline. While attending more is what we usually think of first, the “out-of-the-box” idea might be to find ways to encourage others to attend more often. Ask your pastor what would happen in your church if everyone who called your church home attended one or two additional times next year.

As you take your group through this study, look out for a few things. First, some people may try to take a step in all of the spiritual disciplines at the same time, as mentioned earlier. That would likely be overwhelming to most people and might cause more harm than good. The intention is not for anyone to try and take too many steps at once. As Christians, we do of course need to grow closer to Christ in each discipline. However, trying to do too many at once is not helpful. Be sure to emphasize this to your group at the first session, and again several times as you work through the study. A good rule to follow might be for each person to limit themselves to taking a step in only two or three disciplines during a season of life. That would mean they are doing all of the spiritual disciplines, but only focused on growing in a few at any one time.

Also, be prepared for someone who might be uncomfortable with this talk of growing as a disciple. There may be a generation of people in your church who feel they have completed their journey. We need to treat them with extra love and grace. In many cases, churches have offered classes and programs where participants might feel they have somehow “completed” discipleship by completing those classes and programs. This can be a major paradigm shift for some to suddenly discover that they are not finished growing as a disciple of Christ. Be gentle. Take very small steps. Help them see, in love, that none of us are “done” as long as we are on this side of heaven. We all have steps to take. Provide lots of encouragement, and celebrate when they take a step.

The intention of this study is to help everyone in your group, including you, take a step on their spiritual journey. The second main purpose of this study is for everyone to have a clear understanding that this journey is never complete on this side of heaven. As the leader of the group, we encourage you to help everyone in your group see the life-long journey aspect of discipleship. One way to reinforce this, if your group is staying together after this study, is to take time every month or so to ask everyone to share what spiritual discipline step they are working on now, and how the group might help them.

Our goal as disciples is to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. We hope this study will be a resource to help you and your group do so. Discipleship is a way of life for the rest of our lives. We come to church to be fed, so that we can learn to feed ourselves, so that we can join in the process of feeding others. Wherever we are on that journey, what's most important is to take the next step. Blessings on your journey!
