

ACADEMY OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

GETTING STARTED GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Academy of Christian Discipleship. Our aim within the Academy is to provide churches with easy-to-access, theologically insightful discipleship materials to help pastors and other church leaders intentionally disciple their congregations to become true apprentices of Jesus.

As hard as we work to make our material accessible, we also recognize that it can be intimidating to think about implementing a new program or study format in your church. We hope that this guide will simplify the process and offer a clear road map to recruiting, launching, evaluating and growing your program.

We've done our best to include all the hard-won insight from our partner churches who have had great success studying in the Academy – but if you find that you still have questions, our team is always happy to connect with you to troubleshoot! Reach out to us at oce@whitworth.edu.

GETTING STARTED

1. Contact the OCE for access to the materials

- a. All the information about study tracks and registration can be found at www.whitworth.edu/academy. On the webpage, select the “register as a church” link and submit the form.
- b. Once you submit this form, our office will be in contact shortly. We can provide access to the study material early on to allow time for planning.
- c. Gracey Gonzalez will be your point person for additional questions, payment and access to materials – ggonzalez@whitworth.edu

2. Develop a team of leaders

We've seen churches be successful developing leaders in two ways, but we want to emphasize that *your* leadership can't be hands off in this process. Consistent engagement with leaders is the key to successful small groups. Try these strategies:

- a. Launch a large group: Some churches have found success by launching an Academy study church-wide right off the bat. These churches have recruited leaders and trained them on the job through periodic gatherings to check in and troubleshoot problems.
- b. Start small: Other churches have walked through their chosen Academy track with a small group of leaders first. This allows leaders to get familiar with the material and receive training on facilitation. If you go this route, we still suggest periodic meetings with leaders once the full program has launched.

3. Recruit!

As you recruit, it's important to set up participants for what they should expect in the process. Studying in the Academy of Christian Discipleship is likely a bit different than other small groups your church members have participated in. Participants should be prepared for homework, spiritual exercises and deep engagement with the material. These tips should help you:

- a. Set up the “why” for the small groups well. Small groups are meant to make disciples, to develop serious followers of Jesus. Jerry Sittser thinks of discipleship this way – if you put a detective on the tail of a Christian for two weeks without them knowing, that

person will look recognizably Christian all the time. Be sure that people who sign up recognize that this is the goal – transformation!

- b. Have a champion. Find someone (or a couple people) who has already bought in to this discipleship process and empower them to follow through. This champion can be on staff or a lay leader/volunteer, which can take some of the pressure off an already over-worked pastor!
- c. Consider developing some groups around specific categories such as men, women, couples, choir members, young adults, etc.
- d. Remind your people often that the Christian faith is imbued with grace from beginning to end. We don't want to fall into the sin of the Galatians: starting in grace but ending in works.

4. **Send your list and payment to OCE**

Once you've recruited participants, you should compile their names and emails in the "participant list template" (available on our website) and send it on to the OCE (don't worry, we don't add them to email lists or anything like that – it just helps us keep track of participation for our own internal reporting/processes). If we haven't provided you with access to the materials already, this is when you will receive all the links you need.

5. **Launch**

This is the fun part! As small groups launch, it's important for each group to decide on a group meeting structure. One important consideration is whether groups will watch the videos together or separately. If together, then preview your set up to avoid technical difficulties and allow for enough time. If separately, encourage members to watch around the same time of week. Each group should build a rhythm and expectation of consistency. More tips for small groups can be found in our Small Group Guide (also on our website). For now, here a few other important considerations:

- a. Set an order of operations (e.g., 10-minute social time, watch video, discuss, final prayer)
- b. Always start on time and always finish on time.
- c. Devote time to what's happening in the lives of group members through the spiritual practices – don't get stuck on the video content, get to application!

Remember that flexibility is built into each study track – decide what is best for your group and stick with it for a while, but if the structure isn't working for your group, you can always make a change (like meeting every other week, taking a break during the holidays, spending more than one meeting with each session topic). The most important part is that you are true to what the process is trying to accomplish – building mature disciples!

6. **Assess progress and evaluate success**

As we mentioned above, it's important to be hands on with the small group leaders. By developing a method of checking in and troubleshooting with group leaders, you will be able to get a general idea of how the process is progressing. These meetings should do two things:

- a. Help leaders deal with common problems like one person talking all the time, members getting hung up on small theological issues, lack of participation in homework, etc. You want to empower leaders to handle problems so they don't get sidetracked.
- b. Give you a sense of how the goals of the process are being met. Remember that these study tracks are counteracting a tendency toward consumerism in the church. You want

to continue to orient leaders toward the “why” of the process. Be sure to ask questions of group leaders that give you a sense of how meetings/discussions are moving from discussion of information to application and personal transformation.

7. Develop a strategy for growth

Our goal in the Academy is to help you elevate the spiritual maturity of the whole congregation, not just a few members – and to avoid the problem of creating any sense of an “in group” and “out group.” To accomplish this, you should aim to multiply small groups. This requires a process of moving people from mere interest to genuine commitment. Most churches that succeed in this endeavor follow one of three strategies:

- a. Divide groups after a year or two and add new members to each group.
- b. Send out leaders from existing groups to form new small groups.
- c. Recruit and train a group of leaders for a year or two, then deploy them as small group leaders for the wider congregation.

As mentioned before, no matter what strategy you follow, it is important that you stay connected with the leaders of the groups through both formal and informal meetings. Our final tip is simple – pray. God wants to grow the church in both maturity and size. We are responsible to do our part, of course, but as Paul says, “God gives the growth.”