

Parallel FAITH

WALKING
ALONGSIDE OTHERS
ON THEIR JOURNEY
TO CHRIST

DAVE BODEN

“Having just returned from two weeks in Turkey walking the ancient streets of the seven churches mentioned in the book Revelation, I marvelled at how the early disciples acted with such courage, creativity, and cultural awareness to turn their world upside down. Ever since, I’ve been wondering how we got so far away from that early sense of mission and how we can recapture that in our twenty-first-century world?”

In his refreshing book *Parallel Faith*, Dave Boden provides us with a wonderfully engaging call to disciple-making for today’s culture. It’s an inspiring, practical, and winsome exploration of Jesus’ command to make disciples. Boden explores how we can recapture the heart of disciple-making without using gimmicks or pressure for conversions, but in being true friends in close proximity in the ordinariness of others’ lives.

Dave emphasizes a process of walking alongside others aiming for transformation in Jesus and not settling for a simple transaction with a stale, one-size-fits-all message. Filled with thoughtful reflection questions, insightful illustrations, and engaging stories, *Parallel Faith* helps ordinary disciples take courageous steps to listen generously to others, reframe the misconceptions of Jesus held by many, and creatively demonstrate the hope that is in Jesus Christ. Readers will benefit tremendously from Dave’s abundant experience and the wonderfully rich practical applications. I can hardly wait to give it out to my friends, colleagues, and those I train to take the good news of Christ to a seemingly foreign culture in our day!”

—**Brett Andrews, director of People Development,
Youth for Christ Canada**

“Companionship has too often been lost to consumption in our modern approach to Christianity. But relationships will always be the wineskin of the Word incarnate. *Parallel Faith* is a much-needed manifesto to help restore the heart of Jesus for walking alongside others.”

—**Ben Arment, author of *Dream Year:
Make the Leap from a Job You Hate to a Life You Love***

“Dave is a tremendous gift to all who know him. He is authentic, kind, funny, and passionately committed to walking with others to help them find Christ. My hope and prayer for you is that this book will inspire you and equip you to walk well, walk slowly, and walk intentionally with others to help them in their walk with Jesus.”

—**Pete Baker, co-senior leader, Life Church Lancashire, UK**

“This real, honest, thought-provoking book is packed full of wisdom told through the power of personal story—the stories of those who have gone before and the greatest story ever told, the Bible. *Parallel Faith* is not just another book on discipleship but an opportunity to reflect on your own journey and consider how you can help others on theirs. Dave doesn’t just teach about parallel faith, he lives it, which is why this book is a must-read.”

—**Matt Brown, founder and national director,
Reality Youth Project, UK**

“*Parallel Faith* delves into discipleship by prioritizing walking alongside others on their journey to Christ. Dave has developed an intricate road map that allows each person to pull from their personal gifts in discipling others. This book sets up the reader to succeed in the God-given privilege of not only leading others to Christ but also discipling them to go and do likewise.”

—Gayla Congdon, founder, Amor Ministries
—Scott Congdon, founder, Encourager

“Dave Boden’s work overflows with refreshing reminders that as an apprentice to Jesus, you have something to offer that no algorithm can: ‘genuine human connection, care, and understanding.’ He brilliantly and practically offers tools for meaningful and authentic connections with others and for ‘approaching life with a sense of inquisitiveness rooted in awe and wonder.’ *Parallel Faith* offers guidance for creating caring relationships that offer opportunities to explore what God is really like in safe spaces. Prepare to have your paradigms shifted in unexpected ways by the truth that ‘loving the person in front of you can indeed be done on any schedule.’ If you’ve been looking for a guidebook for effective and sincere discipleship, you’ve found it!”

—Juni Felix, author and radio host,
Stanford Behavior Design Lab Teaching Team

“As church communities around the globe flounder with the struggle to be relevant and sustainable, I truly believe that the way forward is disciple-making congregations. In his book *Parallel Faith*, Boden paints a picture of a discipleship path that will prove valuable for anyone who wishes to consider how to engage in disciple-making in a practical way.”

—Rev. Leanne Friesen, lead pastor,
Mount Hamilton Baptist Church, Canada

“Dave has the amazing privilege of respectfully understanding the culture of approximately 10,000 teenagers in secular education, bringing an appropriate Christian perspective to their experience. This is evidenced in how he leads us to grapple with the issue of our own disciple-making effectiveness. *Parallel Faith* is a powerfully helpful book that enables me to be better equipped to share my faith in post-Christian Britain, and in ways that make sense to the Jesus who asks me to share my faith with those who need me to do so. It was an enormous privilege to read a book I would gladly buy and pass on.”

—John Fudge, CEO, Amor Europe

“*Parallel Faith* encourages us all to see that disciple-making is possible and powerful. Dave inspires and provokes us to see that step by step and side by side, we can see Jesus work in and through us all. Dave’s inspiring honesty moves us in one moment and make us laugh in the next. May it bless and boldly challenge many.”

—Amy Summerfield, CEO, Kyria Network, Head of development,
Skylark International, Zeo Church, Hitchin, UK

“There are lots of books on evangelism and lots of books on discipleship, but I love how my friend Dave Boden fuses evangelism and discipleship in this brilliant book. It is both challenging and inspiring, practical and doable, biblical and personal. Even if you don’t feel you have much time to read, *Parallel Faith* is written in such a way that it can be easily read in short sessions. Honestly, this is a must-read for any follower of Jesus, however long you have been on the journey.”

—**Rev. Mark Greenwood, national evangelist and head of evangelism,
Elim Churches UK**

“A must-read for every Christian! Dave has a unique and light-hearted way of writing and inspiring all of us to take the path of intentionality when it comes to connecting and walking with others and leading them one step closer to Christ. This book helps us all rethink how we can be a positive influence and connect with others with open hearts and curious minds. It is God’s work, and we are all called to play a part in it.”

—**Jo Haaijer, European director, OneHope**

“In this book, Dave Boden offers us an accessible and inspiring opportunity to take a deep breath and reset both the purpose and trajectory of our lives. As he puts it, ‘Proximity changes perspective.’ In a culture constantly clamoring for more ‘reach’ and increased ‘platform,’ Boden reminds us that the greatest missional impact to be made is right here in the relationships of possibility and promise in our midst.”

—**Jay Y. Kim, lead pastor, WestGate Church, San Jose, California,
Teacher-in-residence, Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, California,
Author of *Analog Christian: Cultivating Contentment,
Resilience, and Wisdom in the Digital Age***

“There is such a deep need in our world for disciple-makers and insight into how we journey with people through transformational moments. Dave Boden has done a wonderful job of equipping all of us to change lives. *Parallel Faith* is a profoundly relevant, passionately winsome, and stylishly eloquent step-by-step guide of how we can make lifelong disciples of Jesus. I’m grateful for my friend’s contribution to this important area of life and ministry.”

—**Phil Knox, evangelism and missiology,
senior specialist, Evangelical Alliance,
Author of *The Best of Friends: Choose Wisely, Care Well***

“This book isn’t just a nice reflection of how Jesus wants to do life with others; it’s an inspiring example of how the author himself has been walking alongside others on the road to Christ for years. Life is done better together, and Dave Boden is someone that anyone would love to have on their journey.”

—**Dan Randall, YxYA director, HOPE Together**

“In the same way Jesus used parables to demystify the kingdom of God, Dave Boden has written *Parallel Faith* in such a way to demystify what is often *perceived* as more complicated than it really is: discipleship. In doing so, Boden draws and equips the everyday follower of Jesus toward Jesus’ compelling vision for all of his followers to join him in his disciple-making work, right where they live.”

—Alice Matagora, leader development, *The Navigators*,
Author of *How to Save the World: Disciplemaking Made Simple*

“If you’re looking for a fresh approach to disciple-making and evangelism, Dave Boden’s book is for you. It’s filled with great stories, current research, and biblical principles. Boden takes a subject that is profusely written about and brings new insights and new approaches. You won’t find nice concepts here but practical principles and how-tos drawn from real life that will empower you to engage with people relationally and biblically where you live, work, or play.”

—Bill Mowry, author of *The Ways of the Alongsider: Growing Disciples Life to Life*

“The church has a desperate need for more voices like Dave Boden’s—those who are helping us understand how the people around us typically come to faith, showing us how to draw others to Jesus as we pace alongside them rather than push or pull. I cannot commend *Parallel Faith* highly enough! Dave’s clear, compelling, and practical guidance feels like a friend whose encouragement gets you excited to share your faith again in everyday interactions as it guides you each step of the way.”

—Darin Stevens, director, *Start to Stir*, Bicester, UK
Author of *The Stir Course*

“*Parallel Faith* is a must-read for anyone who is passionate about Jesus and longs to see his life reproduced in and through them. Dave writes with an inspiring and a practical blend of wisdom, humour, challenge, and honesty, provoking every Christ-follower to rethink disciple-making in a way that is accessible, achievable, and powerful. May this bucketload of truth-bombs explode good news to everybody you meet.”

—Matt Summerfield, senior pastor, *Zeo Church*, Hitchin, UK

“Practical and powerful discipleship tools from a real disciple-maker. For years, I’ve wished that every Christian could see how Dave and Leah Boden disciple those around them. With this book, now they can. I have learned more about living life alongside others as a Jesus follower from Dave than any other individual. He has walked beside me for much of my life following Jesus—and now through this book, he gets to walk beside you too.”

—David Bowden, executive director, *Spoken Gospel*

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INTRODUCTION

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:1

Just off the beautiful Mull of Kintyre Peninsula in Scotland is the secluded Davaar Island, accessible only by foot at low tide. What makes this place so unique is that the rugged shoreline hides seven mysterious caves. Each one is explorable by those willing to relive their childhood adventures and who can judge their timing's right. Davaar is a place teeming with wildlife. Otters, seabirds, and eagles can be spotted alongside dolphins, whales, and even the occasional basking shark. It is also an area of Britain rich in spiritual heritage, where ancient saints tell us ancient stories.

There is one such tale that has always fascinated me. In 1887, a local man named Archibald MacKinnon had a vivid dream in which God instructed him to paint an image of Christ in a cave on Davaar. MacKinnon then worked in secret, traveling back and forth over several weeks, painting directly onto the cave wall. When the final detailed image of Christ was first discovered by the local townsfolk, a great excitement gripped them all, as it convinced them this was a sign from God.

Visitors flocked from all over Scotland and beyond to visit this holy sight. But the delighted crowds soon became a baying mob when someone discovered that a mere mortal had created it. Rather than celebrating his artistry and innovation, the townsfolk exiled MacKinnon indefinitely!

I first heard this story while on a family holiday in the area and was determined to see the painting for myself. On a fine sunny day, the six of us set off across the sandy causeway that led to the island, trying to navigate the shifting tides. I knew I would need a guide to help me find the icon, so I had researched a travel blog that would walk me step by step through the entire journey: Turn left at this large rock here; pass the lighthouse over there; don't go too far past the lookout point. The Crucifixion Cave, as it is known, was the last of seven sea caves that ring the southern shore.

My wife, Leah, and I, along with all four of our children—Nyah, Joel, Micah, and Sienna-Raine—weaved in and out of the damp mossy caverns, counting them down until at last we came to cave number seven. Six pairs of eyes darted around at every darkened rock face as we rushed inside the triangular-shaped cavern to find the big reveal. But within minutes, the sounds of joy and glee turned to grumbles and complaints. Having scoured every inch of the cave walls, we had a growing sense of frustration in not finding what we were looking for.

Where on earth was Jesus?

We must have stepped in and out of that cave at least ten times, but Christ was nowhere to be seen. My children became disengaged and were ready to start the long coastal trek back before the tide came in. I was deeply confused, wondering where I had missed a vital instruction. And then, just as I was about to give up, I rechecked the guide and returned into the cave to take another look at a large open space just inside the entrance.

Suddenly, there he was.

A shaft of light hit a slanting rock in just the right way, and I saw his face. His arms were outstretched on his fragile body that held onto a wooden cross against a blue-tinted sky. I had been in that place before but somehow missed what was right in front of me.

I finally saw Jesus.

How on earth had I missed the one who had so obviously been there all along?

Seeing Christ for the first time felt nothing short of wondrous, and it was a holy moment for us all. But I never imagined he would be that hard to find, even when I had been told where to look. Without that guide, there was absolutely no chance I would have ever found him.

After that experience in Scotland, I have had a nagging concern that has stayed with me ever since: What if the people in our world can't find the real Jesus even when they've been told where to look? Who are the guides willing to help others discover Jesus amid all the darkness?

That's what this book is all about. I want to call us to recapture the simplicity of becoming those who walk with others until they discover Jesus from their starting point and not ours. It asks the pressing question: Do we point people in the vague direction of Jesus and then hope they can find him on their own, or are we willing to walk with them side by side on the journey?

Walking Parallel with People

All around us, there are people who don't yet know what it is like to have seen Jesus for who he really is. They are still waiting for their holy moment.

- There are those who are searching for something but don't know what they're looking for.
- Some have been looking for so long that they've given up trying altogether.
- Many had a glimpse of what they thought was Jesus only to be disappointed by yet another false impression.
- Others have been to where they thought they would find him, but they were so hurt that they may never go back there again.

If only there was one who would walk alongside them and point the way.

The word *parallel* comes from the Greek *parallēlos*, which consists of *para* meaning “alongside” and *allēlos* meaning “one another.” There are fifty-nine verses in the Bible that speak to the idea of *one-anothering*. While these speak primarily to our efforts within the church community, they also point to how we ought to behave with everyone. We ought not to restrict the command to love one another to an exclusive club. Loving others means being near them.

Jesus’ approach was consistently up close and personal, walking with everyone from Pharisees to prostitutes, tax collectors to fishermen, friend to foe. The secret to helping any person encounter Jesus today lies in the potency of our proximity. Jesus didn’t stay in his holy huddle. As John 1:14 reads in the Message Bible,

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

Christ modeled for us incarnationally what it means to leave the security blanket of heaven for the sake of the world. Like Jesus, we are called to leave the comfort of our own space.

Proximity changes our perspective. We are much less likely to stereotype those from a different culture, generation, or even faith if we actually know a person from that background. This also works both ways. If a person outside the church gets to know a Christian, they are much more likely to overcome their barriers or hang-ups about Christianity.

Being present provokes empathy. If you know someone who has overcome an addiction or dealt with a major life trauma, then you are more likely to have compassion for them. When we hear of a terrible incident in our immediate neighborhood, it hits harder than if it took place on the other side of the world. The closer we are, the more connected we feel.

Proximity also invokes intimacy. According to scientific research,¹ students who sit near one another in a classroom or colleagues who work next to each other in an office statistically become better friends. There is a link between the time people spend together and the level of closeness they develop.

Let's start by considering our personal proximity problem. Ask yourself: Who do I have in my life outside of my religious bubble?

The Christian life is about walking with Jesus and walking with people. We can walk with people through their conflicts, their chaos, and their celebrations. All the while, we can point to Christ as our source of hope and love others deeply, even if they don't see Jesus in the same way we do. I am not a huge fan of the phrase "friendship evangelism" as it implies that we might use our relationships with others merely as a recruitment tactic. Nobody likes a hidden agenda. How about just friendship? Consent in relationships is the foundation of trust. Permission is a key to mission. Being clear and confident about who you are, what you stand for, and what your intentions are is all part of building a healthy connection with others.

I like the idea of a being on a shared journey. As you walk parallel with Jesus, your friends, colleagues, neighbors, and wider spheres of influence can see the benefits of a consistent lifestyle of faith, hope, and love. This is about both *showing* and *telling*. You are not developing friendships dependent on a particular set of outcomes. You just love people. And you let them love you too.

Unexpectedly, we can find an example of this kind of consistent relationship in the life of a world-famous celebrity. In a post-lockdown *GQ* article, we discover Justin Bieber's low point during one of the toughest seasons in his life. Walking with him during this time was well-known pastor Judah Smith, who refused to let go of hope on Bieber's behalf. The *GQ* article describes that anticipated breakthrough:

When Bieber finally began to emerge from his bad years and to seek guidance, Smith was still there. And Bieber noticed that, in retrospect, Smith had never asked him for anything. "He put our relationship first," Bieber says. And then he started to notice other things, too, like the way Smith's family seemed to care for one another. "It was something I always dreamed of because my family was broken," Bieber says. "My whole life, I had a broken

family. And so I was just attracted to a family that eats dinners together, laughs together, talks together.”²

In this snapshot, we see the importance of walking with people even when they seem far from desiring any engagement with God. Smith was *still there*. That’s the key. He left ajar the door of their relationship. This story inspires me to pray that God will help me be there for others and become that nonanxious presence and the nonjudgmental advocate we often wish we had for ourselves. It’s about consistently walking parallel with purpose and parallel with people, no matter where they’re at.

When a person explores faith alongside us, they’re not just making big decisions about God, they’re making micro decisions about us. As someone tries to figure out where Jesus is, they often watch our lives closely and ask questions such as:

- Do I trust this person?
- Can I be open with them?
- What difference does *their* God make to them?
- Do I want what they have?
- Do they care about me?

Authentic, vulnerable relationships are foundational to helping those who don’t know Jesus to move from a place of being uninterested to becoming spiritually curious. It’s rare that we can delegate this process to a celebrity Christian or a pastor on a screen or a stage from afar. The name of the game is *connection*. God wants you to be confident to walk alongside people and help them start a journey with Jesus.

Although not everyone in your life will want to listen to your message, follow your example, or even become a Christian, that doesn’t mean you can’t love them. This is not about living with a hidden agenda marked by manipulation, coercion, or trickery. You don’t have to be pushy or odd. It’s about being honest about who you are and sharing the hope you have as you care about those around you.

Parallel with Purpose and People

The purpose of God for the church is that we go into all the world and make disciples. This was Jesus' last message and it's never needed a modern upgrade. A study by Lifeway Research³ found that 80 percent of those who attend church one or more times a month believe they have a personal responsibility to share their faith, but 61 percent of them hadn't shared the gospel with another person in the previous six months. This is a sign that we're not quite aligned with God's purpose despite our good intentions.

Either we don't really understand the good news or we don't really have anyone to share it with. When it comes to reaching *your* world, you have to be in it to win it. There are many illustrative verses in Scripture that encourage us not to be isolated, abstracted, or excluded from the world in order to make an impact. Let's take a whistle-stop tour of just three of them.

VERSE 1: WE ARE LIKE LIGHT

“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” (Matt. 5:15)

God does not intend for us to be hidden, tucked away, or distant. In fact, it's a malfunction of purpose to not let lights shine. For us not to be visible to those around us would be both an abdication of responsibility and a dimming of our destiny. Yes, Jesus is the light of the world, but the plan of God was to put that light inside a community of people who would then reveal it to others. The whole of church history is like the lighting of heaven's Olympic torch that now rests in our hands, ready to pass on.

VERSE 2: WE ARE LIKE SALT

“You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?” (Matt. 5:13)

Here, Jesus uses salt as an analogy to show that Christians can add value and flavor to the world around them. This is not because we are better than anyone else, but because we have Jesus with us, in us, and working through us. Yet the verse also comes with a warning not to lose that sense of saltiness—namely, the integrity of who we are. As we live in proximity with those around us, it's vital we stay close to Christ and keep him as our way, truth, and life. We are both inclusive and distinctive.

VERSE 3: GOD'S KINGDOM IS LIKE YEAST

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” (Matt. 13:33)

Jesus uses yeast here as an illustration, referring to how something small and seemingly insignificant can highly influence the environment in which it's embedded. You can't be an influencer if you live your life at arm's length. This is why Jesus had the biggest open-door policy of anyone. He was like that yeast: he infiltrated everywhere!

When we think of words like *evangelism*, we often default to the stereotype of a loud preacher standing on a street corner, banging on a door with tracts, or trying to fill a stadium for an event. This approach often perpetuates a sense of *us* and *them* and keeps others at arm's length. But what if evangelism is about walking alongside others and letting our words and deeds shine through? By the way we live for, speak about, and point to Jesus, we can proclaim the good news in our daily lives. We can all make disciples and fulfill God's mission whoever we are and whatever we do. You don't have to be in full-time ministry in the church to be in full-time ministry with God!

This is what it means to be *parallel with purpose*.

In the same way, *discipleship* is another buzz-word that has been pigeon-holed to structured programs led by pastors, preachers, or professionals. We tend to think it is about following a set method, in a fixed way, at a specific time. This leaves little room for

the normal average Christian who doesn't feel qualified enough. But what if discipleship is actually walking alongside anyone to help them take a small step toward Jesus from any starting point?

This is what it means to be *parallel with people*.

In some ways, it's hard to distinguish where evangelism ends and discipleship starts when we think of walking with others as both begin from different stages of a spectrum. I love the way Alan Hirsch combined these concepts through the term "disciplism." He describes mission like an ongoing journey:

By simply following the Great Commission literally, we begin to see that conversion is a process that begins right at the start of the journey towards Jesus! Listen to what I'm saying here: Discipleship should start even before people become regenerated ("born-again") converts and continue right till the end.⁴

Let me be clear that I'm not trying to say that one type or style of mission is better than another. God can use anyone by any means. Jesus constantly changed his methods but was always driven by one motive: love.

You don't need to be a certain personality type or have any special training to walk side by side with others. You just need to be available. In being parallel with people, you don't have to be perfect, but you do have to be present.

Although investing a lot of time in people requires a huge amount of focus, attention, and energy, it's what really works for being effective in fulfilling God's purpose for the world. In the words of author Pete Scazzero:

If you're going to be serious about discipleship, you're going to go the same way as Jesus. It's going to be sloppy, difficult, messy, small, and slow. That's it. You're going to have to figure out, "How am I going to disciple a few?"⁵

By understanding more about the process of how people come to Christ over time, I believe you will feel more empowered to play your part in leading anyone to take one more step toward Jesus. What a brilliant adventure that can be.

REFLECT

As you think about the power of proximity,

- *Can you identify the names of people you're already walking alongside in your daily life who wouldn't yet call themselves followers of Jesus?*
- *How are you praying for them right now?*

PART ONE

PARALLEL WITH PURPOSE

In this first section of the book, we focus on *why* it is so important to start walking alongside others on their journey to Christ. Thinking about evangelism and discipleship as a continual spectrum empowers us to help others take steps toward Jesus from any starting point. In thinking about being *parallel with purpose*, we will learn that:

- ✓ Every church has a cause.
- ✓ Every person has a process.
- ✓ Every believer has a bubble.
- ✓ Every disciple has a destination.
- ✓ Every soul can be stirred.
- ✓ Every excuse can be eliminated.
- ✓ Every mindset can be missional.

1

WALKING

A voice of one is calling out, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness [remove the obstacles]; Make straight and smooth in the desert a highway for our God."

Isaiah 40:3 (AMP)

My jaw almost dropped to the floor when I noticed a teenager called Sarah walk into our church for the first time. I honestly thought she had come to the wrong building by mistake! Whereas many school students I knew wouldn't have known what the label "atheist" meant, Sarah would define herself as one. While outwardly I perceived her as almost militant in her antireligious views, I didn't know she had inwardly been on her own secret journey with Jesus and had decided it was time to check out church for herself.

I first met Sarah through my work in a local school, where we educated students about the basics of Christian belief without ever crossing the line into proselytizing. Education is about giving people the tools to explore subjects for themselves. When we came to Christianity in Religious Education lessons, I realized that a lot of the young people like Sarah simply didn't have any prior awareness of the topic at hand. They had not grown up in a family where faith was discussed, and nine out of ten had never been to a church meeting in their life. Their knowledge was at a level you could visualize as like fresh snow without footprints.

I recently reminisced with Sarah about her transformation since leaving school. She had become a Christian and joined our local church community, even after she had initially so publicly rejected Christ.

“How long have we known you now, Sarah?” I said after we finished a small group Bible study my wife was leading.

“I first met you when I was twelve,” she responded with a grin on her face. “That seems like only yesterday to me.”

“And remind me how old you are now?” I asked, pretending I already knew the answer.

“I’m twenty-eight,” said the twelve-year-old.

Sixteen years had passed in the blink of an eye, and like so many, Sarah’s journey to Jesus had started far beyond the walls of the local church, taking many twists and turns along the way.

I am always fascinated by the markers that define a person’s spiritual walk before they decide to follow Jesus. It’s often the little things that made the difference. For Sarah, it was the opportunity to explore God in a safe space, the chance to have conversations and make connections, and that she could argue with people like me and know I wouldn’t give up on her. Even after she crossed the threshold of a church, she still had a journey before her. We often miss this process in our keenness to tick the attendance box, as if sitting in a pew is the same as fulfilling a purpose.

Over the years, I have had the wonderful privilege of helping many people make their first moves toward freedom, destiny, and belonging with Jesus. Some people start their journey after a significant conversation with a Christian—whether a mentor, relative, or friend. Others stumble onto something while scrolling on the internet that helps them find good news amid fake news. Sometimes a moment of crisis brings a wake-up call or an answered prayer comes in the middle of a storm.

Every person has to come to that point of responding yes or no to the invitation from Jesus to follow him. Even if you’ve been raised in a home full of Christians, you still have to make a choice to follow Christ for yourself. Everyone has to take little steps toward Jesus before they can take big steps with him.

The Chronicles of Lewis

In the movie *The Most Reluctant Convert*, based on the play of the same name, we see an in-depth example of one man's personal pathway to finding faith. Thinking about the story of Clive Staples Lewis, I'm always struck by how long the lead time to conversion was for him. During a kneeling prayer in 1929 when he finally succumbed to the idea that there even was a God, it's said that it took a further twelve years for him to give in to following Christ.

In one of his letters to a friend, Lewis writes about that night of significance:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.¹

C. S. Lewis embraced a slow-burner approach toward following Jesus—perhaps because he knew what an authentic yes to God was going to cost him. Though he attended church as a child with his strict father, he was out the door as soon as he had the chance. Through many years of study, he cemented a staunch atheist viewpoint. Yet he soon wrestled with his own unbelief as his friends, the books he read, and his personal experience of God pulling on his heart influenced him. In his book *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes this as being hunted down, as if God was a hunter and he was a deer.

Sometimes it feels like God is happier to play the long game than we are.

I recently took a stroll on the legendary Addison's Walk, which is part of Magdalen College at Oxford University, where Lewis was a faculty member. In September 1941, Lewis, the famous J. R. R. Tolkien, and their friend Hugo Dyson took a formative journey one night along that same loop. The discussions

that took place became instrumental in Lewis's decision-making process. On that day, it's said they talked about everything from "metaphor to myth"; and in Lewis's retelling to his friend Arthur Greeves, the conversation that started on Addison's Walk lasted well into the early hours of the morning:

We continued (in my room) on Christianity: a good long satisfying talk in which I learned a lot: then discussed the difference between love and friendship—then finally drifted back to poetry and books.²

The next day, Lewis decided that Jesus was a reality worth following. In that conversation on Addison's Walk, strongholds must have been broken, barriers removed, eyes opened, and hearts softened. If it wasn't for that long walk, perhaps we would never have known the legacy of Lewis in the same way we do today. Maybe he would have been just another scholar destined for obscurity?

Addison's Walk is a quintessentially English looped path that parallels the Oxford Canal. Designed for human connection, there is just enough space for two people to walk side by side. On the day that I walked that same path in the balmy Oxford sun, I imagined I was walking with Lewis, Dyson, and Tolkien, and I strained to listen to the lingering conversations of history. I had an epiphany that when we think about discipleship, we ought to picture it as walking side by side with people, leading them toward an encounter with Christ.

To journey parallel with people is to explore with them, to be curious, to listen, to allow space for questions, and not to rush a single step. Life so often sets up stumbling blocks, diversions, distractions, or "no entry" signs for those seeking God. Our role is to partner with God to help create a straighter path for people to encounter Jesus in their own lives. This is what it means to prepare the way. Right from the get-go, we have to release ourselves from any expectation of being responsible for the ultimate outcome. You do your part and let God do his. We are not the rescuers.

What was it that helped clear the way for Lewis? The art of conversation played a fundamental role in him taking small steps toward Christ. While he could take a walk of enquiry with friends, how quick are we to hurry people down our religious conveyor belt? I wonder where the safe spaces are for this kind of dynamic dialogue during our busy church culture today? The question for us now is whether we still have the patience to walk with others in this process.

As well as conversation, it was creativity that played a key role in preparing the way for Lewis's commitment to Christ. The work of the Scottish author, poet, and minister George MacDonald moved Lewis. As a pioneer in fantasy literature, MacDonald became a tremendous influence on Lewis's style long before he created the world of Narnia. If creativity like this can move people toward Christ, then we ought to ask, Where are the modern George MacDonalds today? Who is creating content that engages people beyond the confines of the church? Or is all of our creative effort still serving those inside our church walls?

C. S. Lewis was not someone who would have made an impulsive choice to be influenced by an inspiring speaker, bright lights, and video screens, or emotional soft piano and guitar music. His conviction came from a raw encounter with the God who had been wooing him even as he had been challenging him to count the cost. When you look closely at Lewis's life, there are a series of events, nudges, opportunities, and moments that remind us what the side-by-side journey looks like. You may even call this evolutionary unfolding *pre-discipleship*. More on that word later.

The Journey toward Jesus

Imagine for a moment you're watching a television show like *Dragons' Den* for the Brits or *Shark Tank* for the Americans. You see the usual mixed bag of pitches for pointless inventions like virtual reality for pets, wax-melt candles made from yak's milk, or a business that sells pumpkins to people in the summer so

they can get ahead of the autumn rush. Suddenly, the voiceover unexpectedly announces that the next two pitches will feature special guests from the Christian community on church growth. You lean in to pay attention to see what happens next.

Pitch 1. An impressive leader dressed in a brand-new suit comes out and outlines his plans for church growth. It centers on greater profiling of his personality, running an amazing teaching program, hiring a high-performance marketing team, and executing his professional plan for content creation and distribution across the entire city.

The investors are amazed and instantly give the leader all the money he asks for.

Pitch 2. Next up, dressed in casual clothes, Jesus comes out before the investors and outlines his plans for church growth. He says, “I want to take a small group of people and intentionally journey with them for a few years. I’m going to invest my life into them, love them, and lead them into a life of sacrifice that will forever affect eternity. And I don’t even need a building or a budget to do it.”

The investors are quick to declare that it will never work, and one by one they say, “I’m out!”

You can see why the investors would appreciate the first pitch more: It offers tangible and measurable signs of impact. You can always gather a crowd behind a charismatic personality and culturally relevant message. The Jesus approach seems inherently riskier on first impression. It feels like a huge long-term investment.

Although you’d never logically think that Jesus’ plan would work, it already has.

This model of slow, side-by-side spiritual transformation from the inside out has been working for over two thousand years, driven by the engine of God’s Holy Spirit. Our challenge today is that we have taken something organic and tried to manu-

facture it on a mass scale. It sometimes feels like our strategy to grow our churches goes something like this:

- Work hard to get lots of people to attend meetings and programs.
- Consume people's time, energy, and effort to keep those meetings and programs running efficiently.
- Send the crowd we gather out to get more people to attend meetings and programs.

Jesus, however, modeled something radically different for us to consider if we are to follow in his footsteps:

- Take a few people and walk with them from day one.
- Help empower those people to disciple others.
- Impact the world as we walk side by side together with him.

Why then is our emphasis too often still on recruiting people to a program rather than leading them on a journey? Perhaps this is because small movements are rarely as exciting as giant leaps. If faith formation is more transitional, gradual, and relational than we think, then it's important to question why our methods are often reduced to being transactional, impersonal, and locked into the confines of a church building. As one church strategist puts it, "Even though our spiritual journeys don't begin when we put our trust in Jesus, most churches act like they do."³

Let's be honest, Christians often jump the gun and try to *seal the deal* with people way too early. This is often down to our desire to see temporary visible results rather than eternal impact. This happens when we see people as targets to sign up to our club rather than souls who need a savior.

It's important that we see discipleship not just as a destination but as a pathway. This is not so we can get more people to attend our church meetings. It's because God wants us to walk parallel with his purpose. What if the next person you meet is another C. S. Lewis waiting for you to invite them to take a stroll on Addison's Walk?

REFLECT

When you consider your own journey of how you came to Christ,

- *What were the significant moments or stages you had to take before you became a Christian?*
- *How would you lay out these steps on a timeline if you had to decode them for others?*