

# Jesus Shaped Church



**mis•sion•al**  
[mish-uh nl]

**disciple[ship]**

noun

Intentionally following 'The Way' of Jesus Christ.  
Responding actively to the call to 'be my disciples.'

Produced by the Mission & Discipleship Committee  
of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church

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a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in

**Walking**  
**the Way**  
Living the life of Jesus today

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## Jesus shaped church?

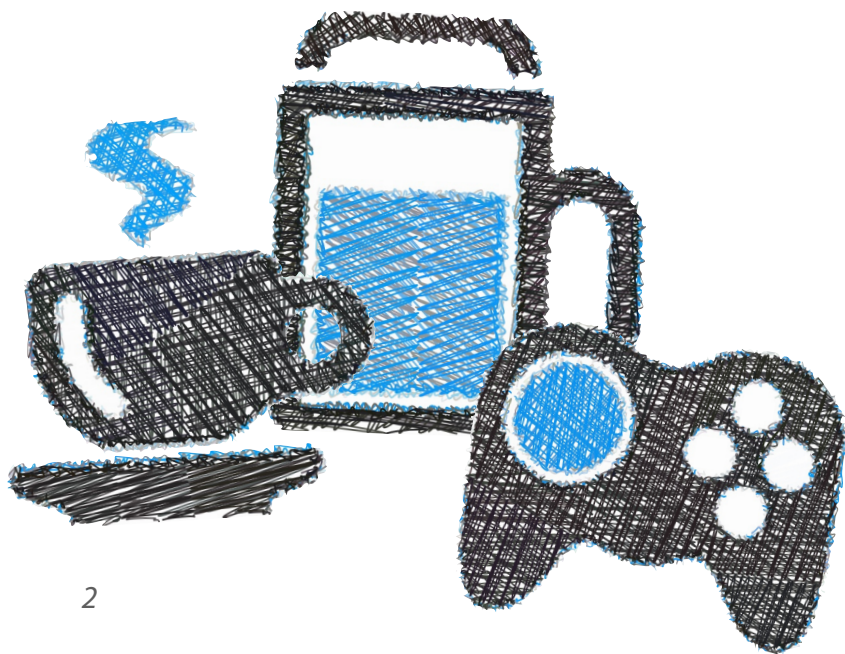
### ► Activity:

*Using sticky notes – one per answer – write down the words that come to mind when you think of 'Jesus'. Put these onto a large sheet of paper. Place positive sounding words towards the top and negative sounding words towards the bottom.*

*Repeat the exercise – but this time responding to the word 'Church'.*

*What do you see?*

*Can you draw any conclusions?*





Research amongst young adults in America suggests that while people are generally positive towards Jesus, they are much less positive, and sometimes openly hostile, about 'Church'.

The feeling seems to be that Church (by which we mean the Christian expression of church – in many denominations) does not reflect the same values that many believe Jesus stood for. This has led to the belief that the Church is in crisis. And that is both a good and a bad thing. If we accept that the church is in crisis then we have two options: Shut ourselves in, put our fingers in our ears and pretend that everything is alright... or do something about it.

Missional Discipleship (and Jesus-shaped church) recognises that doing nothing is not an option. If our church is to be relevant to the communities we serve, and the world in which we live, then we need to do something! And this booklet invites you to think about what that might be...

People outside the church recognise more clearly than we do the gap between their experience of us as church and what they imagine or expect of Jesus. And they are far less forgiving than we are. So when I talk of "the Church", I mean "us", and when I talk about "us", I mean "the Church".

The scale of the crisis becomes apparent when we look at some recent statistics:

- ▶ The number of Christians born in the UK between 2001 and 2011 fell by 5.3 million - about 10,000 per week. At this rate, the number of UK-born Christians would reduce to zero by 2067 (UK Census).
- ▶ If the current rate of decline continues, it will disappear from Britain by 2033 (British Social Attitudes Survey).
- ▶ Church attendance (as opposed to membership) has declined steeply from 11.8% of the population in 1980 to 5% in 2015.
- ▶ The number of United Reformed Church members in 2015 had declined to just 27% of its 1980 level (from 188,000 to 52,000).
- ▶ Millennials (aged 20-30) are the generation most disconnected from church. A poll of 16-29 year old Americans in 2007 by the Barna Group revealed that only 16% had a positive attitude towards church. Overwhelmingly, church was viewed as:
  - ▷ Judgemental (87%)
  - ▷ Hypocritical (85%)
  - ▷ Old-fashioned (78%)
  - ▷ Too involved in [right wing] politics (75%)
  - ▷ Anti-gay (91%)

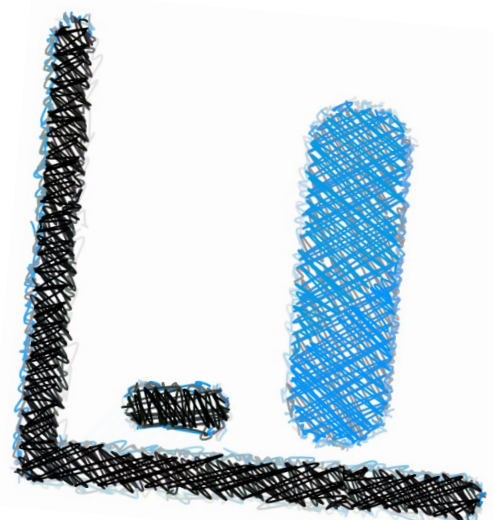


What we are seeing is people who no longer see their local church as a place where the 'love one another' theme of Jesus' ministry can be found. Indeed, depending on your colour, your gender, your age, social background, sexuality... your experience can be anything other than 'love'. The problem we face is that people think of, and experience, the Christian Church as Bad News.

The response to Jesus is very different. Research published in December 2013 found that, according to Wikipedia, Jesus Christ tops the list of the world's 10 most significant people in human history, followed by Napoleon and Shakespeare. That is a staggering finding, not just because Shakespeare somehow came third, but because Wikipedia is probably the most representative single deposit of global knowledge and opinion available to us.

The point is not whether everyone ought to agree with the conclusions of the research: what we need to take urgent notice of is the enormous gap between contemporary attitudes to Jesus (which are overwhelmingly positive) and contemporary attitudes to the Church which bears his name (which are overwhelmingly negative).

The Barna researchers, for example, noted a sharp distinction: when talking about Jesus, people would smile, talk animatedly and positively; when the topic moved to the Church, the mood would change abruptly, and the participants and comments would become negative and hostile, with comments like "They [Christians] should be taken out behind the shed and shot!" Their conclusion is hugely significant: "Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus".



So, it seems obvious that we, the church, need to change so that we DO reflect people's expectations of what a movement that claims Jesus as its head should look like, should behave like, should act like... should BE like.

Were Jesus to come and live among us again, doing the sorts of things he did and changing the world in the ways he did, he would receive a tremendous welcome, as he did in the Galilee. People don't dislike the Church because they are tired of Jesus: they dislike the Church because we say we follow him but don't look or act like him. We've forgotten that the plural of "disciple" is "Church"! We're talking the talk, but not walking the walk. And people have spotted it.

Missional Discipleship takes as its starting point that the Christian Church needs to look recognisably like Jesus and to make the same sort of differences to the lives of people and communities as Jesus did. It is closely following him day by day until we remind people of Jesus, they see us as followers of Jesus, who share his ideas and want to make the positive changes to our society that he did. It is about growing Jesus-shaped churches that are part of the Good News we live by and proclaim.

## ► Questions:

*What experiences have you had as a Christian in places where you are the minority (school, sports club, youth club, etc.)?*

*In what ways do you recognise the view of the Church held by the people involved in the Barna research?*

*Which bits of your church do you think are Jesus-shaped?*



## A road trip with Jesus:

### ► Activity:

*Using a map of the world, or a globe, pick 3 or 4 places you'd like to visit.*

*Try and work out how you'd get there.*

*Can you fly directly from each place to the next?*

*Might you have to use a boat or a car?*

*How long would you stay in each place?*

*How long would your trip take?*

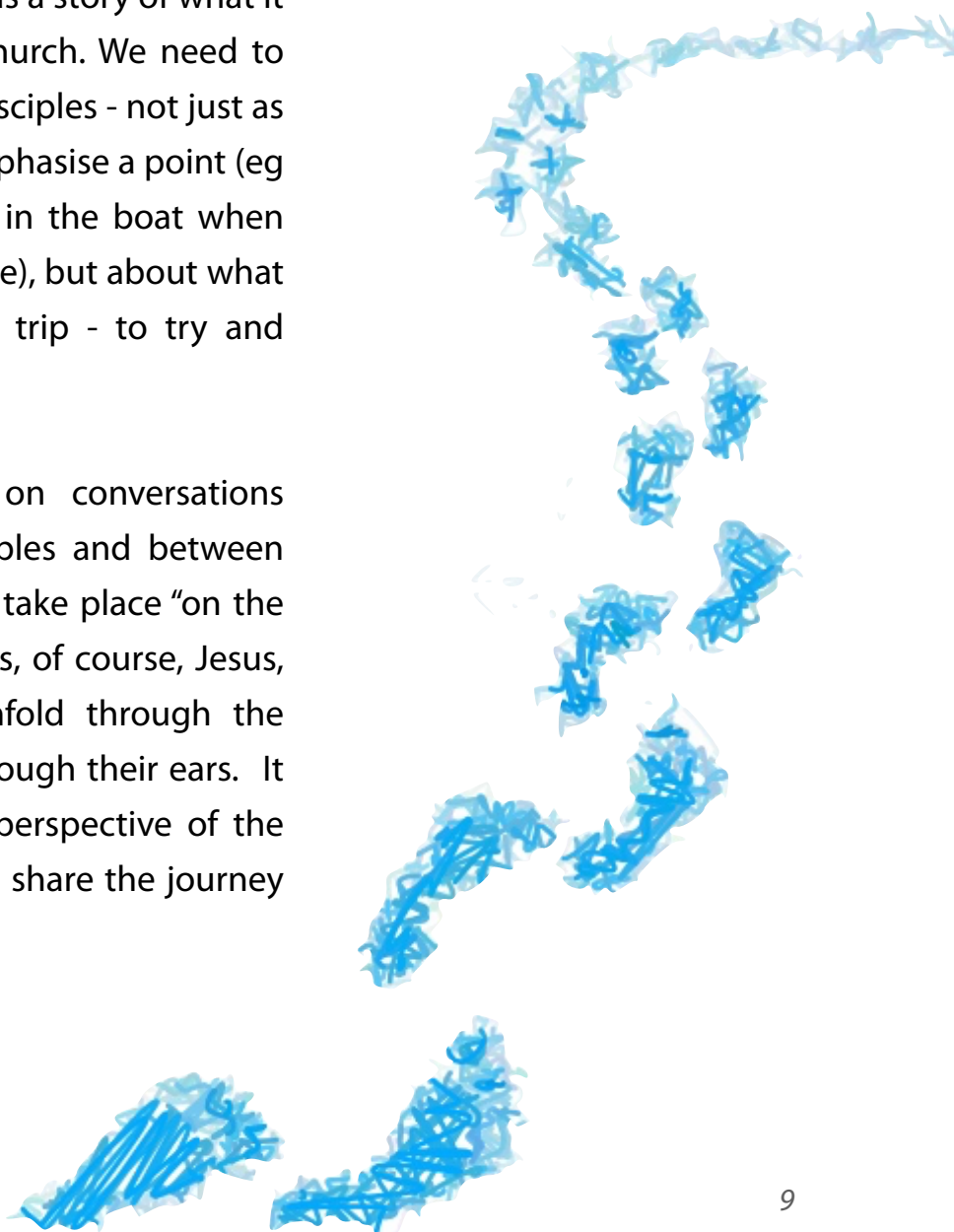
*Who else would you want to take the trip with you?*



The four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are travel diaries. They start from different places – but all end up in the same place. And each Gospel writer was trying to pass on the Good News in a different way. They wanted the reader to be thinking about different aspects of Jesus' journey.

Sometimes, though, we're so busy paying attention to Jesus that we fail to recognise that the gospel writers are telling us a story of what it means to be the Christian Church. We need to pay careful attention to the disciples - not just as "fall guys" that are used to emphasise a point (eg about how terrified they are in the boat when the storm blows up on the lake), but about what it means to make that road trip - to try and follow Jesus closely.

As readers, we eavesdrop on conversations between Jesus and his disciples and between the disciples themselves that take place "on the road". The central character is, of course, Jesus, but we watch the story unfold through the disciples' eyes, and hear it through their ears. It is a road trip told from the perspective of the people whom Jesus invites to share the journey with him: the disciples.



- ▶ Matthew wants us to be "doers of the word, not just hearers". Discipleship is about putting Jesus' words into action. Disciples are, first and foremost, active followers of Jesus - not just people who claim his name.
- ▶ John talks a lot about love! God is love, Jesus is God, and we are to be like Jesus. Put simply, if we want to be like Jesus, and be known as his followers, we need to actively show our love for others.
- ▶ Luke is all about community and social justice – about how Jesus stood up for, and ministered to, and was friends with the poor and the outcasts in society. He'd want to know how we, as individuals and as a community, are standing up for these same people, too.
- ▶ Mark tells us of the lengths Jesus was prepared to go to, to stand up to the powerful and those who have the most to lose. The story challenges us to stay for peace, justice, and equality in our own contexts.



So why 'Journey'? Well, as with all good travel books, the story isn't just about the places but about the people, too. Obviously Jesus is the central character – but the disciples are there, too, as are many other people we meet along the way. In telling us about them, the Gospel writers not only give us clues about what it means to follow Jesus – but show us the disciples weren't perfect, and that we are on the same journey with Jesus today.

Christian faith, according to the gospel writers, is best understood as following. That entails commitment and trust. It requires the sort of wholehearted commitment that Jesus demanded of James and John when he called them to leave their family and livelihood and follow him (Mark 1: 19-20). It is expressed in the sort of trust exhibited by the bleeding woman (this time in sharp contrast to that of the disciples!) who says, "If I can only touch his clothes, I will be made well!" (Mark 5:28) and the faithfulness of the women who, alone of all his followers, stick with Jesus all the way to the cross, whatever trouble it will bring down on them.

Jesus' journey has a clear purpose. The disciples don't just discover Jesus; they discover his mission as well - to tell everyone that God is in the business of transforming the world into the place God intended it to be. Jesus calls this "the Kingdom of God". It's a place which is 'up-side-down'; where the poor, the excluded, the unimportant people - are the most important and go to the head of the queue! Jesus shows us that everyone is loved and valued by God.

As Jesus moves among them in the Galilee at the outset of his ministry, he is welcomed with enormous enthusiasm and excitement. As he turns towards Jerusalem, however, his journey is bringing him closer and closer to the religious and political leaders whose power comes from being in charge of the way things are. His message of a world being transformed is not going to play well here. It is going to provoke a confrontation that he knows he will lose. This is what makes Jesus' call to follow so challenging and uncompromising: are you prepared to follow wherever this journey with Jesus will lead, even to the cross? That is what discipleship means. There is no easier, less costly way, but it is the road to Life (Mark 8: 34-35).

That is what Christian faith means. We read the gospels to understand our own situation and learn what following Jesus faithfully means today.

Missional Discipleship recognises that the Church is a community of disciples who follow Jesus and are engaged in his mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. It is a process of deepening our discipleship and engaging more faithfully in mission: becoming more recognisably like Jesus and making a Jesus-shaped difference in the lives of people and communities.

## ► Questions:

*What is your favourite story in the Gospels?*

*Can you understand why it is your favourite?*

*What changes might you make to the way you live to be more the Christian Jesus wants you to be?*

*What gets in the way of that change?*

*What are the practical things your church could do to be more like a Jesus-shaped community?*



## What do you want to be?

### ► Activity:

*What Do You Want To Be?*

*When you were 7, what did you 'want to be when you grow up'? Share around the group.*

*What are your plans for the future now?*

*Have they changed?*

*What does your future rely on?*

*Exams?*

*Money?*

*Moving?*





James and John were fishermen. They had probably known that this was going to be their occupation from an early age. After all, James' and John's dad was a fisherman – it was expected that they would go into the family business (unless they 'made it' as a rabbi – which was difficult and possibly beyond their ability). But being a fisherman wasn't being a failure – it was a reasonably steady job.

And then Jesus turned up. And he invited them to follow him. Was it a tough decision to put down their nets, leave the family firm and go with Jesus? Did they agonise long and hard, have difficult conversations with their dad? Not according to Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 4.22) "At once they left their boat and their father and went with him."

Such trust, such faith. Such stupidity?

Only a couple of years later Jesus asked them to follow him again. But this time it wasn't about losing their livelihood – it was about losing their lives (Matthew 16:24-26).

Who'd be a disciple, eh?

Jesus knew that his mission was going to be costly, that it would ultimately cost him his life but there was no way of avoiding it. No Plan B. It was all or nothing. It's obvious really. You can't rise from the dead unless you've died!

And he wanted his friends to be there with him.

And it's what happens to us when we're baptised. Yes, over the years we've gone from being symbolically drowned to having a light smattering of water poured over our heads. That doesn't change what Paul says: "in baptism, we die with Christ" (Romans 6:4). Dying and rising with Christ is not just a one-time event at baptism; it's supposed to be the pattern for our whole Christian lives. We learn it from Jesus.

It's something that, as followers of Jesus, we are called to do time and time again. Yet many churches, maybe yours, spend all their time trying to survive, to just keep going., at all costs

How different the world would be if Jesus had done that, if He'd avoided the cross, gone into hiding perhaps, or changed his tune and toned down his message so as not to upset anyone so that he could continue to just live.

Churches have to leave behind 'survival mode' and recognise that to be renewed we must let go of all the things that are stopping us from being renewed. Only then will the Church truly be walking the way of Jesus, look more like Jesus, and be able to truly say 'we are a Jesus-shaped church'.

## ► Questions:

*Are there things in your church that are more about survival than renewal?*

*How might you help your church let go of some of its 'surviving' traditions?*

## Living for others:

### ► Activity:

*Rewrite the Lord's Prayer  
using:*

*Modern language*

*Slang*

*Text message  
abbreviations*

*Emojis*



One of the obvious ways in which we can learn to become more like Jesus, more Jesus-shaped, is to pay more attention to what he did and said.

Take, for example, the Lord's Prayer. Jesus was with his disciples and they asked him "How do we pray?" Look at Matthew 6. 8-13 for his reply and his teaching.

Jesus wants us to start by praising God – the creator of all things including us.

But then he starts telling us why. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We want to see heaven on earth. We need to make earth as much like heaven as we can.

And how do we do this? By being more like Jesus. By thinking more about others and less about ourselves. Are there people who don't have enough bread ... Are there people who are weighed down by feelings of guilt?

And, just as Jesus couldn't do all his miracles by himself, we are reminded that we have God with us at all times, and the power of the Spirit to help, support and cajole us in making God's Kingdom come. "If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done."

The Lord's Prayer is not just a prayer – it is a manifesto; a call to action.

Could Jesus be any more specific about how to follow his way?

## ► Questions:

*What do you find hard to forgive?*

*How do you feel when someone forgives you for a wrong you may have done?*

*Who needs their 'daily bread' in your community?*

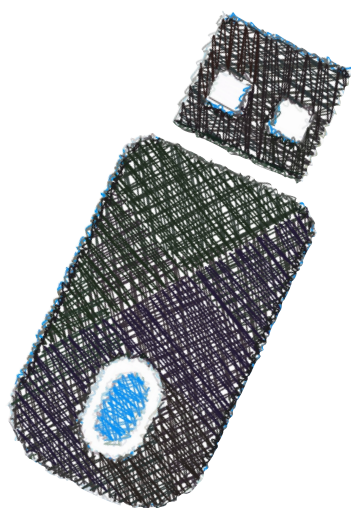
## Change:

### ► Activity:

*Imagine churches were banned by the government. You get a message that soldiers are coming to destroy your church in 3 hours' time.*

*You have three hours... three hours to get from your church anything that you think is crucial in allowing you to continue to worship God, to set up and 'underground' church.*

*What would you take, and why?*





If you've worked your way through this booklet you've probably worked out that one of the answers to this activity, probably the most important one, is 'ourselves'. Missional Discipleship, and becoming a Jesus-shaped church, is all about stripping away all those things we do which are unnecessary, and allowing ourselves space to reconnect with God; getting rid of the things that get in the way of us fulfilling God's mission. Sometimes that can be the church building itself, which takes up so much of our time and energy in fund-raising and maintenance. At other times it's our practices and the way we think.

American President John F. Kennedy said, in his inaugural address in 1961 "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." As followers of the way we need to stop asking what God can do for us but what we can do for God. It's about moving away from a relationship that says 'if X does this, then Y will do this' and moving towards 'X is going to do this because it's the right thing to do'. Of course WE are X. We don't treat people fairly, seek justice, worship God, and show compassion because we're aiming to gain 'Kingdom Credits', but because it's the right thing to do. It's about covenant – not contract.

We need to be more trusting: trusting of God, trusting of our companions, trusting of those whom we meet – and trusting of ourselves. And, yes, sometimes we're going to be disappointed, of course we are. Possibly, we'll be hurt. But that anxiety shouldn't stop us consciously trusting others. If we are truly to Walk the Way, then trust isn't something that has to be earned; it is something which we should graciously give and is, therefore, something that is to be lost by others. And if our trust is betrayed, then we need to be very sure of ourselves before we refuse to trust again.

This is going to require quite a change in how we are, and who we are. But you've read, and maybe talked, about how we need to constantly let old things go and be re-born. And that's going to mean change.

If we are fearful of change, it won't happen, or we'll only do it because it's the last resort. But being a Jesus-shaped church means not just embracing change, but investing in it, welcoming it and enjoying it!

It's always easy to find reasons not to change – but change is at the heart of discipleship. Following Jesus is a call to step into the unknown and trust Jesus rather than let our fears hold us back. Imagine where we would be if James and John had said "Nah, you're alright, lad. We're going to keep fishing"!

And, finally, remember that if we are going to change and become a Jesus-shaped church then it is down to us. US. It's not somebody else's responsibility. It's ours. And in taking that journey together we will find out just how abundantly the Spirit has provided us with the gifts necessary to complete the job.

Here's to change...

## ► Questions:

*What gifts are you already aware of (in yourself or in your group)?*

*What three things would you change about your church before the next service?*

*What's stopping you changing them?*

*Are you ready to become a Jesus-shaped person creating a Jesus-shaped church?*



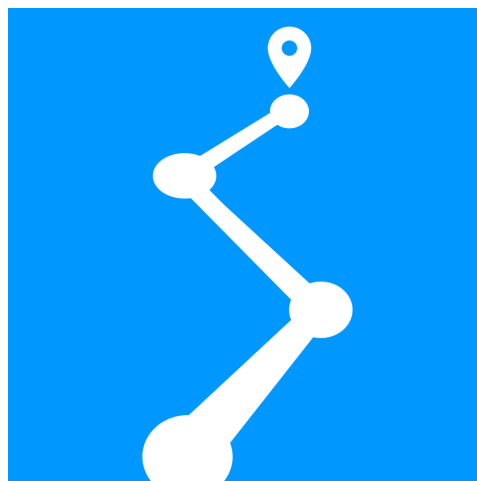
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# Discipleship



a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in **Walking the Way**  
Living the life of Jesus today