

DNA INTRODUCTION

BY SOMA TACOMA

Through the years, many leaders at Soma Tacoma have played a role in developing and refining the DNA approach as an aspect of discipleship. I was part of the team tasked with some of the early development of our DNA strategy. The church has been working with DNA groups now for many years and has learned much and seen much fruit along the way. This introduction to DNA groups was written by Abe Meysenburg, who helped refine how the church articulated its vision for DNA's.



WWW.MISSIONALMADESIMPLE.COM

A WORD ABOUT SOMA AND MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

We believe that Missional Communities (MCs) are the primary organizing structure for the church. Disciples are made most effectively on mission, in community, and through life-on-life interactions. Therefore, as a church family we focus primarily on the health and growth of our MCs.

Jesus calls all of his followers to be radically committed to him (Matthew 16:24-26). We believe that commitment to Jesus includes commitment to his bride, the church. As a church family, Soma Tacoma expresses our commitment to Jesus and his bride through involvement in Sunday gatherings (***we gather***), an MC (***we go***), and in a DNA group (***we grow***), all of which provide ample opportunities to steward the gifts and talents God has given us (***we give***).

DNA GROUP FAQ'S

What is a DNA group?

The term "DNA group" refers to a group that ideally consists of three people (but often is 4 and occasionally 5) – men with men, women with women – who meet together 2-4 times a month. DNA Groups provide a structure for us to care deeply for one another and to foster growth as disciples of Jesus.

DNA is an acronym that reminds of us of three key components of discipleship: Discover, Nurture, and Act. The goal is to help one another to *discover* Jesus in the Scriptures, *nurture* the truths of the gospel in our hearts, and faithfully *act* on what the Spirit calls us to do.

Our DNA group should be a major factor in our growth as a disciple (someone who is learning to apply the gospel to every part of their lives).

Why should I be in a DNA group?

As disciples who've been saved and made righteous, Paul exhorts us to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2). Discipleship requires life-on-life interaction, and can only happen in community. We grow primarily through the experience of life in gospel community. A DNA group can be a key catalyst for growth and transformation in our lives.

One of the main ways this happens is by giving each other regular reminders of the truth of the gospel. Hebrews 3:12 warns, "Take care, brothers and sisters, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God." We are often tempted to forget who God is, what he's done for us in Christ Jesus, who we are as a result, and how we live out of our new identity. Hebrews 3:13 says one of the major ways to prevent this "falling away from the living God" is to "encourage one another daily...so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Every single day we need to be encouraged with the truth that we are deeply loved and accepted by the Father *purely* on the basis of what Jesus has done! Our new identity as sons and daughters of God shapes everything about our life as disciples of Jesus. Understanding this new identity also gives us the boldness and humility to be honest with our DNA partners when we are tempted to hide our sin or to blame others. Regular encouragement from our DNA partners can be a significant help in our battle against sin and against the lies of the enemy.

What is the goal of a DNA group?

The overall goal of a DNA group is to foster discipleship relationships that help each person grow to become more like Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. The goal is not merely to hang out and have fun, or even to build friendships, though hopefully all of that will happen! The goal is to challenge one another to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

As disciples, we should experience transformation at every level, affecting our whole person: head, heart, hands. The specific discipleship goals for a DNA group meeting can be understood by unpacking the acronym:

- **Discover:** led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Study** the Bible and **Ask** the 4 Questions. The goal is to *teach* the head.
- **Nurture:** led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Repent** and **Believe** in the gospel. The goal is to *shepherd* the heart.
- **Act:** led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Listen** and **Obey**, as he calls us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. The goal is to *empower* the hands.

What can I expect from a DNA group?

The members of a DNA group should be committed to meeting together regularly, usually anywhere from 90 minutes to 2 hours. These meetings consist of sharing personal stories and struggles, asking questions, listening to each other, reading scripture, praying, speaking the truth in love, repenting and confessing sin, listening to the Holy Spirit, and submitting to one another. Beyond the weekly meeting, however, DNA groups should seek to build trusting relationships by sharing everyday life together.

DNA GROUP STRUCTURE

How many should be in a DNA group?

Discipleship methods have often employed a one-on-one approach. While this is certainly in line with many apprenticeship models, from which we can learn how to train someone “along the way”, it does not appear to be the primary method Jesus utilized. We rarely, if ever, find him with only one of his disciples.

In our experience as a church family, we have found that three is the ideal size for a DNA group.

If you are accustomed to one-on-one meetings, there's a number of reasons to add a third person:

- A more dynamic group exchange occurs.
- It is much more difficult for one person to dominate the conversation.
- There are two sets of ears filtering everything that is said, providing two unique perspectives in response.
- There's a much greater potential for learning and development. Each person is unique and brings so much to the table!
- There are two people loving and supporting each person in the group. No one is bearing another's burdens alone.

On the other hand, if you are accustomed to small groups of 4-8, there's a number of reasons to limit it to three:

- Each person can contribute significantly to the group
- No one can "hide", remaining silent for very long before someone asks, "What do you think?"
- Each person has an ample opportunity to share at each group meeting."
- Scheduled group meetings don't last multiple hours (which can be great from time to time, but is not sustainable.)

Though three is the ideal size, circumstances will sometimes dictate that a group be larger than three. Schedule conflicts and a lack of qualified leaders can lead to groups of 4, 5, and even 6 meeting together for a time. While not ideal, these options are better than only two people meeting on a consistent basis.

Who should the DNA group consist of?

An MC is often defined as "a family of missionary servants, sent to make disciples." While MCs seek to live as family, the reality is that the level of intimacy with the people in our MCs will vary. As a result, it is helpful for our DNA group to consist of people from our MC. This will help ensure another regular touch point with some of the people in your MC outside of the weekly MC gathering. It will also allow you to share your heart and your life with a few of the people with whom you are on mission. When DNA groups are made up of people from the same MC, it greatly strengthens the MC, and helps advance the mission of making disciples who make disciples.

There will be times when a DNA group will not be made up of men or women in the same MC. An MC may have recently multiplied, and perhaps the DNA group wants to wait before transitioning. Sometimes people have longstanding relationships they really value, or they want to continue pouring into a particular discipleship relationship, before entrusting them to someone else. The keys are to follow the Spirit's leading and to keep in mind the goal of growing as disciples. If people are not being challenged and transformed, it is almost certainly time for a change.

How often should a DNA Group meet? And where?

First of all, since the DNA group is a subset of a MC, DNA groups should connect on more than just a formal basis. DNA groups should be engaged in as much everyday life as possible. Ideally, gospel friendships will form, and people will enjoy spending time together in all kinds of ways.

As far as a more structured meeting, DNA groups should plan to meet on a weekly basis for about 90 minutes (though often they go longer!). If a group only plans to connect every other week, the busyness and unpredictability of life (travel, sickness, holidays, schedule conflicts) will often mean long stretches between solid meetings.

Meetings usually occur in coffee shops, restaurants, pubs, or homes. Focus is a key factor to consider - it's hard for three moms to have a DNA group meeting, while their kids play at the park or for three commuters to talk on a crowded bus. Meet in a place where everyone is comfortable and that is reasonably free of distractions.

DNA GROUP LEADERSHIP

The nature of group dynamics reveals that every group has a leader. Acknowledging this reality will help DNA groups function in a healthier manner.

Each DNA group's make-up will be unique. The nature of the group will determine the type of leadership that's needed. For some groups, where all participants have similar experience and maturity, the leader will simply be the person who makes sure the group meets. For others, the leader will clearly drive the discussion. Sometimes, the leader will essentially form the group by inviting them together, and other times the group will need to work together to clearly identify the leader.

Regardless of who initially plays the role of leader, each member of a DNA group should get experience leading within the group. Ideally, over the course of a year or so, each person will spend a few months leading the group. As disciples, each person should be equipped to guide a group of at least three people through a discussion that is centered around Jesus. A DNA group provides a great training ground for disciples to learn the basics of leading in a group setting.

Each MC will have a shepherding leader who will provide counsel and consultation for the DNAs under their care. This MC shepherd could be the MC leader or another person in the MC.

A note for MC Leaders: the investment you make in your DNA group is the most strategic discipleship investment you will make. Be prayerful and very intentional about whom you invite into your DNA group and in how you utilize your time together.

DNA GROUP GROWTH, MULTIPLICATION, AND TRANSITION

A DNA group should be more than a once a week meeting. The members of the group should share everyday life together. Hopefully, relationships will form that “stir up one another to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24). All DNA partners should experience intimacy with each other, and some may even find friendships that continue long after they have transitioned into another DNA.

Occasionally, DNA groups may stay together for a few years. Others may sense that, after a significant time of growth, God is leading them to make strategic discipleship investments in other people. This would lead them to think through how to “multiply” their efforts as a group. Still others will be forced to navigate the inevitable changes that life throws their way - people losing interest, people moving away, MC multiplication - with grace and the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

The bottom line is that there is no formula for growth and multiplication of a DNA group. Relationships are beautifully complex, and must be handled with care and sensitivity. Every situation is different, and the group members must be willing to submit to the Spirit’s leading. The members of a DNA group should enter the relationship expecting long-term commitment to one another, even if the exact nature of the relationship changes over time.

DNA GROUP FORMATION

The formative stage of a DNA group is very important. The first few meetings will set the stage for how the group will interact in the future.

Whether or not the group members are familiar with The Story of God, reviewing The Story of God Summary is a great way to begin. God’s Story reminds us that everything is about him; that our stories are actually *his* story; that our understanding of who we are - our identity - should flow from this story. Reviewing the Story as a group will establish a solid foundation on which the group can build together.

After reading and discussing The Story of God Summary together, each member of the group should share a 10-15 minute version of their own personal story.

Telling Your Story with Jesus as the Hero is a great tool to help each person prepare to share their story in a way that highlights the work of Jesus throughout their life.

As each member of the group shares their story, the other DNA partners will listen. But they won’t just listen for the sake of showing empathy and compassion, though that is vitally important. Each person will listen closely to what is said because “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). The members of a DNA group will regularly *listen for the heart*.

Listening to a person’s story is kind of like examining a fruit tree. Jesus said you will know a tree by its fruit. Typically, a person’s story will clearly reveal some of the fruit that is hanging on their tree (financial difficulty, sexual sin, marital conflict, anger, etc).

The real action is under the surface though, in the root structure of the tree. According to Jesus, actions and words reveal the heart. And the heart is of primary importance because the heart is the seat of faith. "With the heart a person believes" (Romans 10:10).

A person's story has the potential to reveal where they have exercised faith in Jesus (gospel alignment), as well as where they have replaced Jesus as the only right object of faith (gospel distortion). Jesus is the only one who can save, and we regularly look to created things instead. These false saviors will often be revealed in our stories.

Learning to *listen for the heart* will be a major focus of the Nurture step in the DNA process. Praying and asking the Spirit to give the group ears to hear is essential. It may take 2-3 meetings to work through The Story of God Summary and to allow time for each person to share their story. Take the time to lay a solid foundation. Gain a clear understanding of how Jesus is the hero of each person's story, and of the areas where they are still struggling to believe the gospel. These struggles will undoubtedly resurface over and over again, as the group moves forward together.

THE DISCOVER, NUTURE, ACT PROCESS

At each meeting, a DNA group should walk through the three-step process of Discover, Nurture, and Act. Each of these can only be done with the help of the Holy Spirit, so praying throughout the process is imperative.

DISCOVER

Led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Study** the Bible and **Ask** the 4 Questions. The goal is to *teach* the head, so that each person either learns or is reminded of the truth about who God is, what he's done, who we are, and how we live, every time the DNA group meets.

Discover primarily involves discipling the head. In John 8:31-32, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Discover is about uncovering the vital truth about who God is, what he's done, who we are, and how we should live.

There's a number of Jesus' statements from John's gospel that highlight the importance of *his word* and *his Spirit* in helping a disciple discover truth: Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13-14).

Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to live in us! And his Spirit is our teacher, the one who makes Jesus even more real to us as we grow in our faith. Our motivation to Discover comes from the great gift Jesus has given us and from our desire to know him more. Discover is not about information, but about relationship and transformation.

In light of Jesus' prayer in John 17:17, studying the Bible should be the primary way DNA groups Discover together. As a group, choose a passage of scripture, and read it throughout the week. Each person should utilize the 4 Questions, as they study on their own. Consider using a journal to capture key thoughts and insights that the Spirit brings to mind. Group members should come to the weekly meeting ready to answer these three questions:

1. *What did you discover this week? What did you learn? What were you reminded of?*
2. *Where did the Spirit lead you to repentance and faith this week?*
3. *How have you struggled with sin/unbelief in your life this week?*

When the group meets, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to speak through his Word! Read through the whole passage once or twice together before working through the 4 Questions. Share any insights from the week, and write down new things the Spirit illuminates.

By studying and asking the 4 questions independently and as a group, the Discover step in the process has the potential to significantly increase the group's Biblical literacy. Starting with God's Story is a must, as it gives us the whole picture and helps us understand each individual part. But moving on to an intimate knowledge of God's whole story is vital. Jesus shows up on every page (Luke 24:27), either in shadow or in fullness (Colossians 2:17), and our love for him grows as our understanding of his story grows.

At different times, a DNA group may decide to study something other than the Bible, as a way to help them Discover. These additional resources might include books or curriculum that are clearly gospel centered. These resources should include large amounts of scripture; essentially answer the 4 Questions over and over; point us directly to our need for Jesus and to his provision through the cross; encourage us to apply the gospel to our lives in practical ways. DNA groups should utilize the 4 Questions even when studying something other than the Bible.

NUTURE

Led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Repent** and **Believe** in the gospel. The goal is to *shepherd the heart* so that each person is brought to repentance and renewed faith every time a DNA group meets.

Nurture primarily involves discipling the heart. The word heart is used over 850 times in the Bible, and is used to describe the very center of our being. It includes our mind, our emotions, and our will. And in Romans 10:10, Paul says it's the part of us that exercises faith, or belief. "For with the heart a person believes..."

In Luke 6, Jesus says the fruit of a person's life - their words and their actions - are an indicator of what is present in their heart. "Each tree is known by its own fruit...out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6:44-45) So, regardless of what we *know* in our heads, the fruit of our lives is determined by what we *believe* in our hearts. We may *know* God is great and in control, we may affirm his sovereignty and power, and yet, we worry. What we *know* does not align with what we *believe* in that moment.

When we worry, we're placing our hope in something other than God. We're believing that something other than him is in control and can give us security. Paul's assessment of this misplaced belief is that we've "...exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25). By placing our faith in something other than God to give us what only he can give, we are actually engaging in false worship, in idolatry.

DNA groups are designed to help identify these areas of sin and idolatry in our lives. Nurture is about ensuring what we *know* aligns with what we *believe*. It's also possible to be over zealous in our desire to root out sin in one another's lives. Nurture is not a witch-hunt or a game of "whack-a-mole", where we wait anxiously with a big mallet, smacking down every little indicator of sin and unbelief, as it pops up in people's lives.

In reality, we should be even more quick to point out evidences of grace than we are to call out sin or to start poking around, looking for evidence of unbelief. The fundamental assumption is that within a week's time every believer is going to sin, and therefore needs to...

- confess our sins to one another (James 5:16)
- repent before God (Revelation 3:19)
- turn back towards Jesus in faith (Hebrews 12:1-2)
- experience the ongoing forgiveness and cleansing of Jesus (1 John 1:9)
- observe the fruit of the Spirit being produced in our lives as a result (Galatians 5:16-25)

ACT

Led by the Holy Spirit, the group will **Listen** and **Obey**, as he calls us to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. The goal is to *empower the hands* so that, in light of their repentance, each person knows what to do and who to tell every time the group meets.

Act primarily involves discipling the hands. Once we've discovered the truth about who God is and what he's done, and once we've repented of our sin/unbelief and renewed our faith in Jesus, we need to ask the Spirit to guide us in changing the way we live. Our repentance must have some practical impact on our lives.

When John the Baptist was baptizing people, preparing them for the arrival of the Messiah, he exhorted them to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance," meaning, "demonstrate through your life that your repentance is legitimate."

This was a part of Paul's message, as well. As he was telling the story of his conversion to King Agrippa, Paul said, I "...declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem

and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance" (Acts 26:20) Legalism has left a bad taste in the mouths of so many followers of Jesus that talk of works and actions can sometimes be dismissed. While the "you-are-what-you-do" mindset has certainly caused a great deal of damage in the church, the NT clearly calls us to change our behavior in light of the gospel.

The book of Titus is one clear example. Titus 2:11-12 says, "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age..." Experiencing God's grace motivates us to say "no" to sinful actions and "yes" to godly actions! If the Spirit leads someone to repentance, either outside of the group or during the weekly meeting, spend 5-10 minutes praying and listening together. Ask the Spirit to speak. Be quiet and listen, waiting for him to answer two specific questions:

1. What do you want me to do?

As followers of Jesus, we have already been transformed. We are a new creation! (2 Corinthians 5:17) But we are also called to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) Repentance will lead to change, and when we ask, the Spirit will call us to *do* something.

2. Who do you want me to tell?

Jesus gave his followers his Spirit so they could be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). He wants us to bear witness to the reality of his work in our lives. When we ask the Spirit, "Who do you want me to tell?", he may lead us to talk to both believers and not-yet-believers. He may want us to tell our spouse, our kids, our friends, or another member of the church family. He may also want us to tell a coworker or a neighbor.

We often wonder how to share the gospel with our not-yet-believing friends. Well, every time we experience the conviction of the Spirit and the forgiveness of Jesus, we have an amazing story to tell about how Jesus is saving us *today*. When a neighbor asks, "How are you?", we can take the safe route, or we can be vulnerable and share a recent struggle with anger or worry or pride, pointing to Jesus yet again as our only hope.

After a few minutes of praying and listening, the group will discuss what they heard. Because of our lingering struggle against sin, we often need the input of our brothers and sisters to help determine exactly how to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Praying, listening, and discussing this together is a prime opportunity to practice mutual submission. In light of the repentance the Spirit granted, and in light of what he said to the group, clear action steps should be determined together.

CONCLUSION

In Revelation 2, Jesus is addressing the church at Ephesus. After giving them a good deal of specific encouragement, he says, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." (Revelation 2:4)

When we worship and serve created things instead of the creator; when we place our faith and our trust in anything other than God to save us; when the affections of our hearts are set on earthly things; we have, *at least for a moment*, left our first love. We lose sight of the cross, God's clearest demonstration of love for us, and our hearts quickly wander away. As the old hymn says, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."

Jesus' stinging diagnosis is followed immediately by his prescribed cure: "*Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.*" (Revelation 2:5, italics added)

The DNA process seems to align with Jesus' prescription.

In the Discover step, the goal is for each person to learn or be reminded of the truth about who God is, what he's done, who we are, and how we live. Being reminded of the truth of the gospel on a regular basis is key to maintaining our love for Jesus. "We love, because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

In the Nurture step, the goal is for each person to be brought to repentance and renewed faith in Jesus. Over and over again in the book of Revelation, Jesus calls believers to repent. Martin Luther famously said, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mathew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

In the Act step, the goal is for each person to listen to the Spirit and obey as he prompts them to do and to tell in light of their repentance. Jesus is calling his church to return to works of faith that flow from a heart that's filled with love for him. After all, Jesus "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." (Titus 2:14)

May the Holy Spirit lead every DNA group to Discover, Nurture, and Act in light of all that Jesus has accomplished, to the glory of God the Father.