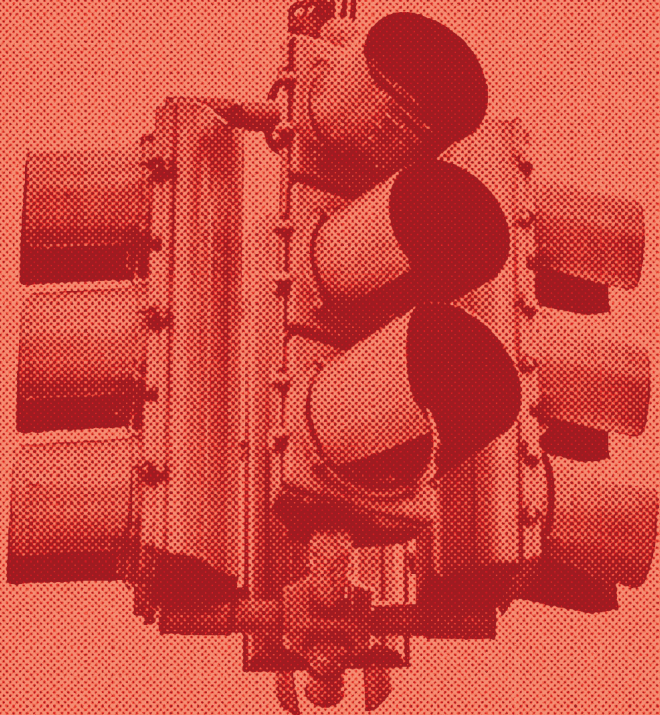


'Over many years I have longed for a practical, simple, authentic and inspirational book relating to ordinary discipleship. This is it.'

THE REVD CANON MARK CAREY

GUY DONEGAN-CROSS



DISCIPLESHIP START THIS WAY

*Beginning to live as an
everyday Christian disciple*

Praise for Discipleship: Start This Way

‘As Jesus-followers we are certainly called to be disciples... Guy’s new books are a fantastic, wise and highly readable resource exploring why we might want to consider the call to discipleship, and how we might intentionally jump into this life-giving adventure.’

The Revd Ali Herbert, head of discipleship, Gas Street Church, Birmingham

‘*Start this Way* is an outstanding summary of the challenges, experiences and practices of those who want to be apprentices of Jesus. It is honest and practical, culturally sensitive and rooted in scripture.’

Phil Knox, evangelist, author and missiologist, Evangelical Alliance

‘It is a book full of joy and pragmatic realities that are excellent for novice and experienced disciples. It is a reminder, affirmation, and framework of their journey, full of scripture, personal stories and profound truths handed down through the ages.’

The Revd Canon Dr Sharon Prentis, deputy director, Church of England racial justice unit

‘This book is a treasure trove of wisdom, offering practical insights for living as a Christian disciple. Donegan-Cross blends personal stories, biblical teachings and actionable advice, making it essential for both new and seasoned believers... May it inspire you to embrace Jesus’ abundant life and walk confidently as his disciples.’

The Rt Revd Saju Muthalaly, bishop of Loughborough

‘Such a clear, engaging and helpful exploration of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus today.’

James Lawrence, CPAS leadership champion

‘What is a “missionary disciple”? And how can I become one? In these highly accessible and practical books, Guy invites all of us on to the journey and gives us a map and a compass.’

The Revd Stephen Hance, dean of Toronto



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Ministries

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Introduction

We spend most of our lives doing the same things as everyone else in the world. We all sleep, eat and look after our homes. Most people work or study, watch TV or see friends. We all need to rest. In my experience, the lives of most Christians look fairly similar to the lives of everyone else. Superficially, at least.

What difference does being a Christian disciple make to the ordinary person, and how might we start?

We know Christians *believe* certain things. There are lots of books and courses available to explain the basics of belief. The question this book is focused on is how those beliefs start to affect our daily lives. This book does explore some of those beliefs along the way, but it is more interested in digging into how discipleship feels.

Sometimes I think lots of people are attracted to Christ but are unsure what to do about it. How exactly should I respond to him, and what will that look like? If you are in that boat, this book aims to provide a clear explanation of what it looks and feels like to become a disciple and to start to live as one.

What might it *feel* like to begin being a Christian disciple? How might I start to *experience* life differently?

Or perhaps you are someone who has a friend who wants to explore how to become a Christian disciple but are confused as to how to help. One of the challenges we can face in supporting others in their first steps is that people can have so many different stories and questions that we don't know where to start.

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't seem to help or to do justice to the beauty of discipleship. One of the aims of this book is to provide an accessible resource for walking with people into a life of discipleship, whatever their background or story.

Together with the companion book, *Walk This Way*, it can be used as a journey of at least a year, which might help move someone from an initial course like Alpha to a greater experience of confident, everyday discipleship.

The book aims to explain where discipleship begins for ordinary Christians, in a way normal people can relate to. It aims to be accessible but not lightweight. It offers theological thinking springing from questions most people ask and is illustrated by lots of real-life examples.

Defining 'discipleship'

The word 'discipleship' is everywhere in the church these days and rightly so. But it is also a bit of a funny word. It is not used in any other context. It doesn't resonate with anything we are familiar with. Even though Jesus used it all the time, I have heard lots of debates about what it means today.

But the uniqueness of the word does not have to be a problem. It can be a gift. It is a word which can unlock how Christian life is different from anything else in this world. Understanding what 'discipleship' offers us the best way to embrace a Christian life that is meaningful and life-changing even in the daily routines we all share. In our normal, ordinary lives, being disciples is the way to experience the existence every human being was created for.

What to expect in this book

In chapters 1 and 2, we start by thinking through *why* we even consider being disciples in the first place. We reflect on some of the life-questions shared by every human. We ask whether it is good for everyone to think about being a disciple, and why timing matters. We dig into some of the reasons we wrestle with this unfamiliar word.

Heart



Chapters 3–5 then boil things down to the **heart** of discipleship. This is where it starts – a life of surrendering to God being at the centre. We look at how people can experience that surrender depending on where they are starting from and who they are. Whether we are near the beginning of our journey, or many years on, surrender to God can be experienced in various ways at different times. We look practically at how we surrender to God by understanding the shortest sermon Jesus preached.

Foundations



Chapters 6–10 could have been called ‘Before you do anything... read this’. I have experienced the way in which being a disciple can turn into a legalistic life, trying to please God with my behaviour. This section is about knowing who we are as disciples and how God sees us. It explores the **foundations** of our thinking and feeling, which need to be in place before we make any attempt to be a Christian disciple.

What we *do* as disciples always needs to be a response to who we *are* as disciples people who are secure in God’s love and in their identity; who have a good perspective of how much is about us and how much is about God; who hold to a long-term view of life and change. If we haven’t received the gift of these foundations, discipleship can be dangerous, another thing to fail at.

Attitude



The final chapter explores the one principle which helps us to begin to experience ordinary discipleship in our everyday lives. It is the 'Start here' chapter and is about the daily **attitude** of a disciple which will make all the difference. It outlines what it feels like to be people who pay attention to God and respond to what God might be showing us in our daily lives. This is how we 'follow'. It might be an easy idea to understand, but hard to know how to live it out. This chapter offers some practical guidance on what this might feel like and addresses some of our questions or insecurities about the idea of paying attention to God.

The book ends with a summary page of key ideas to use with anyone interested in beginning their journey as a disciple (p. 139).

The book is designed for individual and group use. Each chapter contains questions within the text and at the end to help people reflect and respond. A relevant Bible passage is offered. It is suggested that a good way of listening to God in the Bible passage is simply to read it through twice and then use Discovery Bible Study questions:

What do we learn about God?

What do we learn about people?

What does this passage say about how God calls us to obey?

In the light of what we now know about this passage,
what is God calling you to do? (I will...)

Who might you share this story with this week?

The Discovery Bible Study method is accessible for all and helps us apply the Bible to our lives. Used over time it will enable most people to have confidence in listening to God through scripture. But it will also be a method which others can pick up quickly to use with others. (There is an appendix about leading Discovery Bible Studies well on page 140.)

Next steps

Finally, having read *Start This Way*, its companion book *Walk This Way* is a guide to experiencing the **lifestyle** of an ordinary disciple. It looks at the habits of being a Christian disciple which help us to live closely to God. There are chapters on worship, taking bread and wine, prayer, the Bible and the principles of a balanced life. These practices help us to give God our attention and space in our daily lives.

Walk This Way explores how we might change as people. We know Christians are meant to be Christlike, to be growing more like him in character. We ask what Christian **character** is and in what ways we are called to be different. We look at whether and how our character can really change. We unpack age-old wisdom about what helps us to grow, the role of the things we do regularly, how much is about us or God, and why we need each other to change. We finish by looking at how disciples can approach life's difficulties.

Finally, *Walk This Way* looks more specifically at the meaning of being a 'missionary disciple' by exploring the **aim** of a disciple's (and every human's) life. What are we living for? To join in with God's work in the world. We examine the nature of God's mission in the world, and where we fit in with that mission. We look at how God equips us, in our weakness, to take part in it. We see how mission is for everyday life, not just a special part of it. It is for everyone, not just a few people. We investigate how mission can include everything we do, in the 95% of our lives we spend not in church buildings. We look at God's ultimate plan for the world, and how his promised future shapes our daily lives. We explore aspects of mission: sharing faith naturally and helping others to grow, being a blessing alongside other Christians, fighting for a better world, and whether praying for things makes any difference.

1

How a spade changed my life

*What are the first questions we all ask about life?
Is everyone ready to consider being a Christian disciple?*

A few years ago, I went on a weekend retreat with a group of friends to a beautiful, ramshackle house in the North Yorkshire countryside.

If you have ever been to any conference or learning event, you will know that after a few days, you have probably forgotten much of what you heard and might end up applying only a small fraction of it to your life.

What we did that weekend shook up my sense of what my life is about so much that it has stayed with me ever since, and I am sure God used it to shape who I am today.

The person who was leading us gave us several things to do, but one of the first involved taking us outside into the garden and putting spades in our hands. As we stood there, slightly perplexed, he quietly dug a hole, about half a metre squared, before straightening up and looking at us with a worryingly mischievous expression.

‘There is a group of monks who, every morning of their lives, will dig a hole,’ he said.

We stared at this strange gardener and waited.

He continued: 'They are beginning the day by digging a part of their own grave. When they have completed a full grave after a month or so, every day they will then fill a little of it in.

'Once the cycle is complete, they will repeat it, again and again, until the time comes when they will actually occupy the plot themselves.'

We shuffled nervously. This was not what had come to mind when we were thinking about a weekend retreat.

And we certainly were not expecting the next instruction.

'If you would like to, why don't you dig your own hole?'

There is nothing like digging your own grave to get you to focus your life priorities and give fresh perspective. I have always believed that being comfortable with your own mortality is important, but the very experience of turning clods of earth connected me with just how fragile and short life is.

Moments like that are both a sobering lesson and a joyful liberation.

As I saw the earth making way between my feet, I realised that my body would one day soon be part of it, along with so many of the things that I clung to for meaning or which preoccupied my mind. All things are passing.

Imagine your regrets folding into the earth with you. The job you didn't get no longer feels so crucial to the meaning of your life. The grudge you carry because someone ignored you seems less important. The places you haven't lived, things you haven't owned, the money you haven't earned, the lottery ticket you never bought, people you haven't known, fame you haven't attained – all things are passing.

As the spade turns and you let go of those wounds or impossible dreams, you find yourself asking, 'What am I here for? What have I done that really matters? What do I really want for the rest of my life?'

Yet while it disturbs you, at the same time it frees you to see yourself and others in a new way. Each slap and thud tells you that the time you have with your loved ones is even more precious. The choices you have left to make are more important. The world you live in feels a greater gift than it did yesterday. The air you breathe is to be savoured. What you centre your life around could not be more vital.

If you are a gardener, the next time you are digging, perhaps making time to create a half-metre square hole might shift your perspective on your life.

Our friend hadn't finished with us yet. My sense of what mattered in life had begun to shift while digging my own grave, but the exercise was to become more precise.

We returned to the house in a contemplative mood and were each handed a thin piece of wood, about 30 cm by 50 cm, with the top end rounded off, and a marker pen.

'When you are laid in the ground, what would you like written on your gravestone?' said our host.

Our next task was to describe in a few words the things we would like to remain of us at the end of our lives. It might sound a bit morbid, but over an hour it forced me to step back and name what I am living for.

I didn't find myself writing about a list of achievements or possessions – after the digging exercise they seemed a little less impressive and relevant. I wasn't particularly concerned to write about how I had been 'true to myself' – integrity is essential, but as a life legacy it seemed a very timid focus.

What emerged was more about my *loves*. Who did I treasure and want to ensure that they knew they were of worth? What did I pursue which was bigger than me, which would last longer than me? What had I given myself to, body and soul?

I was reminded of Dr Martin Luther King's phrase, 'Whoever has nothing they would die for, has nothing to live for.'

What had I staked my life upon?

I found myself hoping that at the end of my life, I could look back and see that what would matter was how much I had given glory to God, how much I had put him at the centre. I wanted my wife and children to have known they were loved by me, that they were secure in my love and that I had helped them be secure in him. These were the things I hoped would endure.

Digging that hole had excavated my heart. It had reminded me about what will last. The action helped me realise again that the worth of my life is found in what I am committed to and in whom I love. The spade said, 'You are not the centre of the universe. Life does not revolve around you. A healthy human being lives for something other than themselves.'

We are all disciples, all following someone, all prioritising certain things in life. Whether we realise it or not. Whether we notice it, appreciate it, develop it, respond to it... or not.

This is a book about what, at the end of the day, we centre our lives around. More specifically, it is about living as a Christian disciple (we will be exploring what these words mean). It may be that these kinds of questions resonate with you. If so, it can only be a good thing to give them some time. But before we begin, here are a few more thoughts as we gather our things for the trip.

PAUSE Have I had moments that have made me think about what I am living for? What or when were they?

Digging had jolted me. A while later I experienced a similar moment of opportunity. I passed a poster in the street. It was a line of poetry by Mary Oliver which read, ‘What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’¹ I could have walked by, but this simple question stopped me in my tracks and slowed my life down to thinking pace. It was calling me to live in a deeper way, for things which mattered.

My digging experience and this well-chosen question had revealed to me how good it is to realise we are *already* living for something. The poet’s words spoke to me of how life-giving and essential it is to explore what that is – and how I need to pay attention if I am going to see it clearly.

I believe God was involved in these moments – as he is in all of life. One of the keys to living and growing as a Christian disciple is being open to these opportunities for change and being able to respond to them (see chapter 11).

This morning, as you rolled back the covers and started the day, you probably didn’t have a big philosophical conversation with yourself about the reason for your existence.

But whether you call yourself a Christian or not, something got you out of bed – a reason to live another day. Even on the gloomiest mornings you believe life is worth living.²

As the days, weeks, months and years of your life have gone by, the way you have lived each day has been, consciously or unconsciously, the result of assuming that your life has some kind of a purpose.

Some people have looked at life and the universe and have concluded it is meaningless and absurd. There is endless darkness before we are born, we live a short, pointless life and then we are extinguished forever. (Even the Bible is honest enough to express these very human feelings.)

The philosopher Camus is rumoured to have asked, 'Should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee?', because they seemed equal options in the face of what he saw as the pointlessness of existence.

This book doesn't pretend to put forward huge philosophical arguments, but the point is this:

Whatever they might believe about whether life and the universe mean anything, most people *live* as if it *does*.

I meet very few people who can *live* as if their choices don't matter, as if there is no point to the day.

Most of us *live* with a sense that 'who I am' has significance – I *mean* something; I have an identity.

Most of us *live* with a sense that 'what I do' *matters* – I have a purpose. I might even name that as a 'calling'.

To give him credit, Camus was honest enough to know this. Despite his view of the emptiness of the universe, he knew life had to be lived. He wrote, 'Find meaning... you need to breathe. And you need to be.'

He instinctively knew that we are meaning-hungry creatures, that life is in some ways 'precious'.

You might not regularly consider the meaning of your *identity* – the significance of who you are as a human being.

You might not be clear on what your *purpose* is – the importance of your sense of calling.

But, unless we are machines, every choice we make comes from somewhere and is centred on something.

*My love,
she said
that when all's
considered
we're only
machines.*

*I chained
her to my
bedroom wall
for future use
and she cried.*

Steve Turner, 'The Conclusion'³

It is hard for anybody to follow through on being completely without soul.

We could compare this common need for meaning to oxygen.

It may be that for a lot of people their 'life-centre' is a bit like the air we breathe.

We are constantly breathing, but rarely think about it or count our breaths. We can take the amazing gift of oxygen for granted.

Nevertheless, we know breathing keeps us alive.

When I pause long enough to focus on my breathing, I realise just how important, and wonderful, oxygen is.

In the same way, sometimes we can glimpse the deeper meanings that are providing our reasons for living.

I can pause and reflect on what it is I am living for, what kind of creature I am, what kind of world I am living in, what I am here for. What or who I am centring my life around. What or who I am following.

This is what Mary Oliver invites us to do. Not only to know that I am already a disciple of something, but to step back and notice what or who it is, so that I might grow.

I enjoy counting my breaths – it gives me a sense of peace and appreciation for the gift of life.

But to explore my 'life-centre', to know and grow in who or what I am following, is breath for the *soul*.

It is responding to the question, 'What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' like it matters.

How warm are you to discipleship? If you have read this far, this might feel like an unnecessary question. You have picked the book up and you have started reading. But asking ourselves whether we *warm* to being a disciple can be a helpful question to ask for two reasons.

Firstly, it is entirely normal that as human beings we have seasons in our lives when we are open to big questions about what is at the centre of our existence. But there are times when we are less interested.

When the apostle Paul preached to some Greeks in Athens, people reacted in different ways:

Some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject'... Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed.

ACTS 17:32-34

Same message, entirely different reactions. Different people, with different circumstances and backgrounds, with completely different degrees of openness to his words.

I know in my own life when it comes to being a disciple there have been times when I have been warm, and there have been times when I have been cold. Life circumstances can make a difference – we can react to moments of joy or tragedy in different ways, some of which may or may not turn our hearts and minds to God.

When I first came to faith at the age of 13, there was more going on than simply reading a book or hearing a message and giving mental assent to it. There were of course rational reasons to be a Christian disciple – Jesus made sense of the way of the world and my longings. It seemed like the sensible thing to do.

But there was also something more mysterious – a 'heart tug' which I couldn't put my finger on. Nevertheless, I knew it was real. I was *attracted* to God's love, and my heart was in the right place to respond. It was the right time.

It was the same when I met my wife, Ruth. We started as acquaintances, became friends and at some point, fell in love. There were, of course, lots of good reasons for falling in love with Ruth.

To be honest, I didn't spend a lot of energy feverishly writing a list entitled 'Ruth: pros and cons'. I didn't step back and make a *calculation*. My heart had to be in the right place as well as my mind. I had to warm up to her, and she to me. At some point I had to be willing for my heart – that mysterious centre of my being – to be involved.

When it comes to being a disciple, I would be the last person to suggest switching your brain off. Wrestling with questions and doubts, weighing evidence and finding out more are all part of the adventure. Yet I also know that is never enough. When it comes to living as a disciple of Christ, your heart must be willing to cross over, as well as your mind.

As you contemplate using a book on living as a Christian, it is a helpful question to ask yourself whether you are truly attracted to this or whether this feels like the right time to be exploring growing as a disciple. Do you want it? Or even, do you want to want it? If you are at least willing to listen, if you like discussing these things, if you enjoy the company of fellow faith travellers, the chances are that you are in a place to embrace new possibilities for your life.

But you also need to know you can say to yourself, 'This is not the right time for me,' and that that is perfectly normal. You might be surprised to hear a Christian say that. Shouldn't I be trying to persuade you to try? Not if I believe that God, by his nature, never forces his love on anyone – he only ever offers. And not if I trust that he is always good towards you and will lead you in the right way for you, at the right time.

The second reason for the 'warmth' question is because this book is not written purely to be a source of information. It is written to help form your life in ways that will bring change.

To reassure you, all the changes which flow from being a Christian disciple are good. They are life-giving, loving, healing, empowering and restorative. But they are changes, nevertheless. To be a disciple is to be willing to be changed – and we are not always warm to change, even if we know it is good for us!

Discipleship is a way of life which affects everything. Being a disciple is about the centre of who we are, what we are living for, how we spend each day, what we think about, what we desire. There is no part of you that is left out.

According to Jesus, disciples will love God with every aspect of their being:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

MATTHEW 22:37

This will involve focusing your thoughts, offering your feelings and surrendering your desires. It is a comprehensive surrender.

The good news is that most of the time the way that God lovingly works to change us is by making us want what he wants. Change is not so hard when you desire it.

Going back to my marriage experience, having ‘warmed’ to Ruth and fallen in love, I *naturally* found I wanted to please her. I *instinctively* began to want what she wanted. It became my joy to do things at *enormous personal* cost which I would have never contemplated before. I was a student who lived in squalor, but I started to wash my clothes regularly. An agonising effort, yet because my love was growing, it suddenly didn’t seem like a big deal.⁴

Nevertheless, even if we want it, change can be painful, and we can want to avoid it. Jesus had a conversation with a rich young man in which he invited him to give up the one thing he was really addicted to – his money. The young man couldn’t do it and walked away from the one change that would bring him true freedom.

This is why it is good to ask ourselves if we have a glimmer of warmth to following Christ – because there is a cost to being changed.

The great thing is there is no starting line you need to get to first. You don’t have to be an expert, a mystic, a nun, a theologian or a graduate to be a disciple (look at Christ’s followers). God starts with the broken, the confused, the lost, the meek and the poor in spirit (look at Christ’s followers).

But you have to warm to the journey and to the possibility that God might change you on the way.

Discipleship is not just receiving information about life.

It means being open to the possibility of the transformation of life.

If you really want to explore being a Christian disciple, it will be hard for you to keep God at arm's length.

PAUSE How warm am I to exploring discipleship?

There are lots of books about why being a Christian disciple might be a wise, good, life-giving and ultimately true way to live. They lay out why believing in God could be a reasonable thing to do, and they explore some of the tough questions (it's a big topic!). They look at why Jesus might be the Son of God who reveals the character of God in a unique way and why he is the centre of the human story. They outline how he calls all human beings to trust him and place him at the centre of their lives.

Speaking personally, I remain a Christian disciple because after 40 years or so of calling myself a Christian, I still haven't found anyone who improves on Jesus.

But the focus of this book is not just about beliefs. It is much more about what being a Christian *feels* like. Of course we look into some of the 'knowledge', but it is much more concerned with *lived experience*.

This is because my sense is that for many of us, whether we call ourselves Christians or not, often the questions we have are less about 'What?' and more about 'So what?'

A lot of people might be prepared to give living for God, loving God and following Christ a chance. But they might be genuinely confused about what *difference* that would make.

After all, in many ways people of faith, no faith or some faith seem to live quite similar lives. We are born, we work, we shop, we sleep, we love, we struggle, we laugh, we cry, we pay taxes (perhaps!) and we die (definitely!).

If you are interested in the questions ‘What difference does this make?’ or ‘What is the way?’, this book is for you. It is a little about what Christians believe, but it is more about how what Christians believe *shapes their lives*. It asks questions like:

What exactly is a Christian life?

How might it be different from other lives?

What difference does it make on a Monday morning?

How do I develop as a Christian?

How does someone start and continue the journey?

If you agree that everyone follows something, are keen to step back and reflect on your life, and are warm to growing as a Christian disciple, let’s begin.

Summary

Every human being lives for someone, or something, whether they realise it or not.

We are all disciples in the sense that being a disciple is about what is at the centre of our lives.

Most of us live as if there is purpose and meaning to our lives. Taking time to reflect on what those are helps us to grow and gives us life.

It is normal for us to experience times when we are warmer or colder towards discipleship, so it is worth asking if we are open to at least considering the journey.

This is partly because discipleship will lead to changes and affect every part of our life and our being.

These changes are all good and worked by God in us.

God starts with us as we are, whoever we are.

Discipleship is not only about what we believe, but also about how what we believe shapes our lives. This is our focus here.

REFLECTING

What would I write on my gravestone?

What kinds of things are at the centre of my life?

BIBLE PASSAGE

Matthew 13:1–9

RESPONDING

Could I share with someone who knows me well that I am thinking about discipleship?

Notes

- 1 'The Summer Day' by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by the permission of The Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency as agent for the author. Copyright © 1990, 2006, 2008, 2017 by Mary Oliver with permission of Bill Reichblum.
- 2 There are many reasons why people struggle to face the day because of physical or mental illness. I am making a more general point here.
- 3 Steve Turner, *Up to Date* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1983).
- 4 I am happy to report that this is a habit which has become a natural part of life – more on how spiritual transformation works later.



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Discipleship: Start This Way is the first of two books which inform individuals or groups in being Christian disciples, with a distinctive emphasis on the difference discipleship makes in our everyday experience of life. It is both a resource for the person who wants to explore Christian discipleship and a tool for anyone wanting to support someone in beginning their faith journey. It unpacks the heart, foundations and daily attitude of a disciple through personal story and biblical teaching. *Start This Way* offers a clear and accessible explanation of what it looks and feels like to become a disciple and to start to live as one.

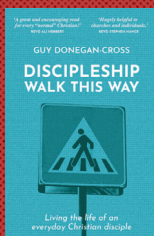
'Want to learn how to follow Jesus in the midst of normal daily life? These are the books for you.'

JAMES LAWRENCE, CPAS LEADERSHIP CHAMPION



Guy Donegan-Cross has worked across churches in Birmingham in roles encouraging and resourcing discipleship and leadership. Prior to that he was in parish ministry in four different contexts, most recently leading St Mark's, Harrogate. He loves helping people to grow in their everyday experience of being Christian disciples. He is married to Ruth and they have four children and a Norfolk Terrier. He loves his improvisation group and the free jazz on offer in Birmingham!

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