

Community

STARTING WELL IN YOUR SMALL GROUP

CONVERSATION GUIDE

EIGHT SESSIONS

FORMATIVE
EDITION

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Community: Starting Well in Your Small Group - Formative Edition
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WELCOME

Whether you've been in a small group before or this is your first time, we hope the next eight weeks will be different than anything you've experienced. You may have joined this group because you wanted to study the Bible, or you may just want the opportunity to meet some new people. In *Community: Starting Well in Your Small Group*, you'll do both. You'll explore biblical truth while building relationships with others. That's because we believe that *spiritual growth happens in the context of healthy relationships*.

A big part of this study is getting to know the other people in your group and letting them get to know you. We hope that as you come together with the purpose of growing closer to God, you'll experience joy and laughter, make new memories, and support one another during life's rough patches. We want you to view the next eight weeks as an opportunity to grow closer to God and closer to the people in your group.

Because life really is better connected.

FACILITATOR GUIDE & RESOURCES

Even though your group doesn't yet have a leader, one of you will need to facilitate the group meetings. That just means someone needs to make sure everyone knows when and where to meet, as well as guide the group discussions based on the questions in each week of the Participant Guide.

You will find an in-depth Facilitator Guide to help you better organize the group meetings at:

groupleaders.org/startingwell/formative

Groupleaders.org is also a great place to find other resources to help you throughout your group experience.

A TYPICAL GROUP MEETING

Group meetings consist of three elements:

- Sharing—unstructured time when you connect relationally and talk about what's going on in your lives
- Study/discussion—time you spend studying the Bible, a book, a video series, or a curriculum
- Prayer—time you spend sharing prayer requests and praying for one another

You can decide as a group how you want to work these three elements into your meetings, but a typical two-hour group meeting might consist of 30 minutes of sharing, 60 minutes of study and discussion, and 30 minutes of sharing prayer requests and praying.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

BEFORE EACH GROUP MEETING

- Read the session's Introduction and Weekly Reading sections.
- Answer the Discussion Questions.

DURING EACH GROUP MEETING

- Read the session's Weekly Reading aloud.
- Watch the 15- to 20-minute video segment.
- Have a conversation about your answers to the Discussion Questions.
- Read the Moving Forward section aloud. This section challenges you to apply what you've learned and sets up the topic for the next session.

RENEWING YOUR MIND

Each session contains a key Bible verse that you can memorize or meditate on during the time between sessions.



Session 1

SHOW UP

INTRODUCTION

Community isn't just a nice option; it's a need—like food, water, and shelter.

God created in us a need for him and for other people. We're relational beings because he is a relational being. Our community with others becomes the real-world setting where we practice the love our relationship with God produces in us.

**HE USES OTHER PEOPLE TO GROW US,
AND HE USES US TO GROW OTHER PEOPLE.**

Over the next eight sessions, we'll explore the connection between **relationship with God** and **community with other people**. We'll talk about how the two are essential components of growing spiritually and living life to the full.

The central purpose of this study is for you to get to know one another so you can set a firm foundation for a great Community Group experience.

You'll spend two of the eight sessions just telling your stories. But before you do that, we'll spend a couple sessions talking about why community is so important, why your stories matter, and how to best tell your stories.

WEEKLY READING: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

Community can be challenging because it's organic—every Community Group is different. Each is made up of different people with different backgrounds and experiences. But the very thing that can make community challenging can also make it great. As we get involved in real people's lives, faith leaves the realm of religious information and becomes a vibrant part of life in the real world. Jesus didn't give us a specific system or program with which to grow in our relationship with him. He gave us one another. He gave us community.

Life is better connected because connected people go further, faster.

Though the need for community is universal, there's a difference between what every person needs and what every group will provide. All groups are not equal at delivering community because all relationships are not equal at providing it.

FOUR KINDS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Our relationships fall into one of four categories:

PUBLIC

Connections through outside influences like a shared taste in music or a love of the same sports team.

SOCIAL

First-impression relationships based on surface-level interactions—acquaintances but not necessarily friends.

PERSONAL

Closer connections forged through shared experiences and feelings—friends.

INTIMATE

Real and raw connections—inner-circle friends. These relationships happen through our most closely shared experiences and feelings.

Most small groups are comprised of social and personal relationships. The deepest community happens through personal and intimate relationships. We hope this group will provide you with deep community. Whether it does will be partly determined by factors outside your control, like group chemistry.

But some things are within your control. We'd like for you to do three things:

1. Show up.

Make a commitment to be at group meetings. You can't form community with other people if you aren't around enough for them to get to know you.

2. Join in.

Take part in group discussions. Listen to what others have to say. Be part of the community you're trying to form.

3. Be real.

Let the people in this group know who you are. Be authentic and transparent. You don't have to reveal all your deepest, darkest secrets. But be open to the possibility that you may eventually form the kind of deep relationships in which you can share those secrets.

ONE THING IS CERTAIN:

God has a purpose for this group and for everyone in it.

It may be a good experience for you or it may be a great experience. It will definitely be a place of growth and ministry if you pay attention to what God is doing through your relationships with one another.

ICEBREAKER QUESTIONS

1. What is your favorite movie? Why?
2. What was your first job? What do you remember most about it?
3. If you could go to college again, what would you study?
4. You have been given a one-year sabbatical from work. What would you do?
5. If your house were on fire, what three items (not people) would you try to save?
6. Who is one of your heroes? Why?



PURSUE GOD

Session 2

INTRODUCTION

We all have relationships that feel weird.

We don't want them to be, but they are.

MAYBE you can't find a way to talk to an adolescent.

MAYBE you're not sure what your parents really think of you and you can't muster the nerve to ask them.

MAYBE you've felt yourself drifting away from a close friend.

or **MAYBE** you see potential for friendship in a new acquaintance, but that person is holding you at arm's length.

**FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE,
THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH
GOD IS WEIRD AND AWKWARD.**

He can feel distant and uncaring—maybe even angry or judgmental. People think of him as a surly old man, a disapproving parent, or a humorless scold.

You may believe in God but still wonder what he wants from you.

Does he like you?

Is he aware of how stressful life is—how you hate your job or are stressed out about your mortgage or concerned about your health or can't even believe how much it still hurts that your mom is gone?

Does he even care?

What if God does care?

What if he *wants* a relationship with you?

What if he wants to interact with you in a way that is honest and transparent—*intimate*?

What if he wants your life to be filled with joy and peace?

That's the kind of God we all hope and long for, right?

If that's how God is, it would not only change your spiritual life, it would change the way you relate to other people.

IT WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING.

WEEKLY READING: INTIMACY WITH GOD

Boiled down to its simplest form, the entire Bible—Old and New Testaments—is a record of God’s pursuit of intimate relationship with his creation. God made everything around us so that it would reflect his glory and creativity. He made us in his own image to do the same. And he gave us the freedom to choose to love him . . . or not.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three stories¹ to illustrate God’s radical and relentless love for people.

In the first one, a man who had a hundred sheep lost one of them. So, he left the ninety-nine and went looking for the one until he finally found it. The man was so happy, he called his friends and family together to celebrate.

In the second story, a woman who had ten coins lost one of them. She turned her house upside down looking until she found the lost coin. Like the man with the sheep, she celebrated recovering the coin with friends and family.

In the most famous story, a rebellious young man asked his dad for his inheritance (even though his dad was still alive) and then set off on his own because he was tired of living by his father’s rules. The young man squandered his money, learning the hard way that people who are your friends because of what they can get from you tend to disappear when you run out of stuff to give. When the young man realized how much he’d messed things up, he swallowed his pride and went back to his father’s house, fully expecting to be punished.

INSTEAD, HIS DAD THREW A PARTY AND INVITED ALL OF THEIR FAMILY AND FRIENDS. HE WAS JUST HAPPY THAT HIS SON HAD COME HOME.

What Jesus’ stories tell us is that God doesn’t only look down on the mass of humanity from afar and feel love. He knows us and loves us individually. He cares about us personally. When we’re lost, he finds us and brings us home. When we run away, he doesn’t write us off. He waits patiently for us to return, ready to forgive and accept us.

¹ Luke 15:1-32

WE RESIST GOD BECAUSE WE DON'T TRUST HIM.

What if I depend on God and he lets me down? What if he takes advantage of me? What if he doesn't really have my best interests at heart?

When we decide that we can’t trust God’s love for us, our relationship with him becomes religion, which is just a quest to find the right combination of belief and ritual to get God to do what we want him to do. Because religion isn’t relational, it reinforces our sense that God is distant and judgmental.

That kind of non-relationship with God eventually makes us judgmental. It’s no way to live. It’s definitely not God’s design.

The most powerful relational dynamic in the world is trust.

When two people set aside their own agendas on behalf of each other, it creates an unbreakable bond of trust between them. Each knows that the other has his or her best interests at heart.

God has already demonstrated his trustworthiness. When he sent Jesus to die for our sins, he put our need for salvation ahead of his Son’s suffering. By serving us, he invited us to trust him enough to obey him.²

² Philippians 2:6-8

So how do we pursue life-changing trust in God? It requires two things:



TIME

You can't have a relationship with someone without spending time with that person—casual, unstructured time.

In the case of God, we spend time with him at church or when we serve in a ministry. But that's not enough. We also need to spend time with him privately: reading the Bible, praying, and worshipping him.

TRANSPARENCY

In our best relationships, we share all of ourselves, holding nothing back. In spite of our dark corners and hidden skeletons, we want to be fully known and accepted—loved—as we truly are.

Yet, we're tempted to talk to God in formulas, using carefully selected words that brush over the messy parts of our lives so we don't offend him. It's easy to fall into this pattern. But don't be polite with God; be honest.

The spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, "You are the beloved and on you my favour rests."

HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What motivated you to join this group? What do you hope to get out of our time together?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being *"I'm not sure I believe in God"* and 10 being *"I spend time with God every day,"* where is your current relationship with God? (You can just give a number if you don't want to provide details.)
3. When you think about God, what do you imagine he is like?

4. What people or events in your life have influenced your picture of God?
5. What are some things that make it hard for people to trust God?
6. What is one thing you can do to give God more access to your life? What can this group do to support you?

MOVING FORWARD

Here's the thing: intimacy with God is the foundation for healthy relationships with other people. When we learn to trust God, he is able to grow our faith in surprising ways. That kind of relationship with God frees us to love others unconditionally instead of looking for something from them or trying to figure out how we can use them to get what we want.

We'll talk more about that in the next session.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 8:38-39



A series of horizontal orange lines providing a writing area for the reader, spanning the width of the page.

To fall in love with God is the greatest of all romances; to seek him, the greatest adventure; to find him, the greatest human achievement.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO



Session 3

JOIN IN

INTRODUCTION

We all put on acts.

We try to convince everyone that we have it all together:

- Successful careers
- Strong, satisfying marriages
- Well-behaved children
- Crystal-clear consciences

We go to extremes to create and protect the fake versions of ourselves that we present to the world. We buy cars and houses we can't afford. We suffer unsatisfying careers just to pay the bills. We hide our marital struggles instead of seeking help.

We keep secrets.

Have you ever had a raging argument in the car on the way to church with your spouse, children, boyfriend, or girlfriend, only to force smiles as you step into the building and make your way through the crowd? Most of us have.

BUT ISN'T THERE SOMETHING IN YOU—SOMETHING IN EACH OF US—THAT MAKES YOU WANT TO BE KNOWN FOR WHO YOU REALLY ARE?

When we present false images to the people around us, we feel **TENSION**. We feel like phonies, hypocrites. And at the deepest level, we know that's no way to live. We long for who we are in public to be the same as who we are behind closed doors.

A life in which there's only one version of us, no matter who we're around, sounds simple, pure, and magnetically attractive.

But it also feels unattainable. Even if we want to shed our false selves, there's a sense that a certain level of hypocrisy is part of being polite. We're not just fake because we want to look good. We're fake because we believe that no one really wants to hear our problems or deal with the ugly parts of our lives.

But what if there was a way to put aside the false images and just be you?

WEEKLY READING: COMMUNITY WITH INSIDERS

Jesus designed Christian community to be the place we find wholeness, a congruency between who we are in public and who we are in private. He wants us to live together honestly and transparently, not so we will be resigned to our brokenness, but so that we can begin to grow out of it, becoming more and more like him.

Jesus wants us to live abundantly. In **John 10:10**, he says, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”* He didn’t come to take from us or to harm us. He came to release us from sin so we could connect with God and to show us how to live meaningfully in community with one another. A full, free life begins with a trusting relationship with God and expands outward into trusting relationships with other people.

Scripture describes the kind of community Jesus wants us to build with one another:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:7

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.

Romans 14:1

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

Galatians 6:2-3

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16

These passages describe a community that is inclusive, accepting those who are exploring faith, not treating them as though they have to figure everything out and clean up their lives before they’re invited inside. It’s a community in which people can be themselves and depend on one another. It’s a community in which we don’t stand in judgment of one another’s flaws, but call one another to become our better selves, people who love and give to others.

Just like our relationship with God, our relationships with one another must be built on trust. And the ingredients for that trust are time and transparency.



TIME

To build the kind of community we desire for you, you’ll need to spend time together, some of it structured around growing in your relationship with God and some of it casual and unstructured. Sometimes you need to just hang out with no agenda other than enjoying one another’s company.



TRANSPARENCY

In Christian community, we share ourselves. Maybe not all the time and maybe not all at once, but this is the goal: to be real in every relationship and to actively build a few relationships in which nothing is held back.

We all struggle with sin and its effects. Bringing our struggles out into the light is the only way we become free from them. We do that by allowing ourselves to truly know and be known by others.

The idea of trusting other people with our true selves is scary because they might reject or condemn us. But think about it: if someone in this room opened up to you, would you reject or condemn him or her or would you offer support and be more inclined to be honest about who you are in return? If you’d respond with compassion, why assume the worst about others?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who was your best friend in childhood? What was it about that person that caused you to connect with him or her?
2. In what ways do people present exaggerated images of themselves to the world? What harm can these exaggerations cause?
3. Have you ever judged someone based on a first impression only to change your mind when you heard more of that person's story? What was it about hearing his or her story that changed your mind?

4. How do you feel about telling your story in this group?
5. If you were open and transparent in telling your story, how do you think it might change your relationships with the people in this group?
6. What are some things that could make this group safe enough for you to be open and transparent?

MOVING FORWARD

Trusting other people requires us to be honest with ourselves about who we are and to be bold enough to talk about it. That's not easy. But the goal of this community you're beginning to form is to grow to trust one another in ways outside your normal comfort zones. That won't happen overnight. It won't even happen by the time you're finished with this eight-week study. But it can happen, and it begins with getting to know one another.

Over the next two sessions, you'll tell your stories. Before you end this session, spend some time setting up a schedule so everyone knows during which session he or she will be sharing. The length of each person's or couple's story depends on the size and makeup of your group.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24



Lined writing area for notes, consisting of multiple horizontal lines across the right page.

It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but lends us His ear.

So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER



BE REAL

Sessions 4-5

INTRODUCTION

Over the next two sessions, each of you will tell your story.

You may be eager to let others know who you are ...

or you may be filled with anxiety.

Either way, use the information and exercises in this section to help you prepare.

THE MEMBERS OF YOUR GROUP HAVE CHOSEN TO BE IN COMMUNITY—a kind of community different from the teams, work environments, and casual friendships we normally experience.



Like you, they're looking for a community that spurs them into growth and a meaningful relationship with God and others. *Challenge yourself to be open and transparent. Let these people know who you really are.*

WEEKLY READING: THE FIVE THINGS

When people tell their faith stories, five things appear over and over again—five things God uses to grow our faith. They're ways of recognizing how God is already involved in each of our lives. It's a great way for you to think through your own story.

PRACTICAL TEACHING

Studying the Bible and listening to sermons make Scripture seem alive and relevant in our daily lives. They show us who God is, who we are, and who God wants us to be.

PROVIDENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS

God uses the people in our lives to influence us in extraordinary ways. He speaks to us through others—whether lifelong friends or short-term acquaintances. God can even use difficult relationships for our good.

PRIVATE DISCIPLINES

Things like prayer, personal time reading the Bible, fasting, and solitude deepen our relationship with God. They get our hearts in sync with his.

PERSONAL MINISTRY

Jesus showed us that we find life by giving our lives away. When we serve others, we are privileged to partner with God in what he's doing in the lives of those we serve.

PIVOTAL CIRCUMSTANCES

When big things happen, good or bad, they change the way we interact with God. Circumstances often cause us to pay attention to what he's doing in our lives.

As you think about your own story, consider how the five things have played a part in your journey with God.

You don't have to talk about all five things, but maybe you've had a providential relationship or two that were crucial to growing your faith. Or maybe a pivotal circumstance revealed God's presence in your life. Or maybe a mission trip or other form of personal ministry changed your relationship with God. Very often, these five things represent changes in direction, challenges overcome, or life-changing revelations—things that make for interesting stories.

In a good story, a character wants something and overcomes obstacles to get it. When you think about it, your life's like that too. Whether you are looking for the perfect job, trying to get into the right school, or even falling in love, your story is probably about working for things you think will make you happy or give you a sense of purpose.

As you think about telling your story, consider the things you've wanted—career, family, adventure, spiritual experiences—and the obstacles you've faced while pursuing them.

BUT REMEMBER: The goal of your story isn't to entertain. It's not to be dramatic or funny (though it may be both). It's to share with your group the events and experiences that have made you who you are.

MOVING FORWARD

As you think through your story, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- *Who are the people who have most influenced me?*
- *What are my greatest successes? What obstacles did I overcome to achieve those successes?*
- *What are my greatest failures? What did I learn from those failures?*
- *In what ways has God influenced my relationships, successes, and failures?*

If it helps, use the blank pages that follow to write notes, an outline, or a rough draft of your story. Keep in mind, though, that your story doesn't have to be polished and perfect. The most important thing is that it expresses who you are.

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.

1 Corinthians 11:2



We get one story, you and I, and one story alone.

God has established the elements, the setting, and the climax and the resolution.

It would be a crime not to venture out, wouldn't it?

DONALD MILLER

Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.

OSCAR WILDE



FOLLOW & LEAD

Session 6

INTRODUCTION

You may be wondering,

Does it even matter if we have a group leader?

IT DOES . . . A LOT.

When people create a community based on a shared goal, they need a point person to monitor and guide their progress.

A sports team needs a coach.

A boxer needs a trainer.

A mountain-climbing expedition needs a guide.

And a Community Group needs a leader.

The leader isn't the boss of the group. The leader doesn't call all of the shots. He or she guides the group in creating the kind of community that benefits everyone in the group—a community focused on healthy relationships and spiritual growth.

A lot is involved in keeping a group organized and on track: communicating logistical information, hosting, facilitating group discussions, planning group socials, and setting up service opportunities. An effective group leader entrusts those things to group members. Only two responsibilities are unique to the group leader . . . and they're big responsibilities.

- Only the group leader shows up each group meeting thinking about the spiritual growth of everyone in the room.
- Only the group leader nurtures the group dynamic, making sure that the environment supports spiritual growth.

Just know that you don't need to find a perfect leader (other than Jesus, perfect leaders don't exist). You only need to find a person who has a solid grasp of the fundamentals of spiritual growth and leadership. He or she will grow as a leader by leading the group and through the leader development opportunities the church provides.

WEEKLY READING: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LEAD HUMBLY?

Following

We assume that if we learn a particular collection of facts about God, then we'll arrive at spiritual maturity. But that's not how it works. God isn't against our learning stuff about him, but he is more interested in our living in relationship with him. Growing spiritually is about trusting God more and more with the details of our everyday lives.

As we open up aspects of our lives to him—like our finances, careers, and relationships—he proves his trustworthiness. That moves us to give him more access to our lives, which gives him more opportunity to demonstrate trustworthiness. Our relationship with our heavenly Father becomes deeper and richer through time and personal experience.

Spiritual growth is a journey, not a destination. It's about following in Jesus' footsteps. As you think about and discuss who should lead your group, look for someone who is following Jesus. But what does following Jesus look like? In his letter to the Galatians,¹ the apostle Paul described it like this:

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom

to indulge your flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

None of us loves perfectly the way Jesus did, but you'll be able to recognize the fruit of the Spirit in someone who is growing spiritually. He or she will be joyful, self-controlled, giving, and caring. That kind of focus on others will ensure that your leader is about encouraging the group members in their own spiritual journeys. That's the most important role of your group leader.

Leading

When we think of great leaders, we tend to imagine larger-than-life personalities.

We associate leadership with those who dream big and direct others through the force of their own wills. We see that kind of leader all the time in politics, big business, professional sports, and in our workplaces. But that's not really the kind of leadership Jesus modeled or talked about.

¹ Galatians 5:13-14; 22-23.

Two of Jesus’ twelve disciples were brothers James and John. They grew up as fishermen, but Jesus called them away from that trade so they could follow him. The Gospels record that one day their mother approached Jesus to ask if her boys could be his second and third in command. She wanted to make sure that when Jesus finally set up his new kingdom, her sons would have power and influence.

As you can imagine, the other ten disciples weren’t happy about James and John’s mother jockeying for position on behalf of her sons. Matthew’s gospel² says they were indignant. Jesus calmed everyone down by explaining that his view of leadership was radically different than the rest of the world’s view of leadership.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Let’s be clear. Jesus didn’t say that people with larger-than-life personalities couldn’t be great leaders.

He said that leadership isn’t about power.

Great leaders don’t leverage their influence to make themselves look important. Great leaders leverage their influence on behalf of the people over whom they have authority. Great leaders serve those they lead. Keep this in mind as you consider who among you might lead the group. Try to look past the qualities our culture associates with leadership. Consider who might have a heart to serve the group by encouraging everyone’s spiritual journey. It’s not that the extroverts can’t be great leaders (they can be). It’s that you shouldn’t look past the introverts just because we don’t normally associate quieter personalities with leadership.

NOTE: If you think your group may nominate you for leadership, check out the Session 6 notes in the Facilitator Guide at groupleaders.org/startingwell/formative. The notes include some self-assessment tools to help you decide if you want to pursue leadership.

Handwriting practice lines consisting of multiple horizontal orange lines on a white background.

Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As you think about moving forward as a Community Group, what do you hope to get out of the group experience?
2. Talk about a leader from business, politics, or your own life that you admire. What qualities about that person impress you?
3. Talk about someone who has influenced your spiritual growth. In what ways did that person encourage or challenge you to grow?

4. Imagine your life one year from now if you were to move forward in community with this group of people. How do you think this group will have influenced who you are?
5. Who do you nominate to lead this group? Based on what you've learned over the course of your group discussions, why do you nominate that person?
6. Is there consensus among the group about who should be nominated? If so, you've completed the nomination process. If not, talk about the best course of action for moving forward. What do the nominees think?



BE THE CHURCH

Session 7

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few sessions, you've told your stories and selected a potential leader.

You're getting to know each other beyond the surface details of jobs and hometowns and where you went to school. **NOW WHAT?** For the most part, you need to keep doing what you're doing while the church goes through the process of interviewing and approving your leader. Building trust is an ongoing process.

In the weeks and months to come, you will

- Read and talk about the Bible together
- Pray with and for one another
- Just hang out

**BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE YOU NEED TO DO:
INVEST IN THE LIVES OF OTHERS.**

Christian community is designed to be outwardly focused, concerned with those who don't know Jesus, as well as those on the margins of society.¹ We have a responsibility to *express to the unloved and even the seemingly unlovable* the **GRACE AND MERCY** that we receive from God.²

¹ Luke 9:48

² Matthew 25:35-40

WEEKLY READING: INFLUENCE WITH OUTSIDERS

Just before his crucifixion, Jesus prepared his disciples for his death. He began to show and tell them what they would need to do to establish his church and transform the world. During his last meal with them, he did something remarkable:

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

(John 13:1-18)

By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus inaugurated the kind of community he wanted us to live in: one in which we overturn the natural order of the world by tenaciously putting others ahead of ourselves.

Jesus' radical act of service was an invitation to all of his followers—all of us—to participate with him in the transformation of people's lives. It's important that we prioritize relationships with unbelieving friends so that they can experience God's love the way we do. The easiest way to build influence with outsiders is to invest in the lives of unbelieving friends and, at the appropriate time, invite them to environments where they can hear spiritual truth. This isn't about selling someone on the idea of going to church. It's about reaching out and getting involved in people's lives so that they know the invitation is motivated by a genuine concern for them and that they're not just projects for you.

Another way to invest in the lives of people around us is to serve those in need. Jesus' call for us to serve others can make us uncomfortable. It's easier to do nothing. We're tempted to view poverty and sickness and human suffering as too large for us to make much of a difference. But Jesus didn't call you to live in a cloistered community that holds outsiders at bay. He'll take responsibility for changing the world, but he wants you to be

involved in his work. It's true that you can't serve everyone in need, but you can serve **someone** in need.

And this small community that you're in the process of forming will benefit enormously from investing in the lives of the people around you—whether it's investing in and praying for unbelieving friends or serving those in need. That time spent doing something important together will draw you into greater transparency. It will increase your trust—*of God and of one another*.

Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Talk about a time when you got to see people in a new context (for example, going out to dinner with coworkers). How did that experience change the relationships in that group?
2. How do you think doing something together outside of group meetings could change the relationships in this group?
3. What is the connection between investing in others and growing in your relationship with God? Why do you think God set things up that way?

4. How could serving others change people's perceptions of Christians and the church?
5. What kinds of things keep us from investing in or serving others?
6. Is there a charity or a particular group in need that is near and dear to your heart? If so, talk about why you feel a desire to help that charity or group.

MOVING FORWARD

Individually, think about an unbelieving friend, neighbor, or coworker whose life you can begin to invest in so that when the time is right you can invite him or her to church. What is the best next step for you to take with that person?

As a group, begin planning to serve with one another. Talk about it. Do any of you feel a burden to serve a particular group of people in need—single moms, children living in poverty, AIDS patients, shut-ins? If so, this may help you figure out where you can serve. But the important thing is to serve someone. Once you start serving, do so on a regular basis—monthly, quarterly, whatever you decide as a group.

Don't move beyond the planning phase until your leader has been approved and you've committed to move forward with your group. But once you've committed to moving forward, get out and serve some people as soon as you can. If you don't serve within the first few months you're together, time will fly by and you may miss the opportunity entirely.

The **HOW DO WE SERVE?** section in this guide will help you generate ideas and set up a service opportunity.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
Galatians 5:13-14



Lined writing area for notes.

Everybody can be great . . . because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

HOW DO WE SERVE?

NEED HELP CONNECTING WITH SOMEONE IN NEED?

- Ask a friend who works in healthcare.
- Check with your leasing office or a counselor at your child's school.
- Contact a local government group, like the Parks and Recreation Department.
- Call a well-connected neighbor or coworker.

YOUR SERVICE OPPORTUNITY STEP-BY-STEP

1. Consult your calendars, save a Saturday, and psyche yourselves up to serve.
2. Kick off your service day by gathering for breakfast at a restaurant or one of your homes.
3. Take pictures while you serve. Use one as the wallpaper on your computer or phone.

SERVICE IDEAS

- Organize a cell phone or eyeglass drive.
- Rake leaves, clean gutters, or power wash a driveway for a neighbor in need.
- Assemble a new parent's kit for the arrival of a newborn and then donate the kit to a crisis pregnancy center.
- Throw a "PB&J" party. Bring supplies to your small group gathering and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Donate the sandwiches to a nearby shelter or food pantry.
- Identify a school playground or local park that could use some sprucing up. Plan a day of painting, raking, and mulching.
- Throw a cookie-decorating party, manicure party, or Christmas sing-along at a nursing home.
- Put together care packages for soldiers. You can find organizations online that will help with mailing and provide wish-list items to send.
- Renovate used or broken furniture and then deliver it to a needy family or donate it to a nonprofit.
- Choose an easy craft you can do as a group, like making fleece blankets. Then donate your work to a hospital.
- Adopt a family at Christmas by purchasing gifts for the children.
- Sell hot coffee or warm doughnuts in your neighborhood and then donate your earnings to a nonprofit.
- Clip coupons from the Sunday paper, go grocery shopping, and donate the food to a local shelter or pantry.



BE TOGETHER

Session 8

INTRODUCTION

Over the past seven sessions, you've learned that intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders are evidence of spiritual growth.

You've also invested time sharing your stories and getting to know one another.

**NOW IS THE TIME TO COMMIT
TO CONTINUING AS A GROUP.**

In this final session, we'll review the values and goals in the **COMMUNITY GROUP AGREEMENT**. As a group, you'll work out the logistics of group meetings moving forward. This simple exercise is a great way to ensure that everyone's expectations are aligned.

If you decide not to move forward with your group, contact your leader by phone or email before the meeting to let him or her know. If this group isn't a fit for you, don't worry about it. And don't give up on the idea of community.

All groups are different; there's one out there for you.

WEEKLY READING: COMMUNITY GROUP VALUES AND GOALS

A Community Group should provide a predictable environment where group members can pursue healthy relationships and spiritual growth.

Relationships

While prayer and discussion of curriculum are key elements, the driving force behind the group is the building of relationships.

Authenticity

The atmosphere should encourage openness and transparency among members. This is an environment where people should feel free to be themselves.

Confidentiality

For authenticity to occur, members must be able to trust that issues discussed within the group will not be shared outside the group.

Respect

Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouses or other members of the group.

Availability

A primary responsibility of the group is to prioritize specific relationships. This requires a willingness to be available to meet one another's needs.

Multiplication

Group members recognize that one of the goals of their group is to start a new group within the life cycle of the group. This allows others to experience the Community Group relationship.

MOVING FORWARD

Congratulations on finishing *Community: Starting Well In Your Small Group*. We hope that you've had a chance to get to know the other people in your group and to let them get to know you. We hope you've experienced the truth that *life really is better connected*.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13:34-35



The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers and cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant, is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads.

HERMAN MELVILLE