



SMALL**GROUPS**
CONNECT

INTRODUCTION

We are so excited that you are committing to journey together for the next six(ish) weeks! Life in community is vital part of following Jesus, and connecting with other Christians is one of life's great joys. When people gather to talk about what it means to follow Jesus, we trust that God shows up in exciting, powerful, meaningful, and transformative ways.

Whether you have been attending church for years or are just beginning to explore what it means to be a follower of Jesus, whether you have been part of a small group before or this is your first time, we are praying that you will be invited into new kinds of relationships and a deeper understanding of following Jesus because of the next few weeks. God can knit us together, encourage us to deeper study, change our lives, spur us to serve, and move us to invite others into the life of the church.

Small groups work best with some set expectations for how the time will be spent each week. We recommend meeting for 1 ½ to 2 hours and incorporating these elements into each meeting: eating, discussion, application and prayer.

Eating together is important to live life in community well – things change around a table. You get to know people better, informal conversation is easier, and friendships are solidified. We encourage groups to share responsibility for food, so one person is not in charge each week. Your group may decide to do a potluck meal, snacks, or dessert, but we encourage you to start with food.

This resource is meant to provide a launching point for discussion within the group. Discussion questions are provided, but the group should be open to where the Holy Spirit might take the conversation. The resource may best be used if the group reads ahead of time and comes prepared to talk about what they have read as opposed to reading it aloud in the group.

Finally, concluding each week with a conversation about how to apply what you have learned to your life and praying together is essential for transformation. Prayer invites the Holy Spirit to keep working as you end your time together, and it bonds your group as you pray for each other's needs. Transformation won't happen without the help of God!

We are praying for you, and we are available for conversation.

**PLEASE CONTACT US
FOR ADDITIONAL INFO**

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SESSION 1:

BREAKING THE ICE

Are you looking forward to meeting with your small group for the first time? We are so excited that you have decided to explore what it means to intentionally connect with each other. Over the next few weeks, we will walk through the basics of what it means to share life in the body of Christ, but relax – this first meeting will be simple and focused primarily on getting to know who is in your group. Learn each other's names, ask why they wanted to participate in a small group, find out what other people do for a living or for fun – even if you already know the people you will be meeting with, there is likely something more to discover. For this meeting, have fun! Church can (and should) be a joyful, laughter-filled, pleasant experience.

Before you get to the party though, there are a couple of things that your group should talk through tonight. First, officially decide on a time to meet that works best with everyone's schedules. Then, set a calendar for the date that you can all be together. If you are meeting on Tuesdays from 6–8:30 pm, are there some Tuesdays that you need to cancel because of conflicts? Spend some time planning and committing to be present at each small group meeting. Groups work best and make the best connections when everyone is present at every meeting. It is easier to build trust and rapport with each other when you actually interact. On the dates that someone can't make it, we encourage you to still meet. Share a meal or go do something fun together. Spending time together is essential for building deep and meaningful community.

If one thing is clear from Scripture, it is that life is not meant to be lived alone, especially the life of faith. As early as Genesis 2:18, God says, "It is not good for man to be alone." Abraham was part of a larger tribe and family that was meant to bless other people (Genesis 12:2-3). Even Jesus surrounded himself with friends. The disciples ate together, fished together, prayed together, traveled together, and probably laughed at some point along the way. We were made to be in community with one another as we exercise and explore our faith.

We are so glad that you have decided to at least explore what Christian community could mean in your life. Over the next few weeks, we will talk about what it means to live in community, how to develop a strong connection with your group, and share our faith stories with one another. Our hope for you is that you will grow together and in your relationship with God. We pray that this is the beginning of a longer journey of discipleship in Christian community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This week can be a laid back time of getting to know one another, but you may also want to discuss some questions as a group. You will also want to spend some time with a calendar, planning dates when everyone can be present.

- Your group may want to ask an icebreaker question like: what is the last place you traveled? Or what's your favorite dessert? Or what did you want to be when you grew up?

- What are your previous experiences of community?

- What drew you to a small group?
What are you hoping to learn or happen?

SESSION 2:

BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

So what does it mean to live in Biblical community?
What does the Bible say about how we are supposed to live with one another?

Today's culture tends to foster shallow relationships, but within each of us, there is a need to connect with others deeply. Loneliness is one of the top complaints among young adults today. Increasing technology encourages connections that can be made in 140 characters or less. We believe that the best answer to the epidemic of loneliness is Christian community.

The early church is a great place to look for examples of how Christian community functions best. Acts 2:44-47 describes the early community sharing their resources, caring for those in need, eating together, praising God together, and growing in number daily. Small groups can foster that kind of relationship – where you are sharing, serving, eating, worshipping, and making new disciples in a community of other people.

Living in community well starts with understanding yourself. You are loved and gifted by God. You have unique gifts and graces – some of us are wise, some of us are kind, some of us are good with words, but all of us have value that only we can add to a group. This means that as you meet together, your continued presence is important. You bring something to the table that no one else does. When we are in relationship with other people, we are connected to people who are equally loved and gifted by God, so you are always joining with people who are gifted in ways that you are not.

1 Corinthians 12 describes the ways that our gifts are meant to support and lift one another up. Here, Paul says that every member of the body of Christ is necessary. The body is not a body without all of its parts. Verses 17-19 say, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the

body be?" The bottom line is that we need each other and that we are better together. Romans 12 says that we belong to each other. In short, we were created for community.

In small group, there is grace and space for you to be you and for your groupmates to be exactly who they are as well. Your group can be a continual reminder that you belong to each other and to God. You are just beginning your journey as a group, but our hope is that your group will go beyond just being able to eat and have a good time together. We hope your group will begin to share life and to dig into what it means to belong to each other. This means that you share your joys and struggles, your concerns and hopes, your journey with God.

You can start doing that at your next meeting as you go through the discussion questions together. The coming weeks will further address how to build strong Christian community, but we hope that you will start practicing now and continue practicing even after you have completed this curriculum.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions draw from today's reading and prepare the group for next week's discussion of vulnerability.

- Read Acts 2:44-47. What do you notice about how the early church lived together? What does this tell you about how the church and community functions best?

- Read 1 Corinthians 12 or Romans 12 together. How does this apply to your group? How might it in the future?

- What is something unique that you bring to the table? What gifts do you see in yourself? How can you use this to benefit your group?

- How can the group help you discern your gifts?

- How does hearing someone's story change your understanding of that person?

- How do you feel about sharing your story in this group? What can the group do to make it a safe place?

SESSION 3:

VULNERABILITY

Last week, we focused on the big picture of why Biblical community matters and how it works. This week, we will talk about one of the key components of doing life together. Your small group will never do life together well if you don't practice vulnerability. It's a bit of a scary word, but once you commit to being open and honest, the benefits always outweigh the cost.

Your group can be a place where you keep your masks on, like you do everywhere else. You can put on a show, pretend like you have it all together. OR you could let your group see who you are, where you are, and your need for God. Often, moments of transparency, when we let our guards down, are when we receive the most grace and feel the most loved.

James 5:16 says, "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." Both confession and true prayer require us to open up and be honest. This means that your group must be a safe place. If you have not already done so, set that expectation the next time you meet. When someone shares something personal, it needs to stay in the group. When someone shares something, respond with grace and love.

Let grace be your default, so that when you disagree or feel offended by someone else, your response will build up the body of Christ instead of tear it down. You will not always agree on everything – even though you are all trying to follow Jesus. You will find yourselves with different opinions about the world, the Bible, the church,

politics – you name it, groups have probably disagreed about it. But the best small groups are places where it is always safe to share and safe to be yourself.

Another word about vulnerability: as you open up and share with your group, this is not just a place to vent and do nothing. Small groups should push you forward and challenge you. This is how we grow as followers of Jesus. We continue to allow God to do the work of transformation in our lives. It's tempting to bent, to feel better, and to continue living in the same way, but that is not what Jesus is calling us to do.

Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another person." Your group can be a place of encouragement on the journey, a place of problem-solving, a place of building up, and a place of challenge. May your sharing spur you to change bad habits, to create new disciplines, to connect with God more deeply, to develop your gifts further, and to serve your neighbor.

Being vulnerable means naming when you don't have things all in row or when you feel far from God. When someone in your group shares a struggle, support that person, respond with love and grace, pray for them, and help them carry their load. Galatians 6:2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." This is a beautiful thing about community when it functions well – the loads that we carry are lighter because we do not bear them alone.

As you enter your time of discussion this week, consider ways to encourage others in your group, think about ways your group can sharpen you, and make your group a safe place to share difficult truths.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Before you begin tonight, be sure to discuss what it means to have a safe place for people to share. You may even want to write down some of the things your groups agrees to do to have vulnerable conversations.

- In what ways do people put on masks in the world? What harm can this cause?

- Review the Scripture in the reading. Which one stood out to you? What made the most (or least) sense in your experience of community?

- What are your experiences of conflict in your family or in your life? How can you have disagreements and commit to stay in conversation and relationship with one another?

- Living in community is different than being part of a team, work environment, or a casual friendship. Over the past three sessions, how have you come to understand living in community?

- Last week, we talked a bit about how hearing people's stories can change our understanding of them. 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?

- As you prepare to tell your story, how can your group support and encourage you?

As you wrap up tonight, you may consider who will share their stories next week. The facilitator should go first, but other group members may need to be prepared to share as well.

SESSION 4:

THIS IS MY STORY

This week we get to the heart of small groups – we connect deeply by sharing our stories. This is at least your fourth week together. Hopefully, by now, you have gotten to know each other a little better. Now, it's time to go deeper. This is when you exercise your commitment to vulnerability and safety that we talked about in the last session. This is also when your group learns how to support each other best, how to love the person that you have grown to be, and how to push each other forward.

Sharing stories will be the foundation for holy friendships. Preparing to share your story may help you understand the ways that God has been at work in your life, help you discern current questions, and help you share your faith with others.

When we talk about “telling our stories,” we mean sharing your story of faith. It will undoubtedly include some biographical pieces, but it is more than just biography. John 9 tells the story of a man blind from birth. After Jesus heals him, those who knew him as a blind man are confused about what has happened and how he has changed. They bring him forward for questioning. The man responds by saying, “This one thing I know: I was blind but now I see.” Faith stories are like that – this one thing I know I was this way and now I am different.

You may not think you have a story because a moment of change like John 9 does not make sense to you, but everyone has a story. You may not have an epic come-to-Jesus moment, or you may be in the middle of wrestling with your faith. But that's a story. Everyone has a story. Your story does not need to have flashes of light or even big emotional experiences. It's your story, and it's important. If your meeting with Jesus was a slow, unfolding process, tell that story. If your experience of faith is living without it, tell that story. If you had an epic come-to-Jesus moment, tell that story. Whatever your story, it is a valid experience of faith.

As you're thinking about telling your faith story, be mindful that it is probably open-ended, and it should be. As long as you are living, you will be journeying with God. Your story doesn't need to be tied up with a neat bow on top.

You will want to think ahead of time about what you need to share in order to capture those big moments and not simply provide biographical data. Start by reflecting on the places or seasons in life that have been particularly formative or transformative. What have been life's worst moments and life's best moments? How was God present then? What did you learn afterward? How are you living now as a result?

As you think about those moments, you may need to pare them down to the most salient ones that have made you into the person and the follower of Christ that you are today. You may also want to consider where the loose ends are currently and how your group can continue to help you journey with God. The discussion question section this week provides additional questions to help you prepare.

Your facilitator will share their story first, but it is a good idea to put together a calendar outlining who in your group will go when, so they can prepare ahead of time. This will likely take your group a couple of meetings – be patient, respect the process of sharing, find joy in learning about your groupmates, and recognize how uniquely God has created all of us. Finally, this is a good opportunity to focus on prayer as a group. Pray for the people who have shared their stories, and pray for specific things that they have lifted up. This may be a really meaningful way to extend grace after they have been vulnerable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What moments in my life do I consider milestones or pivotal?

- Who was with me in those moments or what relationships were important at the time?

- How have I changed over time? How has God been at work in those changes?

- Where is God shaping me now?

SESSION 5:

DISCIPLESHIP & CONTINUED GROWTH

Now that you have shared your stories, prayed together, and grown together as a result, we hope that your curiosity about continuing life in community is peaked. This curriculum is designed to have an ending point, so your group may decide to journey together for this season and conclude meeting together. Your small group may decide that life in community is something that you want to continue. Either way, our prayer for you is that you would continue to grow deeper in love with God and neighbor by being in relationship with other Christians.

As we talked about in session 2, we are not meant to do life alone. Christianity is not a solo religion; we need other Christians. Hebrews 10:24–25 says, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Meeting together is necessary for growth. The Hebrews passage says that meeting together can spur us on to more love and service, and it can provide encouragement. It might be with this group or with another group, but Christians need other Christians.

Small groups do three things together: connect, serve, and grow. These three things may happen at any point in the life of a small group. You have just spent significant time connecting with your group as you shared your story. This can provide an excellent foundation to ask the question: how do we continue to do life together?

Service is a great way to get to know other people and to experience God in a new way. As we are spiritually fed and grow in love of God and other people, it is appropriate and necessary for us to share that love with others. The key question to explore in your group is: what is God calling us to do in our church and city?

From the beginning, we encourage groups to understand the need to share the life they have found in Christian community. Small groups meet together to share their love for God and other through community and service, and we are also called to invite others to experience life in deep Christian community with us. Growth as a group may mean that your group invites new people into the existing small group, or it may mean that a pair of your group separate to start a new group.

Our expectation is that you continue to develop as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and our hope is that you will exercise your discipleship with other Christians. When you meet with your small group next time, you will talk about what it might mean for you to keep growing as a disciple of Jesus. What does it mean for you to follow Jesus more? How could this group walk that journey with you? How could you walk that journey with them?

Looking ahead, your group will be asked to decide whether to continue meeting together in session 6. If your group decides to keep meeting, you will be asked to commit to six months together. Session 6 will also explore ways to build on the foundation you already have.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Read Hebrews 10:24–25. What does this passage tell you about how important it is to be connected to other Christians?
- What have you learned about connecting with other Christians through this and other experiences?
- What does it mean to follow Jesus?
- In what ways, do you need to grow as a disciple? Are there disciplines or habits that you would like to develop?
- How can your group support you in that journey?

SESSION 6:

DISCIPLESHIP & CONTINUED GROWTH

Congratulations! You have completed the first part of your time together as a small group, but we hope that your time is just beginning. Many groups after telling their stories and considering what it means to live in community, choose to continue meeting as a group. If this is your group's desire, we ask you to commit to six months together. Six months allows your group time to connect further and to really live in Christian community. As you commit to continue meeting, you might need to talk about schedules, calendars, and meeting locations.

As you talk about whether or not this is right for your group, be sure to make the space safe for all voices to be heard. If someone is not ready to commit or does not want to continue meeting, make sure to respond with grace, love, and encouragement.

Once you make a commitment, the next step is to discern what you will do next. How will you structure your time, so that it is beneficial and builds your relationship with God and each other? You don't need to make this decision tonight, but we do want you to start thinking about it. We encourage every group to continue the rhythm of eating, discussion and application, and prayer. We also encourage groups to find times that are devoted to serving together or simply enjoying each other's company. Six months together allows for those rhythms to form.

We have groups structure their discussion time in a variety of ways. Some groups decide to spend their time checking in with one another, weaving Scripture and living as a disciple into those conversations. Some groups decide to check in then read a book of the Bible together. Some groups decide to read a book or do a study together. First Methodist Houston is working to produce resources and opportunities for discipleship that your group may want to use or engage. Whatever your group decides to do, make sure to spend time connecting with each other, checking in on each other's lives, encouraging one another to grow in faith, and praying together.

If your group wants help making a decision or finding a resource to us, contact Pastor Brandi Horton or Pastor Kaitlyn Bowie Hankins. We are happy to discern with your group about your next steps.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways have you grown over the last few weeks? What have been the most meaningful parts of this experience?

- Do you want to continue meeting?

- If we continued, how can we keep growing as followers of Christ? Was there a suggested next step that sounded appealing?