

Leader Development Topic: Choosing Community

Introduction:

A healthy, Christ-centered community helps us grow our faith and is an integral part of the Christian life. To cultivate healthy relationships, we need to establish who we are as brothers and sisters in Christ and what it means to belong to the family of God. This is especially important as we learn to navigate conflict well while caring deeply for one another in good times and challenging ones.

Life Group Goal:

Choosing Community

Life Groups follow the 5 Marks of a Disciple: Believe in Jesus, Choose Community, Live as an Ambassador, Invest in the Kingdom and Serve the Cause.

Groups are engaging in community as they work to cultivate healthy community, where the church sees lives transformed and operating as the loving family of God.

The Character of Christ: Hospitality

Hospitality is rooted in the Greek words “love” and “stranger” meaning the love of strangers. We see Jesus being hospitable to nearly everyone that He meets: the woman at the well, the man at the pool of Siloam, the sinners and tax collectors he eats with —the list goes on. His ultimate act of hospitality is that He made a way to welcome anyone who believes in Him into His family through His death and resurrection.

As Christ followers, we must live our lives with a posture of loving strangers. Perhaps that may look like making a home-cooked meal or offering assistance to someone who is sick. Even though Jesus didn't have a home, He always found a way to set aside His own needs and interests for the sake of another's. He showed that hospitality isn't a set of actions but that it is a way of living.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, sharing the same feelings, focusing on one goal. Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others -Philippians 2:1-4

Jesus clearly says in Matthew 22:36-40, that the greatest commands are to love God and to love others as yourself. We must intentionally bring this way of living into our communities, and specifically into our Life Groups.

Questions:

1. Who is someone in your life who has welcomed you in? What do you remember about how they put aside their own needs to make yours a priority?
2. Where else in Scripture does Jesus demonstrate hospitality?
3. How does a Life Group embody community that loves others as a way of life?

Leader Development: Cultivating Healthy Community

Experiencing Joy

No doubt, in thinking back on your best experiences in community, they all included a healthy level of joy with one another. Healthy communities must first practice building joy together if they are to experience the love, identity, grace, and oneness that Jesus called us to. If joy is lacking (either due to a person's past experiences or lack of establishment within the group), it must be added to have a community experience the type of relationship God desires for us. In Numbers 6, we see an ancient blessing that God taught his people to use: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

-Numbers 6:24-26

What we see in Numbers is God teaching His people to practice blessing each other with joy. He knows the path of life that was revealed to David in Psalm 16, and He is leading his people to it as well. *"You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore"* -Psalm 16:11

Questions:

1. Why is joy such an important component in healthy community?
2. How do you practice building joy in a Life Group?

Embracing a Shared Identity

Our families of origin have instilled in us preset biases, perspectives, and often habitual behavior. Maybe our family was religious, hardworking, or enjoyed good fun or delicious food. All of these experiences affect the way we interpret the world around us. Establishing a family identity helps answer the questions, "What kind of people are we? How do we act?" When we meet Jesus and trust Him with our lives, we are adopted into God's family through His sacrifice on the cross. Our old family identity must be replaced with a new family identity having Kingdom values. We then ask ourselves the questions, "As followers of Jesus, what kind of people are we? How does the family of God act?" There is no better place to look than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to find our new identity in God's family.

We are a people who... (paraphrase Sermon on the Mount)

take God's commands seriously.

reconcile as quickly as possible.

are careful to obey God in our sexuality, even with glances and thoughts.

remain faithful to our spouses.

keep our word and have no need to make oaths.

love our enemies and pray for them.

seek to be rewarded by God instead of by people.

*forgive others because we have been forgiven so much by our Father.*¹

As the church experiences life together, the natural outpouring is a healthy, Christ-like character transformation. Our lives as followers of Jesus, within His family, are to be devoted to the building up of one another to become more and more like Christ each day. God's adoption of us into His family replaces our family identities with His vision of who we are and how to live.

Questions:

1. What are the characteristics that you think of when you think of the family of God?
2. What does it practically look like to be devoted to building one another up?
3. How should a Life Group function as a family with a shared identity?

Walking in Grace and Truth

As Jesus encountered people of all stripes, he was consistent in his posture toward them. He loved people for who they were as image-bearers of God but also gave them a new direction to walk in the light of truth. He was full of grace and truth. As we cultivate kingdom community, we must too be able to experience and deal in healthy correction or grace and truth. Sadly, when many people have negative experiences in community, especially within the Church, they have experienced shame from toxic correction or abuse. They've come into a gathering of people and someone well-intentioned attempted to speak into their lives (usually without the relational foundation of joy, steadfast love, and family identity—often with truth but without love). This leads them to distance themselves from the very community that would give them real life. It is a vicious cycle repeating itself thousands of times a week around the globe.

Read John 4:1-42

In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, we see by all accounts a meeting that should never have happened. Jews didn't associate with Samaritans and Jewish men didn't speak with women, especially women who chose the lifestyle she had. But Jesus had to speak with her because he *had* to give her grace and truth. This marginalized woman who was viewed as less- than by her neighbors and lived a life of isolation, was brought into fellowship of the living God. He was both all truthful and all loving, and it changed her life forever.

Questions:

1. When have you experienced healthy correction through grace and truth?
2. How do you practically walk in grace and truth in your individual life? In your Life Group?

