

# INTRODUCTION TO OUR “PROGRAM” FOR LIFE GROUPS AND DISCIPLESHIP

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## WHAT DO WE SEEK IN PEOPLE WHO DISCIPLE PEOPLE?

People often ask what our "program" is for this or that. Flow charts - org charts - the **end product** we have in mind. Well, let me tell you what we want our discipleship "program" to be:

- **Your life. My life. Our lives.**
- **The everyday stuff of life, wherever that occurs.**
- **Neighborhood, workplace, schools.**

Our "program" is *life together*:

LIFE ON LIFE INTERACTION - THROUGH THE WEEK

LIFE IN COMMUNITY - LEARNING TO LOVE LIKE FAMILY

LIFE ON MISSION - PRAYING ABOUT & FIGURING OUT HOW OUR LIFE (MISSIONAL?  
TRANSFORMATIONAL?) GROUPS CAN SERVE PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW JESUS.

Eclectic is a key word. It will depend on the personalities and backgrounds of the people in your group, and possibly the location of your usual meetings. The Holy Spirit will direct you.

Here's a quick 2- minute video that will help summarize this idea: **Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life**. Please go to this address and view it! <https://vimeo.com/123338982>

I am trying, kindly enough I hope, to foster a "holy discontent with the status quo" and encourage ownership of God's mission in our congregation.

From *Community* by Brad House

"We have so programmed the church to function as a **well-oiled machine** that we leave no room for Christians to be Christians. Are not these the functions of the church, *as in the people of God*, rather than the church, the institution?"

"Seriously, what is left for the disciple of Christ to do? As Hirsch points out, 'We have created passivity through the way we have done church.' We think we are helping by providing every imaginable service, but instead we are robbing the church of the joy of living out their faith and imaging God through encouragement, prayer, generosity, and witness."

**Matthew 28:19**

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Note: it’s “make disciples” (not get converts). How did Jesus do it? He developed a community of disciples - walking, talking, showing, eating, and giving access.

**Ephesians 4:1-3, 11-16**

“Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us.”

How do we do this unless we are living in community? It’s by diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit. Not necessarily will this be convenient.

“And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head — Christ. From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.”

Included in this packet of materials is the teaching I gave on this subject early in this experiment. I’d like you to read it so you can see the path we are walking. This Scripture shows that each one is a minister. The *whole body* promotes the growth of the body, to build *itself up* in love.

**Colossians 3:12-17**

“Therefore, God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, accepting one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a complaint

against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, put on love — the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of the Messiah, to which you were also called in one body, control your hearts. Be thankful. Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

This happens in doing life together, which often involves messiness and effort - not "me first". How often do you have opportunity to do this once per week on Sunday morning? Our discipleship and life groups are experiments in imaging Christ, where we share and show love in deed. People were drawn to Jesus and Christians because of their love for one another. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know you are My disciples, if you have love one for another."

### **John 17:21-24**

“May they all be one,  
as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You.  
May they also be one in Us,  
so the world may believe You sent Me.  
I have given them the glory You have given Me.  
May they be one as We are one.  
I am in them and You are in Me.  
May they be made completely one,  
so the world may know You have sent Me  
and have loved them as You have loved Me.  
Father, I desire those You have given Me  
to be with Me where I am.  
Then they will see My glory,  
which You have given Me  
because You loved Me before the world’s foundation.”

See it? He wants us to present His image, the way He presented it. He wants us to love one another in such a way that it’s noticeable to outsiders. “So that the world may know”.

### 1 Corinthians 14:26

“What then is the conclusion, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, another language, or an interpretation. All things must be done for edification.”

The distinction we are trying for is primarily in expectations: a life (missional/transformational) group expects that an individual is participating in the community to *contribute* something, whereas someone often comes to a Bible study to *consume* something.

### Acts 2:46-47

“Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude, praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.”

Stop and think about how they actually were living. It’s pretty down-to-earth stuff. It’s not complicated. If you have not read the book “A Meal With Jesus”, I suggest you do so. We will get you a copy if you ask.

### Hebrews 10:19-25

“Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way He has opened for us through the curtain (that is, His flesh), and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our worship meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

*Keep assembling* - be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works.

### Gospel of John

This is a good book for simply seeing how Jesus and His disciples participated – together – in the community, engaging their neighbors. Read and identify the different spaces that Jesus and his disciples participated in (wedding, temple, one-on-one conversations, etc.)

Here are at least four spaces where your group can exist.

- Fellowship: Times to encourage one another in our lives with Jesus (most intimate)
- Hospitality: A safe place for anyone to belong to our communities

- Service: Meeting the practical needs of our neighborhoods
- Participation: Joining with our neighbors in common spaces and events (least intimate)

If your group only exists in one or two of these spaces, you won't fulfill the purposes that God has for you as a community. For example, if a group only exists in the fellowship space, there will likely be a lot of deep conversations but there likely won't be much mission taking place. Expanding the spaces in which your group exists will increase their effectiveness for the gospel. Linking those spaces will make your community groups a kingdom force. This requires a new understanding of life groups as a vehicle for mission and kingdom. It requires us to be the church. It requires us to live a lifestyle of community.

### THREE ELEMENTS FOR CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

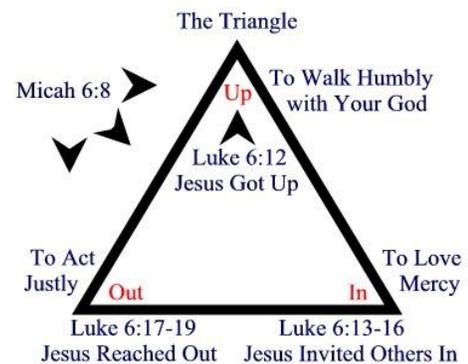
Consider this: Jesus lived His life in three relationships:

**Up** with His Father

**In** with his followers

**Out** with the people in His world

See if you can find these three elements in Jesus' life in **Luke 6:12-19**. We need to be cultivating these characteristics in our Life Group and Discipleship relationships. Use your creativity in how to do so.



### UP

Jesus frequently went to lonely places to pray. Prayer was fundamental to Him. He was in constant contact with His Father. We need to be also - in our individual lives, and in our Life Group and Discipleship relationships. We share life because of the Intimacy of the Godhead. This is abiding in Him. This upward focus needs to permeate our lives together.

### IN

This is the community part of the triangle. Jesus gave people **access** to His life. He "did life" with them. **Mark 3:14** says He chose them "**that they might be with Him**" (not that He might give them Bible studies). When you invite someone into your Life Group or into a discipleship relationship, that's what you are doing. It's not just to have some events over time. It's not just a class or Bible study. It's life. We

need to find ways to give one another access. Sure, it's inconvenient at times. But convenience is not our goal.

## OUT

Why do we share life? Just to feel close to God and one another? Well, no! Not "just". We do need those connections. We need that vital life sharing. But what's it for? Just to spend on ourselves?

Jesus (Whom we are imaging in life together) was on mission. He went "out" to bring life to others. He didn't hang in the synagogue all day. We are created as three-dimensional beings. Without all three activated, there's a distortion, whether in individuals or in life together.

Our earlier "Care Groups" in general lacked the "Out" dimension. Frankly, our whole congregation is weak in this dimension. I am weak in this dimension. We need to change!

This is fundamental to the vision of Life Groups for Chapel by the Sea.

## PRACTICAL THINGS

I would like us to have as a goal that every discipleship or life group encounter regularly addresses these two questions:

- "What is God saying to you?"
- "What are you going to do about it?"

In our life groups and discipleship relationships, let's think more in the role of **parenting**. That involves broader implications than being dispensers of facts! We are in **life mode**, not in **event mode**! Your group is **people, not events**!

Am I insisting on a rigid, clock-ruled following of all these things? No, but I want us to assess regularly how our lives together are going. Our gatherings need (should) not be carbon copies of each other, but over time the "In, Up, and Out" should be there. The flow will change depending on life circumstances. The balance will change. But over time, let's develop this mindset and this practice.

The same applies to the following ideas. Avoiding rigidity, do your best to build some of these into your lives together.

## IDEA STARTERS TO GET BEYOND **EVENT** MODE INTO **LIFE** MODE

- Have regular meals together. (Remember my reference to *A Meal With Jesus*.)
- Share communion in the context of the meal (no, you don't need an elder present).
- Do simple Scripture read-throughs (one suggestion: Mark and Luke on the life rhythms of Jesus). Journal your read-through, share what God gave you.

- Simplicity - you don't need a complex plan or complex, perfect curriculum.
- Encourage one another with prayer.
- Follow-up regularly: how did things go (in "doing" what God said)?
- Early on in your group, why not have each person take up to 10 minutes to tell their story?
- As group gains time with one another, more stories of our life with God can be told.
- Pray for the neighborhood(s) in which you meet.
- Look for opportunities for ministry together in your spheres of life.
- Do errands or projects together (things you'd be doing anyway).
- Meet in a third place occasionally (coffee shop, park).
- Have occasional meetings be a meal to which non-believing neighbors or friends are invited, and make that the main activity of the evening.
- Sign up for an outreach project in the city together.
- Change up the things you do from week to week when you meet. Examples:
  - One week: share the Word of God with one another
  - Next week: prayer and intercession for one another and others
  - Next week: Ministry - make bags of essentials to give to homeless folks
    - Or: hospital visits, children's floor
    - Or: serve at the Rescue mission
  - Next week: Meal out – invite others
  - Next week: help with one of the group member's need or project
  - Next week: worship/sing/prayer walk in the neighborhood or a section of town
- Have smaller groups (men with men, women with women) within your life group. Call them DNA groups? In them, get to the deeper issues of discipleship. (Disciple, Nurture, Accountability or Discover, Nurture, Action {from Soma Church, Tacoma WA})

## THE CONTEXT OF RHYTHM AND SABBATH

"There is an occasion for everything, and a time for every activity under heaven." So says Ecclesiastes. Here we are talking life-on-life ministry, which is not necessarily convenient, and which demands we give access to our lives to people. Doesn't that become burdensome?

Please give me an example of *Jesus being in a hurry!* I like how "The Message" (not a translation I generally endorse) puts Matthew 11:28-30. "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to

me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the **unforced rhythms of grace**. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

From *The Jesus Life*  
by Stephen Smith

"The abundant life is not based on a plethora of options that seem exciting, life-giving, and dramatic. If this were so, then Americans above all people groups in the world would be *living the abundant life*, simply because we have the most choices. But...if you were to ask American Christians to use five adjectives to describe the Christian life, would you hear 'abundant' often?"

"The unforced rhythms of grace". What a beautiful phrase. As you disciple others or shepherd a life group, this is your context. Not demandingness. Not trying to live up to my whip-enforced requirements. Be yourself, open to His Spirit, and be available to people. Really, that's it. It's simple, but hard (because it requires vulnerability and access). We tend to make "discipleship programs" complicated (learning some kind of system) but easy (meaning put people on this conveyor belt of discipleship and voila: completed disciples).

**Jesus called His disciples that** "they might be with Him". (Mark 3:14) Discipleship is not about adding a **list of things** to my calendar. In fact, it might be about

*subtracting things* from my life.

Discipleship is not just learning things. It's about sharing the love of our lives. **It's about learning to live in rhythm** with Jesus.

It's not that He didn't extend Himself. There were times He kept working after sunset. The need was great.

Life isn't always 9 - 5.

Early in the morning, though, Jesus had a custom of going out to lonely places to pray. He sought deserted places - places of respite from the noise and the work.

He "often withdrew" to lonely, deserted places. **Often**. Not when He could get around to it. **Often**. He poured into His work, then He refreshed. He accessed resources for His life and work that were not accessible except through solitude. If you are to last in this ministry, you need to do the same.

Be accessible to people, in the everyday rhythms of life. But develop practices of quiet and meditation. Probably two of the most damaging pieces of technology in this day are the light bulb and the cell phone.

Remember, we are **imaging Jesus**. Look at His patterns, as they emerge from various passages of Scripture describing His practice of getting away:

- As the sun was setting
- At daybreak



- Often withdrew
- Spent the night
- Listened
- Certain place
- Each day
- As usual

## JESUS LIVED IN AN INSIDE-OUT RHYTHM OF LIFE.

- He withdrew - a quiet place by the lake, in the hills, in the desert, or up in the mountains.
- He prayed and meditated on Scripture.
- He listened, submitted, obeyed.
- He prayed and he served.
- He prayed alone in quiet and in community.
- He worshiped and He healed people.
- He meditated on Scripture and He taught astounding new insights.
- He fasted and He fed the hungry.
- He rested in quiet and He ministered in noisy crowds.
- He withdrew on retreat and He was patient with people who interrupted Him.

Life in the Kingdom, an extraordinary life of rhythm, goes *against the grain of our society*. Jesus spoke about the Church 2 times. He spoke about the Kingdom 87 times.

“Seek first the Kingdom”.

## PERSONAL CARE

I ask our leaders and disciplers to give time periodically for gathering for training, mutual encouragement, and fellowship. We have hosted lunches and dinners for this purpose. Response has been spotty. I need each one involved in the ministry to help me understand the best ways and times to get us together for such training and encouragement. I want to make it worth your while, and help you be more equipped to do what you are doing.

In addition to this, I send out a bi-weekly “Leader Letter” with bite-sized articles on many facets of the developing mission and vision of discipleship in our congregation. This is one way to encourage and keep us headed in the same direction.

I also am a “circuit rider”. I make visits to the life groups that meet around the city, to get a first-hand feel for what God and you are doing in people’s lives, and to offer encouragement where I can. Further, I am always ready to meet personally with you to talk about any questions and ideas you have for discipleship and life groups.

This personal connection is important to the health of our ministry.

## THE BIG PICTURE

We are on a roadway in this venture. It's a long road, but here are some cues on our destination. Where could your discipleship and life group ministry go? What could characterize our congregation? Here is what I see, and I hope you can get excited about these possibilities too!

In the future, let's pray for and work toward these future possible realities:

- *Everyone* is connected to a small community that
  - Shares life
  - Worships God
  - Does mission
- The locus of ministry is less centered on campus (ministry is happening around town, via groups)
- 2 or 3 life groups combine (share people and resources) periodically for mission
- Smaller discipleship groups are born out of life groups (men with men, women with women)
- Groups are birthing more groups as people realize they are called to ministry
- Groups are bringing neighbors or work colleagues to Jesus
- Groups adopt schools, city agencies, parachurch ministries, etc. to offer Jesus' love
- Dependency on "professional ministers" fades as people gain **competency** and **character** for ministry
- A group or groups mature into a healthy new church plant
- Individuals are becoming **owners**, not **renters**, of the mission.
- And more . . .

**God has bigger ideas than we do!**

## EXTRA READING

Let me tell you about some books that have helped inform how to apply the Word of God to our current culture and circumstances. They have influenced my thinking:

- *Trellis and the Vine*, Colin Marshall & Tony Payne
- *Community*, Brad House
- *The Insider*, Jim Peterson & Mike Shamy
- *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch
- *A Meal with Jesus*, Tim Chester

Please also read the document included in this package: **“An Experiment in Community: Mindset and Philosophy”**. This will give you insights into what we are trying to accomplish, and to help you know whether you can be in harmony with our purposes. It’s not lock-step “do as I say”. It’s “here’s the road, here are some key elements”, then use your God-given gifts and insights by the Holy Spirit, to create your flavor of ministry!

I am available to you for ideas, questions, sharing what’s going on, and to point toward possible resources. You are not in this alone.