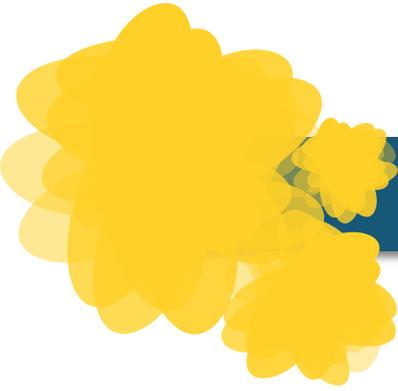


Community

LESSON 1



INTRODUCTION

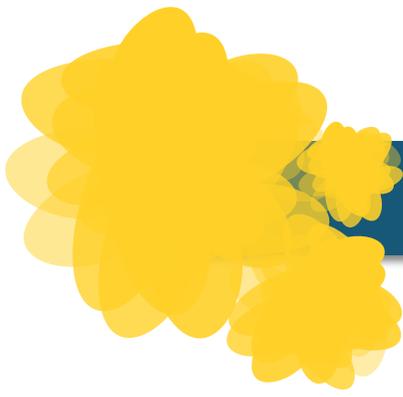
Community isn't just a nice option; it's a need - like food, water, and shelter.

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 that relationship with God produces in us.

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 fullest.

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 Growth Group experience at Sunrise.

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



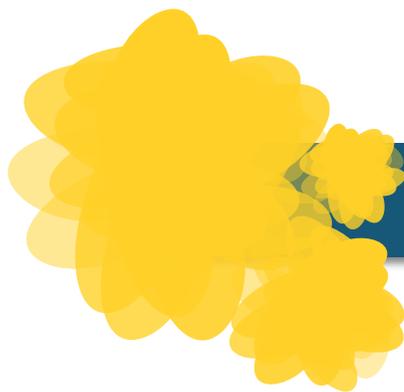
WEEKLY READING

Community can be challenging because it's organic. Every community 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 each other. He gave us community.

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

PUBLIC	Connections through outside influences like a shared taste in music or a love of the same hobby or sport
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 connection. Inner circle friends. These relationships happen through our most closely shared experiences and feelings



EXPECTATIONS

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 personal chemistry among the group members.

Some things ARE under your control. We'd like for you to do three things:

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.

JOIN IN

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

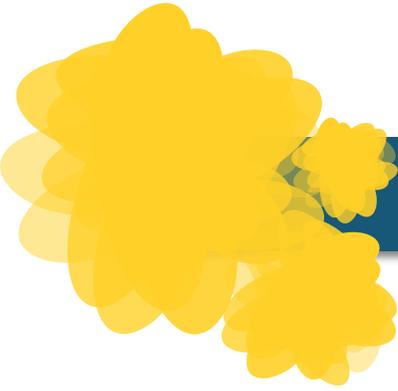
BE REAL

Let 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.



Community

LESSON 2



INTRODUCTION

We all have relationships that feel weird; they're uncomfortable and awkward.

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 from a close friend.

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

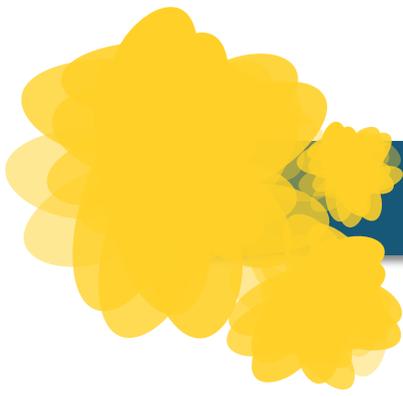
FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE, THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS WEIRD AND AWKWARD.

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 much you hate your job or are stressed out about your mortgage or concerned about your health or can't 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 - intimately? 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 in its simplest form, the entire Bible (Old and New Testament) is a record of God's pursuit of an 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 stories to illustrate God's radical and relentless love for people.

In the first one, a man who has a hundred sheep loses one of them. So he leaves the ninety-nine and goes looking for the one until he finally finds it. The man is so happy he calls his friends and family together to celebrate.

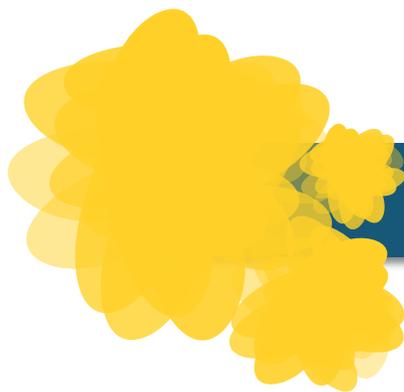
In the second one, a woman with ten coins loses one of them. She turns her house upside down looking until she finds the lost coin. Like the man with the sheep, she celebrates recovering the coin with friends and family.

In the third one, the most famous one, a rebellious young man asks his dad for his inheritance (even though his dad is still alive) and then sets off on his own because he's tired of living by his father's rules. The young man squanders 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 realizes how much he's messed things up, he swallows his pride and goes back to his father's house, fully expecting to be punished. Instead, his dad throws a party and invites all of their family and friends. He's just happy that his son has 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.

WE RESIST GOD BECAUSE WE DON'T TRUST HIM

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.



APPLICATION

How do we pursue life-changing trust in God?

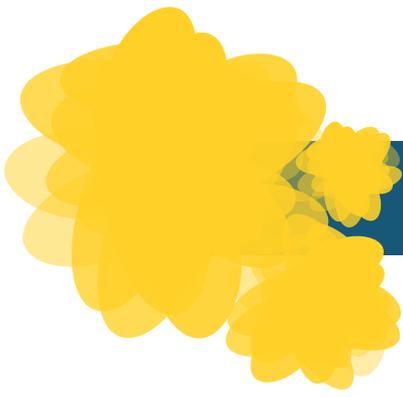
It requires two things:

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.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What motivated you to join this group? What do you hope to get out of our time together?

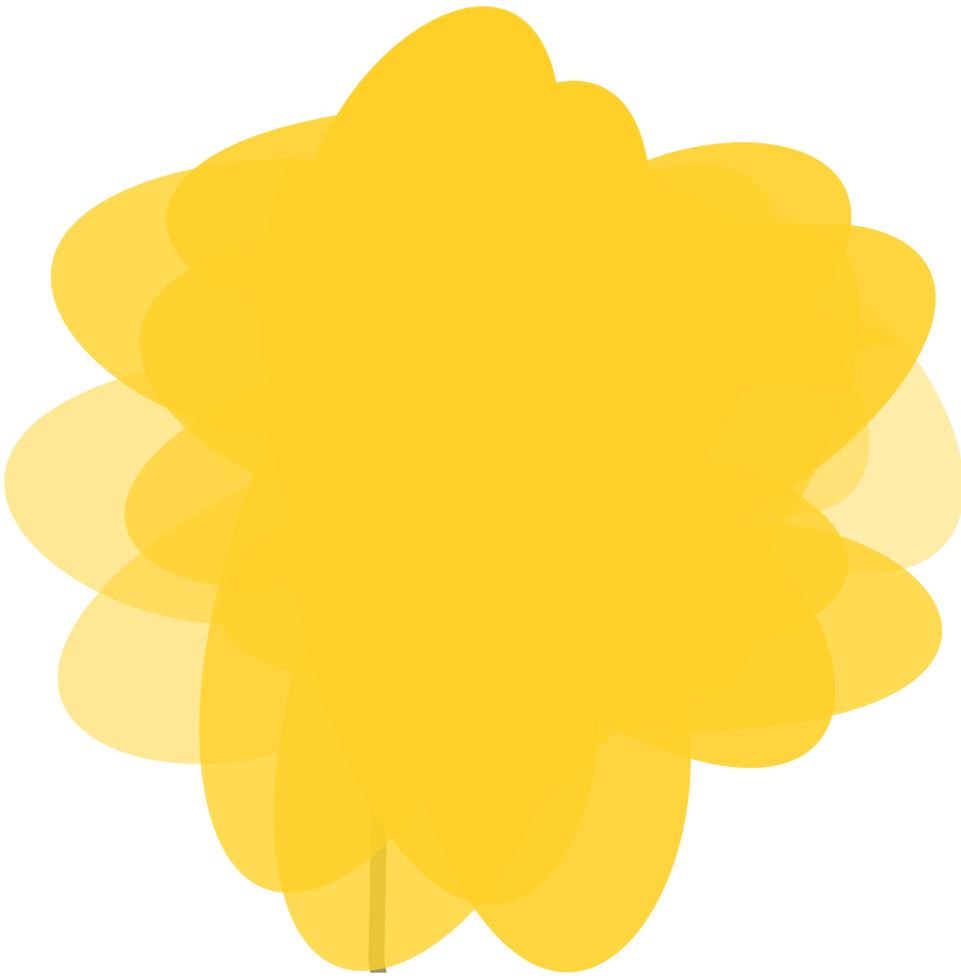
- 2) On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being “I’m not sure I believe in God” and 10 being “I spend time with God every day”, where is your current relationship with God? (you can just give a number if you don’t want to provide details)

- 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?

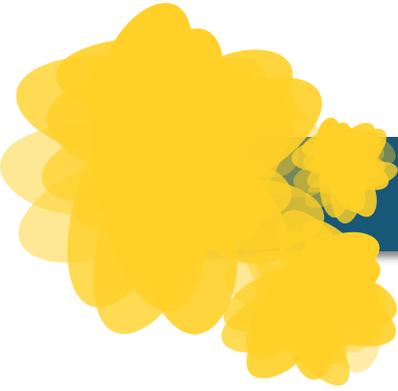
- 5) What are some things that make it hard for people to trust God?

- 6) What is one thing you can do to give God more access to your life? What can this group do to support you?



Community

LESSON 3



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

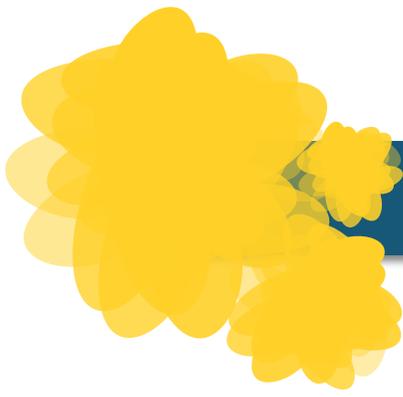
We go to extremes to create and protect the fake versions of ourselves that we present to the world. We buy cars and houses we can't afford. We suffer unsatisfying careers that happen to pay bills. We hide our material struggles instead of seeking help.

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. This 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 can 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.

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

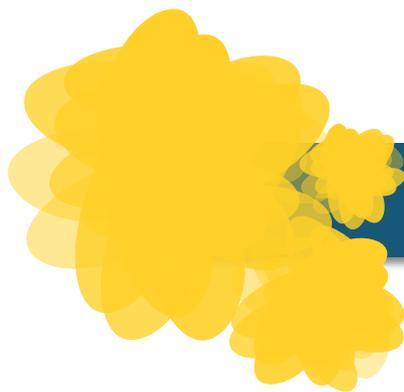
And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

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 we don’t stand in judgement 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 relationship with one another must be built on trust, and the ingredients for trust, **TIME** and **TRANSPARENCY**



EXPECTATIONS

TIME

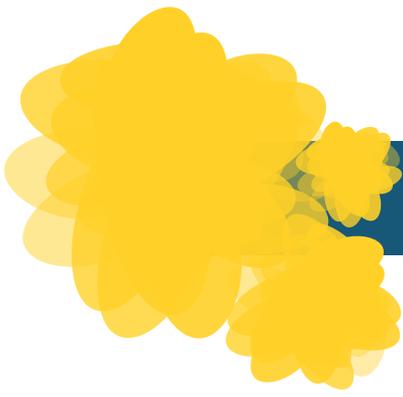
To build the kind of community we desire for you, you'll need to spend time together. Some of this time is structured around growing in your relationship with God and some of it is casual and unstructured. Sometimes you need to just hang out, with no agenda other than enjoying the company.

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 them or would you 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 them?

- 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 their story that changed your mind?

- 4)** How do you feel about telling your story to the group?

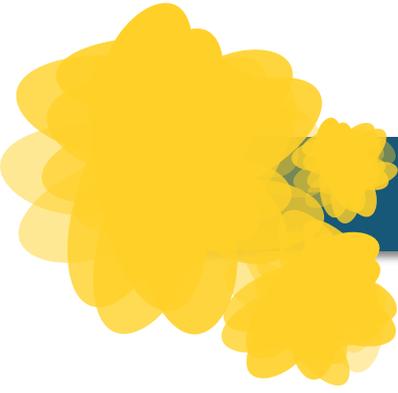
- 5)** If you were open and transparent in telling your story, how do you think it might change your relationships with the people in this group?

- 6)** What are some things that could make this group safe enough for you to be open and transparent?



Community

LESSONS 4-6



INTRODUCTION

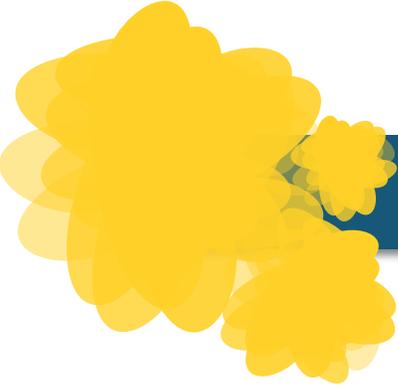
Over the next few weeks, each of you will tell your story:

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.

1) 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.

2) 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. Even difficult relationships can be used by God for our good.

3) 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.

4) PERSONAL MINISTRY

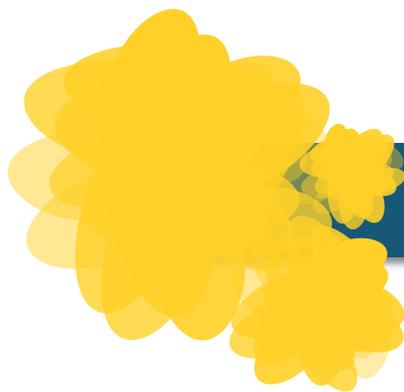
Jesus showed us that we find life by giving our lives away. When we serve others, we are privileged to partner with God in what He's doing in the lives of those we serve.

5) 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, 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. Very often, these five things represent changes in direction, challenges overcome, or life-changing revelations.

REMEMBER: the goal of your story isn't to entertain, but share the story that has made you, you.



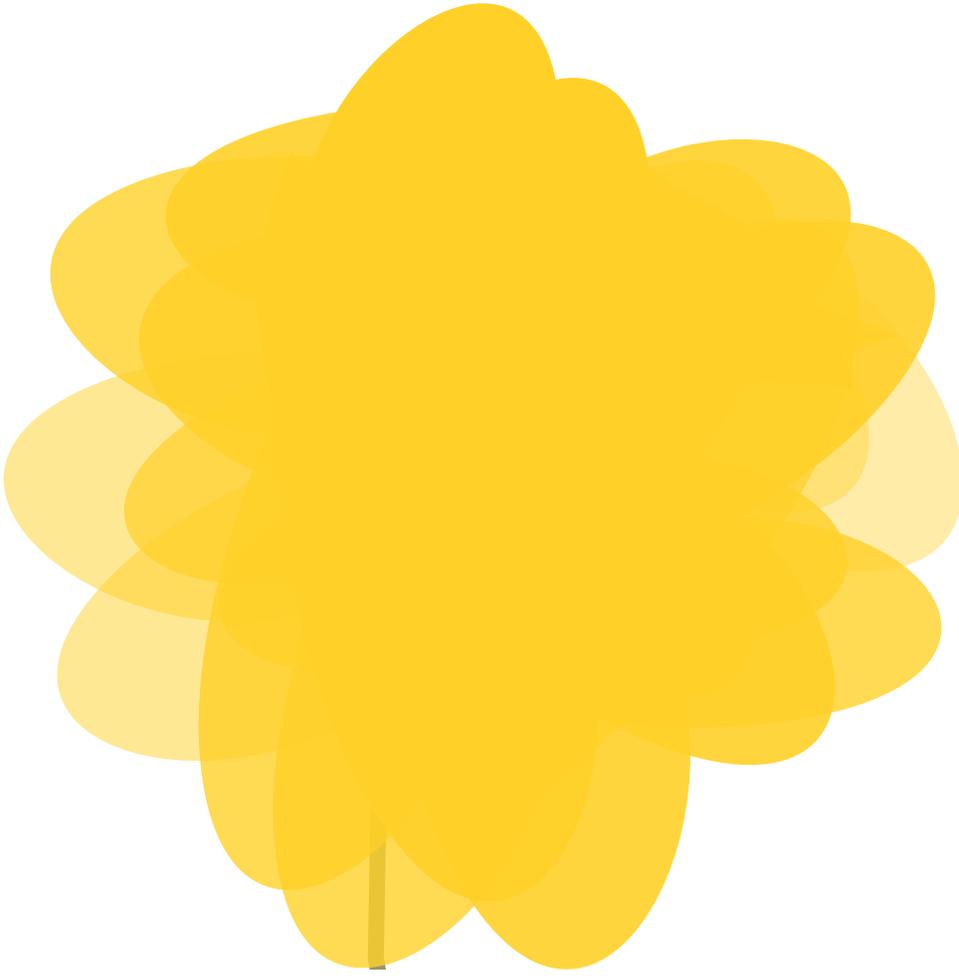
MOVING FORWARD

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?

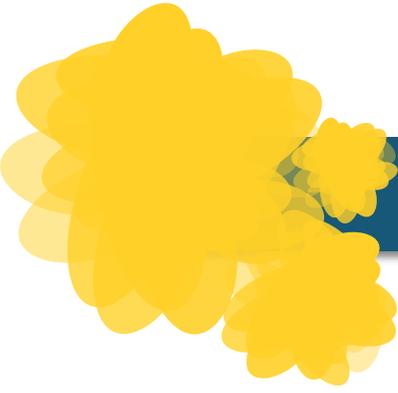
If it helps, use a blank page to write notes, an outline, or a rough draft for your story. Keep in mind, though, that your story doesn't have to be polished and perfect. The most important thing is that it expresses who you are.

Reminder: Throughout Sessions 4-6, each member of your small group will be sharing their story, so please allow enough time for their stories to be told. During Sessions 5-6 there will be no video segments to watch in order to allow each member the time they need to tell their story.



Community

LESSON 7



INTRODUCTION

Over the last few sessions, you've told your stories.

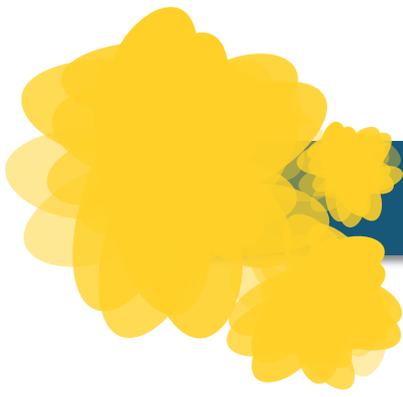
You're now getting to know each other beyond the surface details of jobs and hometowns and where you went to school. NOW WHAT? For the most part, you need to keep doing what you're doing. Building trust is an ongoing process.

In the weeks and months to come, you will

- * Read and talk about the Bible together
- * Pray with and for each other
- * Just be around each other

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 (Luke 9:48). We have a responsibility to express to the unloved and even the seemingly unlovable that Grace and Mercy that we receive from God (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 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 the 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,” 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)



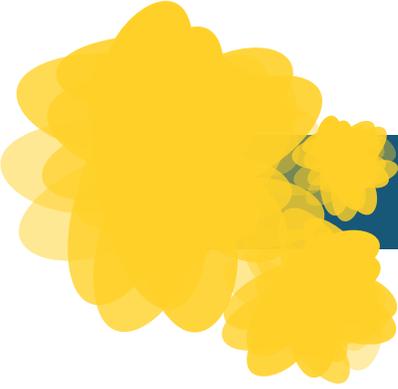
BEING THE CHURCH

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus inaugurated the kind of community he wanted us to live; one 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 that 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 the environments where they can hear spiritual truths. 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 a project for you.

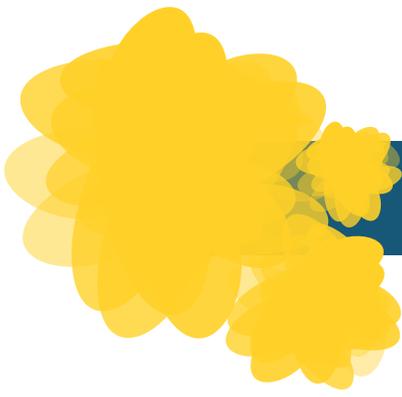
Another way to invest in the lives of people around us is to serve those in need. Jesus' call for us to serve others can make us uncomfortable. It's easier to do nothing. We're tempted to view poverty, sickness, and human suffering as too large for us to make much of a difference. Jesus didn't call you 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 the work.

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.



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?
- 4) How could serving others change people's perception 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 them to church. What is the best next step for you to take with that person?

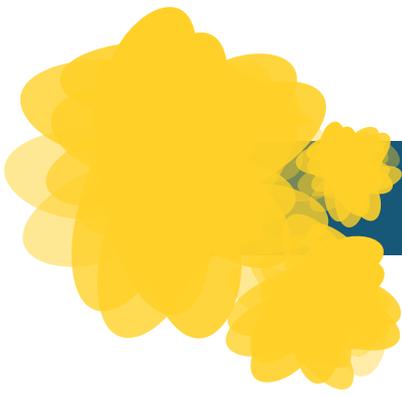
As a group, begin planning to serve with one another. Talk about it. Do any of you feel a burden to serve a particular group of people in need (single moms, children living in poverty, AIDS patients, shut-ins, etc)? If so, this may help you figure out where you can serve, but the important thing is to 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 you've committed to move forward with your group. That will happen next session, 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, time will fly by and you may miss the opportunity entirely.

The **HOW DO WE SERVE?** section will help you generate ideas and ways you could possible serve with each other.

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



HOW DO WE SERVE?

YOUR SERVICE OPPORTUNITY STEP BY STEP

- 1) Consult your calendars, save a Saturday (or any day that you can), 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 to remind you of the joy involved in serving.

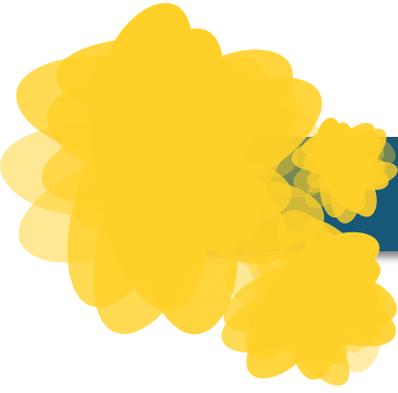
SERVICE IDEAS

- * 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 pantry.
- * Identify a school playground or local park that could use some sprucing up. Plan a day of painting, raking and mulching (this may require administrative approval)
- * 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.
- * 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



Community

LESSON 8



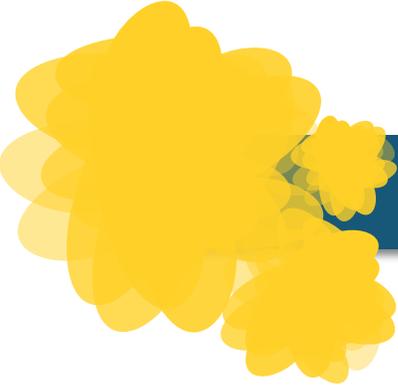
INTRODUCTION

Over the past seven sessions, you've learned that spiritual growth is evidenced by intimacy with God, community with insiders, and influence with outsiders.

You've also invested time sharing your stories and getting to know one another. In this final session, we'll review the values and goals in a 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, have a conversation with your leader before the next scheduled meeting to let them 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

A Community Group (Growth 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

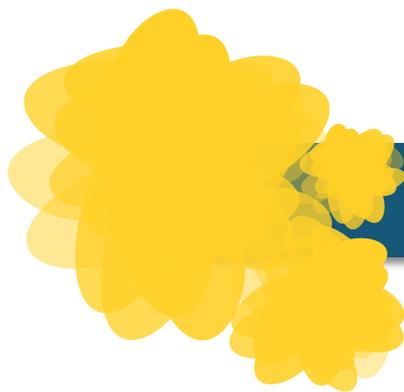
Group members should never say anything that will embarrass their spouses or other members of the group

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 Growth 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"

We recommend that you plan a time in the near future for your group to meet socially. Take a little time to just hang out and celebrate what you've experienced together over the past couple months. Use some of the time to decide what you'll choose next to study in the future studies that are being offered.