

A Guide for Missional Communities

The following guide has been prepared to help you missional communities. It will be helpful to review this guide often to assess the health of your group, and to remind you of your group's Gospel purpose, characteristics, and goals.

Sections:

- I. What is a missional community?*
- II. Group Dynamics and Structure*
- III. How we Gospel one another – Helping Others Look Like Jesus*

I. What is a Missional Community?

A missional community by nature is intended to be more than a typical bible study. First, let's be reminded what characteristics we should expect to see in your community group.

What should you expect as part of a missional community?

- A welcoming atmosphere for strugglers and real sinners (Christ is for real sinners!) *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mt. 9:13; “If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.” I Jn. 2:1*
- A family learning to live out of the Gospel *“As you have received Christ Jesus, so live in Him....” Col.2:6 “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge...” Eph. 3:17-19; “Let us love one another, for love comes from God...He sent His one and only Son” I Jn. 4:7,9*
- A safe place to share your struggles, confess your sins, and expect to be pointed to Jesus. *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” Rom. 8:1; “Confess your sins to one another....” James 5:16*
- A family learning to celebrate grace! *“Rejoice with those who rejoice...” Rom.12:15*

- A place to be quick to listen and sympathize with another's struggles, and respond with compassion and prayer, and if you can, practical help to meet the need. Avoid superficial, pat answers that don't address and encourage the heart. *"Be devoted to one another..." Rom. 12:10; "Everybody should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry..." James 1:19; "Pray for each other..." James 5:16; "Honor one another above yourselves...Rom. 12:10b; "mourn with those who mourn..." Rom.12:15*
- A place to worship God by enjoying one another and God's good gifts (new people, food, art, etc.) *"Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate..." Luke 15*

As you can see, the Gospel is never static, but moves us into grateful action. As we hear and believe the Gospel again and again, the love of Christ working within our hearts energizes us to practical works of love. We begin to ask, "What does loving my neighbor really look like?" This means that we will also want to avoid anything in our community group that does not have this goal of Gospel motivation and love:

What should you *not* expect in a missional community?

- A lengthy teaching monologue or lecture by one person
- An overly- academic group of theological debaters who don't address matters/struggles of the heart, and how the Gospel applies to them (see I Cor.13:1)
- An affinity group to make you happy (...although sweet fellowship in Christ should occur and will bring joy.)

- A place to have your every need met (...although as we serve one another in love, many of your true needs will be met, prayed for, and clarified.)

II. Group Dynamics and Structure

As Tim Keller has suggested, “*The Primary Goal for the fellowship group is to develop a Christian community where Jesus Christ is experienced in his presence and power.*”

This means that as the leader (or co-leader) of your missional community, their primary responsibility is to facilitate “Gospel conversations” and practical works of love among the group members. A key characteristic that will grow from this is **Gospel transformation** in the lives of the group members, and hopefully, those outside of the group who will be ministered to as a result.

While your group will differ in exact structure from another community group, all groups should contain at least the following four essential characteristics:

1. Worship

God has designed us to respond to His great worth and beauty, be awed by His glory, and celebrate His goodness. Keller notes that the worship of the true God “brings health to our souls and substance and weight to our lives.” It is the very purpose for which we were made. Eugene Peterson notes that without the worship of God, we fail to see Him at the center of our lives and live “manipulated and manipulating lives.” While our whole lives are meant to be an act of worship, setting aside special time in the community meeting to praise and celebrate God (and how He meets us through Christ) will bring joy to God and refresh His people. The use of well known hymns and songs which exalt Christ, reading Psalms responsively, responding in prayer, meditations shared

by group members (including poetry and written prayers), instrumental music, the use of candles, etc. may all be used to help the community respond in worship.

2. Christ-Centered, Gospel-focused Bible Study

Hearing the Gospel story from all parts of Scripture builds our faith. Our goal in studying a particular part of Scripture in our community groups is not to focus on the details, but to arrive at the broader, general meaning of the text and to understand how it fits in the greater Gospel narrative. Remember, the goal is not to merely fill our heads with knowledge, but to have the Gospel move our hearts to worship and transform our lives! This vital time of hearing God speak to us can often be interwoven with the sharing time for maximum application.

(As noted, the temptation is strong for the Bible study portion to become a lecture which will take up most or all of the group's time. However, a good rule of thumb in our community groups is to limit teaching time to approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the overall meeting time to leave time for valuable relational sharing and ministry. For ex., a 90 min. group will have approx. 20 -25 mins. of Bible study)

3. Sharing, or "One Anothering"

Effective sharing, as Keller notes, is prompted by the following question: "*What work of power and grace does Christ wish to do in our hearts right now?*" This includes two facets of fellowship: a.) sharing what God is doing in our own hearts (convicting, encouraging, creating repentance and faith); and b.) pursuing others in a love agenda. (We'll cover this in more detail in the next section, *How to Gospel one another.*) Notice too that the "one-another" commands of scripture paint a rich, organic portrait of activity: "Serve one another, carry one another's burdens, be devoted to one another, submit to one another, accept one another, honor

one another up, greet one another, be of the same mind with one another...”

4. Kingdom-Centered Prayer and Missional Focus

Prayer, as Piper has said, is our “walkie-talkie from the battlefield.” In prayer we actually participate in God’s redemptive plan to save the world. As we speak to our great God and Father in adoring praise, confession of sin, thankfulness, and supplications, He is pleased, as another writer says, to “gather our cries and our praises, our petitions and intercessions, and use them.” (Note: Sometimes the activity of talking about prayer requests can use up the time of actually praying for them. Encourage the group members from time to time to be aware of this, and to share their hearts in the share time. Also, you may choose to break into smaller sub-groups to pray, or remain a single group.)

Finally, make it a priority to leave time in the meeting to discuss the group’s particular missional focus and activity. As Keller puts it, you want to ask *“How does Christ want me (or us, as a group) to touch the hurts in the world this week?”* Commit this to prayer, and follow through with actual steps to carry out the vision. (Be sure to delegate and involve group members as much as possible in each facet of planning and follow-through. Remember the “body” metaphor of Scripture!)

In the next section, we want to provide a practical overview and summary of how we “Gospel” one another, which is in essence how we help others change so that they look more and more like Jesus.

III. How we “Gospel” One Another – Helping Others Look Like Jesus

As a community group leader you will want to facilitate and aim for effective “Gospeling” of one another in your group. This means, (as noted above under group characteristics) that you will want to create a certain “atmosphere” in the group where the Gospel can thrive and people are effectively entering one another’s hearts and lives. As also noted above, this *will not happen most effectively* if the primary group dynamic is a teacher-student relationship where information is dispensed in a classroom-type atmosphere. (Note, this does not mean that good teaching won’t take place, but again, in weekly missional home groups we wish to capitalize on the relational opportunities for Gospel fellowship that often cannot take place during a Sunday morning worship service.)

To facilitate effective, holistic Gospeling in your community, note the following four elements of a loving ministry relationship, as formulated by Paul Tripp:

Four Elements of a Loving Ministry Relationship: *Enter, Incarnate, Identify, Accept*

1) **Enter** the other person’s world

The Gospel tells us that Jesus entered our world, as the “Word became flesh (Jn. 1:14).” Loving another person well means entering their life in order to be an effective instrument in Christ’s hands to bring hope and help to that person. This is impossible to do unless we take the time to know the other person well, and to find out what is going on in the real “control center” of their lives: their heart.* The most effective and gracious way to know someone, whether a believer or unbeliever, is to learn to ask good questions. A sample of such questions would include:

“What are you struggling with right now?”; “What are you feeling?”; “What’s bothering you most about this struggle?”; “How are you connecting with God right now?” ; “What

questions do you wish you could ask God?” ; What are you afraid of?”; “Are you feeling angry?”; etc.

Notice that “heart-focused entering” does not stop at merely knowing *about* a person’s particular circumstances. Rather, it seeks to compassionately understand *how the person is responding* to their circumstances. Are they doubting God’s promises to them? Harboring anger or bitterness towards others or God? Nursing a demand to have others meet their agenda (even if it appears to be a good and God-honoring desire? Remember, even a good desire, elevated to a craving or demand that *must be fulfilled* to give a sense of self-worth and meaning, can become an idol. See appendix 2 for a more in-depth treatment of idolatry). Asking good questions (and we certainly do not want to bombard someone with more than one or two questions at once!) and learning to be an active listener invites a greater depth of sharing among group members. An effective leader will model this heart-focused entering by first being a humble, receptive “chief repenter” of his own idolatry, (demonstrating, as Tripp refers to it, “the humility of approachability”), followed by a qualitative and loving relational commitment to those present in the group.

*Note: The “heart” is used some 960 times in scripture and is a dominant theme. We understand the heart to be the emotional and intellectual center of a person’s life, and the “steering wheel” of their behavior. For example, Proverbs tells us that it is out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks. Our hearts are always “busy”: continually worshipping God or the creation, assigning value to things, people, God; craving, demanding, , desiring, lusting, being puffed up and hardened in pride or softened in humility. See Appendix 2.

2) Incarnate the love of Christ

Loving a person well means more than asking good questions.

It includes the vital aspect of assuring the person you have heard and that God hears *and* understands their struggle.

Christ became flesh in order to meet us personally. As the physical body of Christ on earth, we are Christ's ambassadors to bring tangible compassion and practical love to one another, which is how we bring the vertical dimension of our relationship with God to the horizontal dimension of human relationships.

All believers share in this priestly aspect of ministering by Christ's Spirit to one another and the world. More than just words, effective leading means that as we minister Christ in this way, our non-verbal cues also matter, for we are to become "the look on his face, the tone of his voice, and the touch of the Savior's hands (Tripp)." This also means that *how* we speak to one another (in patience, gentleness, and kindness) should never take a back seat to *what* we wish to say. "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing....(1 Cor. 13:1)*"

3) Identify with suffering

Hebrews 4 tells us that Jesus is able to sympathize with us because in his humanness he was tempted and struggled with the same kinds of things we struggle with: sorrow, suffering and death, hunger, loneliness, being tempted to find his purpose in earthly power and riches (by Satan in the wilderness), etc. "Being Christ" to one another means that we learn the vital ministry of "mourning with those who mourn" (and here we do well to pray for the gift of tears, not Biblical platitudes), as well as "rejoicing with those who rejoice." Scripture also gives us the great privilege and calling to "carry

one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2), even as Christ has borne our disgrace, shame, and burdens for us (Ps. 68:19; Heb. 13:13).

4) Accept with a love-agenda for change

A proper understanding of the Gospel means that we who are trusting in Christ are righteous by virtue of Christ's perfect law-keeping for us, his sacrificial death on our behalf, and his victorious resurrection for our justification. This acceptance because of Christ also includes His loving commitment to our change, or what we call progressive sanctification. It is His grace that teaches us to say "no to ungodliness" (Titus 2:11), and "yes" to humility and repentance, hope in Christ, thankfulness, rejoicing, and self-less love. Such self-less love and recognition of God's amazing grace (which comes to us as sinners) reminds us that a critical, impatient, self-righteous spirit toward someone who is struggling in our group is inconsistent with the grace that we have received. He calls us to remove this log from our eye, that we might proceed to effectively and humbly help others to see clearly (See Matt. 7:1-5). (Note: Sometimes a particularly "long-winded" group member will tend to monopolize the group's share time. Be sensitive to the other members of the group if this occurs by offering to listen and speak further with the member after the meeting. Also, be aware when a person's struggle is being met with an overload of "good advice" or criticism from the group that does not bear in mind the above important principles for offering compassionate, Gospel-centered help. Good morals or behavior is not our ultimate goal. Believing the Gospel is our greatest need, which calls us to even be repenting of our righteousness and ongoing attempts at reforming ourselves!)