



LIFE GROUP GUIDE



verticalstpaul.org/groups

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Welcome & Overview

Welcome to Community Formation! Our team is so excited to walk with you through this process of forming, launching, and *living in community* here at Vertical Church!

Our prayer is that your Life Group would grow to become like the early church in Acts...

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47)

Over the next two weeks, you'll learn about God's design for how his people are to relate with one another, something we refer to as “biblical community.” This kind of community is central to our vision here at Vertical: **All of us, making all of life, all about Jesus Christ.**

All of us are invited to live in a community that exists distinctly within the context of the blood-bought body (1 Cor 12:12-14), and bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-32); the family of God (Eph 2:19); a new humanity (Eph 2:15, 2 Cor 5:17); that is, the Church of Jesus Christ. Though all of these things are true of every believer, everywhere, we also believe we are meant to experience this reality in the local gathering of believers—a local church. We like to think of this distinction similarly to how one may think about the difference between immediate family and extended family. While it may be true that you have extended family (think aunts, uncles, cousins) all over the country, your immediate family resides in your own home. They are local. They are the ones you are committed to, first and foremost. They are the ones you *do life with*. It is the same way with the local church. We have brothers and sisters all over the world, and that is beautiful. Yet, we also have brothers and sisters who call this church home. They are our “immediate family.” The ones God has called us to be *in community* with, specifically.

That is why, here at Vertical, community is found in our third step of the discipleship pathway:

Worship — Work — **Walk**
in Services & Stewardship on Teams, Together with Christ, in Community

Church Membership

It can be really easy to think of membership at a church like membership at a gym. Some are totally in on it, some are totally out on it, and all of us inevitably walk away from it once it no longer fits within our budget, or our schedule, or it's "National Quitters Day," also known as the second Friday in January, and we're already done with our resolutions.

On a more serious note, church membership can feel like signing a contract with a shady company who will try to take advantage of you and pocket your money. For others, it might feel like living under a judgmental, arrogant system designed to wrestle you into submission. But that's not how God designed the church. He isn't trying to rip you off or tear you down. The God who sent Jesus to die on the cross for you is the same God who created the church. He wants to make you joyful and purposeful. He wants you to heal and thrive. And one of the primary means he's given to do that is through deep relationships with Christians in the church.

For Your Good

Ultimately, church membership matters because you matter. In Romans 12:3-13, the author, Paul, uses the analogy of a body to describe the church. Each part of the body—the ear, the heart, the eye—has a different function that works together to create a healthy body. If the eye isn't there, the body suffers. If the foot stops working, the body has a harder time moving. It's the same with the church. Each person plays a valuable role in the overall health of the church. If a person doesn't participate, the whole body hurts. The church needs you. We have each been given talents to use for God's glory. The church gives us the opportunity to use those gifts to grow his kingdom. We can find joy while serving together in the purpose and design for which we were created by God.

Serve Others

In grace, God has invited Christians into the church to grow as we care for one another. Scripture lists fifty-nine different "one another" passages, encouraging us to peace, devotion, and patience with one another in the body of believers. As a member of a church, you can fulfill those in a way that you would never be able to accomplish independently. God designed human beings for relationships. Right from the beginning, God saw that it was not good for mankind to be alone (Genesis 2:18); he knew that we could not survive on our own. So, God gave us community within the church and urges us to be unified (John 17:11). God calls us to commit to a body of believers to strengthen us in our faith, and to demonstrate his love to each other and the world. Love cannot happen on its own; it must have an object. God asks us to extend that love to him and to other people.

Help When You Need It

Because humans are born with a sinful nature, it is natural for us to drift toward sin and away from Jesus. So, God established caretakers in the church to watch over our souls and to keep the body of Christ healthy. People who become members of a church willingly submit to those God has given authority to oversee the care of its members. When a Christian is stuck in sin, the Bible encourages other Christians to go privately to that person to help them recognize sin and turn from it. Should no repentance (turning from sin) or resolution occur in a private meeting, Scripture instructs members to widen the circle to other trusted friends and church authority. If the member is still unwilling to turn from sin, the caretakers will eventually ask them to leave the church until they are ready to turn from sin and heal. This process, found in Matthew 18:15-17, protects the overall health of the church and encourages the person in sin toward repentance. This care and correction process is not intended to humiliate or degrade people. It is done in humility and kindness to help members become and remain healthy. Others can often recognize the sin in our lives better than we can alone. And we have all sinned (Romans 3:23). So, before we help others see their sins, we should humbly remember to acknowledge and deal with our own shortcomings first and pray that God and trusted friends would pull us back to him when we wander (Matthew 7:2-4).

Your Pastors Love You

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5 paints the picture of a high & holy calling for Pastors & Leaders of God's people. Church membership is the primary way *you* and *your pastors* can have clarity about *who* they are shepherding. As we said earlier, the local church is like your immediate family. Therefore, the members of this church, in this illustration, represent the family (brothers, sisters, mothers, etc.), and the Pastor represents the father, the head of the family. Pastors & members can all take comfort in having that kind of clarity & care.

Additional Scriptures: *Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-12, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28-30, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Acts 2:37-41, Acts 6:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:3-17, James 5:19-20*

The Why

ENCOUNTER & EMBODY THE GOSPEL



A New Humanity In Christ

“Communal life is again being recognized by Christians today as the grace that it is, as the extraordinary, the **‘roses and lilies’** of the Christian life” (*Life Together*, Bonhoeffer).

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:13-22)

One of the most significant and tangible realities of the Gospel in our lives is the formation of a community, or what the writers of Scripture call *new humanity*. This new humanity was formed, exists, and thrives because of our *union with Christ*, our being *in Him*. Because we are in fact, *in Him*, we know that we are all members of Him, of His body. By nature, then, we desperately need one another, and Christ has done everything necessary in order for us to function and bring life to one another through Gospel-centered, Gospel-formed community!

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, he writes about this reality, saying, “We are members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to its destruction. This is no mere theory; it is a spiritual reality. And the Christian community has often experienced its effects with disturbing clarity, sometimes destructively and sometimes fortunately (1 Cor 12:25).”

Just observe the beauty of the passage above. Jesus, because of His death and resurrection, has accomplished what we could never do on our own:

1. Jesus integrated insiders & outsiders (v13)
2. Jesus imploded our walls of division (v14)
3. Jesus instated a new humanity (v15)
4. Jesus initiated reconciliation (vv16-17)
5. Jesus invited us into familial fellowship (vv18-19)
6. Jesus indwells us by His Holy Spirit (vv20-22)

Each of these unique accomplishments—these realities created by and in the Gospel—have become true so that we might **encounter & embody the Gospel in community**, in a way that we cannot experience anywhere else in this world.

By *encountering the Gospel*, we mean that community is one of the key spaces in your life in which you will regularly hear, be reminded of, and strengthened to believe in the Gospel.

By *embodying the Gospel*, we mean that community is one of the key spaces in your life in which you will have opportunity to live out & extend the grace of the Gospel toward others, while also growing in your confidence, clarity, and ability to clearly articulate the Gospel message!

Community Culture is Gospel Culture

In Ray Ortlund's book, *The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ*, he writes about something called "Gospel Culture." Here's how he defines it:

"I think of it with a simple equation: gospel + safety + time. The family of God is where people should find lots of gospel, lots of safety, and lots of time. In other words, the people in our churches need:

- *multiple exposures to the happy news of the gospel from one end of the Bible to the other;*
- *the safety of non-accusing sympathy so that they can admit their problems honestly; and*
- *enough time to rethink their lives at a deep level, because people are complex and changing is not easy.*

In a gentle church like this, no one is put under pressure or singled out for embarrassment. Everyone is free to open up, and we all grow together as we look to Jesus" (72).

Gospel culture is the kind of culture that Vertical Church wants for every single Life Group. That requires that each Life Group be marked by lots of Gospel, lots of safety, and lots of time. But is there biblical precedent for this? Yes!

"Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love"
(Ephesians 4:15-16).

Gospel + Safety + Time

Did you see it? After spending the first three chapters of Ephesians articulating the depth of our *riches in Christ*, the glorious gift of the Gospel and all its significance in defining who we are as Christians, Paul begins in chapter four answering the question, “so what?” He urges the believers to *live worthy of the calling they have received*, and in verses 15-16, applies this to life together in community.

The Gospel + Safety + Time equation is so evident. Paul calls us to *speak the truth* (Gospel) *in love* (Safety), as we *grow up together* in Christ (Time). There’s perhaps no better way to define what is happening in community than this! This is the essence of community. This is what we want to be as a church. A place where we consistently speak the truth in love and bear with one another patiently as Christ forms us into His own perfect image. Not one of us knows exactly how or when that forming work will take place or how it will manifest. Our job is not to concern ourselves with that, but to concern ourselves with making sure that the Gospel has the first and last word in our lives and in *Life Group*.

Life Group

By now, you may be wondering...what is a Life Group? I’m glad you asked.

Life Groups are the model & means by which we are seeking to cultivate & experience this Gospel + Safety + Time kind of environment. When we say *Life Group*, we’re talking about a small group of people in your life (3-5 total) who are...

- Committed to meeting regularly
- Desiring to grow together in godliness
- Devoted to God’s Word & applying it to all of life
- Under the leadership & authority of the local church
- Your same gender—to foster vulnerability while protecting hearts

We believe that this kind of structure and intentionality will lead to a more tangible experience of the kind of community Paul is putting forth in Ephesians 4:15-16. But, you may be wondering, “what if I’m married?” Or, even if not, “why only same-gender?” Again, great question.

As a church, we are emphasizing the same-gender Life Groups in order to encourage deeper relationships, honest & open confession, and to create spaces where people can be fully known by others who understand their life, circumstances, and struggles. This is most healthy when experienced with other brothers (for the men), and sisters (for the women) in Christ!

However, we definitely encourage individual Life Groups to overlap at times, such as planning things like dinners, game nights, or bible studies with another group to allow for further fellowship within the church at large (e.g. you & your spouse's group could/should regularly meet together in addition to regular *Life Group*).

Conclusion

Here at Vertical Church, we believe that a healthy community culture is first and foremost a Gospel culture. That means our community, our *Life Groups*, are marked by lots of Gospel, lots of safety, and lots of time. We are committed to speaking the truth in love, as we grow up together in Christ. We are patient and present with one another, entrusting the Spirit to continue doing the work of forming each and everyone of us into the perfect Image of God, Jesus Christ.

In the following sections, we will continue to unpack *The Way* and *The Win* of community at Vertical, including some specifics about your role as an individual member of a Life Group, and what we're hoping every group is after each time they meet together!

Life Together Quotes

- “We *are* members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence. Every member serves the whole body, either to its health or to its destruction. This is no mere theory; it is a spiritual reality. And the Christian community has often experienced its effects with disturbing clarity, sometimes destructively and sometimes fortunately.”
- “For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. ‘He is our peace.’ Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.”
- “In Christian brotherhood everything depends upon its being clear right from the beginning, first, that Christian brotherhood is not an ideal, but a divine reality.”
- “Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.”

The Way

MARKS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY



What's My Role?

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:12-17).

Every single member of a community has an part to play in the development, health, and sustainability of their group. Life Groups do not flourish merely because a few people meet together once in a while to talk. No, fruitful groups are built upon the daily investment of each member as they follow Jesus and love one another in Christ. In order to help better identify what this looks like for you, we've outlined *5 Marks of a Healthy Community*, straight from Paul's letter to the church at Colossae.

5 Marks of a Healthy Community

Devote Daily (v12) – Your relationship with God is the most important relationship you have. A healthy community is full of individuals who daily devote to Jesus Christ. This looks like opening Scripture daily, praying honestly in ordinary moments, and asking, “How can I put on Christ today?” Devotion isn't perfection—it's consistency. When individuals show up rooted in Christ, the whole community is strengthened. “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone” (Bonhoeffer).

Relate Restoratively (v13) – Gospel + Safety + Time. Healthy communities confess sin, bear burdens, and extend forgiveness so grace always has the last word. This means choosing conversations over avoidance, prayer over gossip, and restoration over resentment. It looks like confessing sin without fear of shame, listening without rushing to fix, and walking patiently with one another through real, messy growth.

Invest Intentionally (v14-15) – Friendships are forged, not found. Healthy communities pursue one another with love and intentionality. This requires time, initiation, and fun. This looks like inviting people into your life—sharing meals, showing up consistently, planning time together, and choosing presence over convenience. Unity grows when we move toward one another on purpose and make space for joy along the way.

Edify Eagerly (v16) – Healthy communities encourage daily, admonish faithfully, and counsel one another in accordance with the Word of God and guided by the Spirit. This means speaking Scripture into everyday life, reminding one another of what is true, and lovingly challenging sin when needed. Edification happens when we don't just share opinions, but let God's Word shape our counsel, conversations, and care for one another.

Walk Worshipfully (v17) – Worship is a way of life. Healthy communities seek to glorify God in all they do: All of us, making all of life, all about Jesus Christ. This looks like our beliefs shaping our practice, obedience guiding our decisions, and Jesus being honored in our work, relationships, and rhythms. When Christ is central, everyday life becomes an act of worship lived out together.

Personal Reflection

- What rhythms do I currently have that help me stay connected to Jesus, and where do I want support growing in that?
- Am I willing to be known—and to extend grace to others—as we grow together over time?
- Do I see community as something I consume or something I commit to and help build?
- Am I open to both encouragement and loving challenge through God's Word in community?
- How do I want following Jesus to shape my everyday life?

The Win

PRIORITY OF PRESENCE



What are We After?

“But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Genesis 3:9).

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:19-25).

Ever since the very beginnings of humanity, *presence* was at the center of the story. In fact, we were created for the very purpose of experiencing and enjoying a *present God* who intended to be with us in relationship! It’s no wonder why Jesus is called “Emmanuel,” or “God with us,” in the Gospels. Being present with God, with other image bearers of God, and even present to ourselves and our experiences is central to what it means to be human and to follow Christ.

In Genesis 3:9, after Adam & Eve had sinned, the first question God asks as He steps into the situation is, “where are you?” This was a question about presence. He wasn’t merely asking this because He “lost” Adam or truly wondered where he was physically. The ever-present, Triune God of Love was inviting Adam to be honest about his sin. About where he was spiritually. About what had happened and how that had caused a separation between man and wife, as well as man and God. He was inviting Adam to be *present* with Him again.

Adam’s story is our story. It’s no wonder why *being present* seems like such a foreign concept in our day and age. The enemy loves to distract us, to keep us away from the present, to leave us unaware and uncertain about where we *really are* in relation to God, others, and ourselves. That is why, as a church, and as individual Life Groups, we’ve identified “The Win” as *prioritizing presence*. This is a daily, weekly, monthly pursuit that allows us the opportunity to respond to God’s question in Genesis 3 honestly. But, is the precedence for this based merely on one verse? No. Perhaps the most well-known, oft-quoted verses about the Church, about why we gather, why we commit to community, found in Hebrews 10, speaks clearly about what it means to *prioritize presence*. The author of this text (above) invites us to draw near to God on the basis of the Gospel, and to do so with a *true heart*, meaning that we draw near with an honesty about where we are, what we are feeling, the wounds we are carrying, or whatever it may be. The entire picture comes into view, when we read that last verse: a clear call to meet together & encourage one another as often as we can!

Priority of Presence

Drawing on the text in Hebrews 10, we've identified a sort of *liturgy* or structure for how we can move through and live in our community, prioritizing presence:

Present to God: Listen & respond to Him through Scripture reading, prayer, and worship.

God inhabits eternity, He exists outside of time. Fortunately (or unfortunately?), we do not. This means that the only place we can truly meet with God is in the present. Dwelling in the past, or anxiously thinking about the future is where the enemy wants us to live. Therefore, it is paramount that communities learn to become present to God, aware of His indwelling Spirit, and sensitive to anything He may want to do in and through our groups. This may look like spending some time in silence, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your time. Maybe it looks like having one person in your group begin each week by sharing what God's teaching them in this season. Perhaps, it could look like spending some time in the Word, or prayer, or in worship together.

Present to Self: Honestly assess our lives & confess sin within the context of community.

Like Adam, we are bent towards hiding, lying to ourselves, putting on a face for others, and creating a watered-down version of reality. Becoming present to ourselves seeks to do the opposite. Here, we want to be fully honest, real, and knowable in our struggles. This may look like taking time to examine our own lives, confess specific sin, talk about a current conflict or hardship in this season of life, or even share wins, highlights, and reasons to celebrate in praise to God! Whatever you are bringing into group, you get to "hold fast to the confession of your faith," knowing that God and His people will not reject you, but receive you with grace. It is here where the healing power of confession is most profoundly experienced. As Bonhoeffer says, "*Confession is discipleship.*"

Present to One Another: Pray for, encourage, counsel, and admonish one another in accordance with the Word and guided by the Holy Spirit.

The writer of Hebrews gives us one task: encourage one another. We do this by being *present* with one another physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This is counter-cultural, but it is the heartbeat of the Church. Everyone, and we mean everyone, is encouragement-deficient, and so we want to encourage all the more. Encouragement comes in many shapes and sizes. It can look like praying for someone, affirming a character trait you admire, offering Godly counsel in a hard situation, and it can even look like admonishment—calling one another to walk in repentance and obedience in a way that is based on truth, grace, and in alignment with God's heart.

Appendices

CONFLICT, DYNAMICS, AND MORE!



Appendix A: Sharing Your Story

A Life Map is a visual representation of your life from birth to today. It highlights events God has used to mold and shape your character and helps others to know you. The Life Map process gives insight into how God has designed you and worked in your life, and where he is leading you. It will also help your group members get to know one another. Use these three steps to help you develop and communicate your Life Map:

Step 1: Reflection

Prayerfully consider people, places, and events that have marked your life. Make a list. Be sure to use the Life Map Worksheet on the next page to help you categorize your thoughts. The terms in the worksheet identify categories and describe things to include. Ask yourself the questions for each category and fill in the worksheet.

Step 2: Analysis

Now that you have reflected over your life—your heritage, heroes, high points, hard times, and “hand of God” moments—it’s time to analyze which of these you want to put in your Life Map. While it would be nice to share everything, focus on the most significant influences and experiences in your life. Spend some time praying through what you have listed. What you choose is totally up to you.

Step 3: Organization

Now try to synthesize this information into a logical flow of thought. How do these people, places, and events fit together?

Sharing with Your Life Group

Sharing your story can be as simple or creative as you'd like. Feel free to just write it down and share from the page. Or, present it in a way that is creatively unique to your personality. For example, someone might like to draw a Life Map or use photographs and music that is meaningful. Another person might just share five highlights and lowlights in life. Regardless of how you share, each person (or couple) should plan about 20-25 minutes to share.

Life Map Worksheet

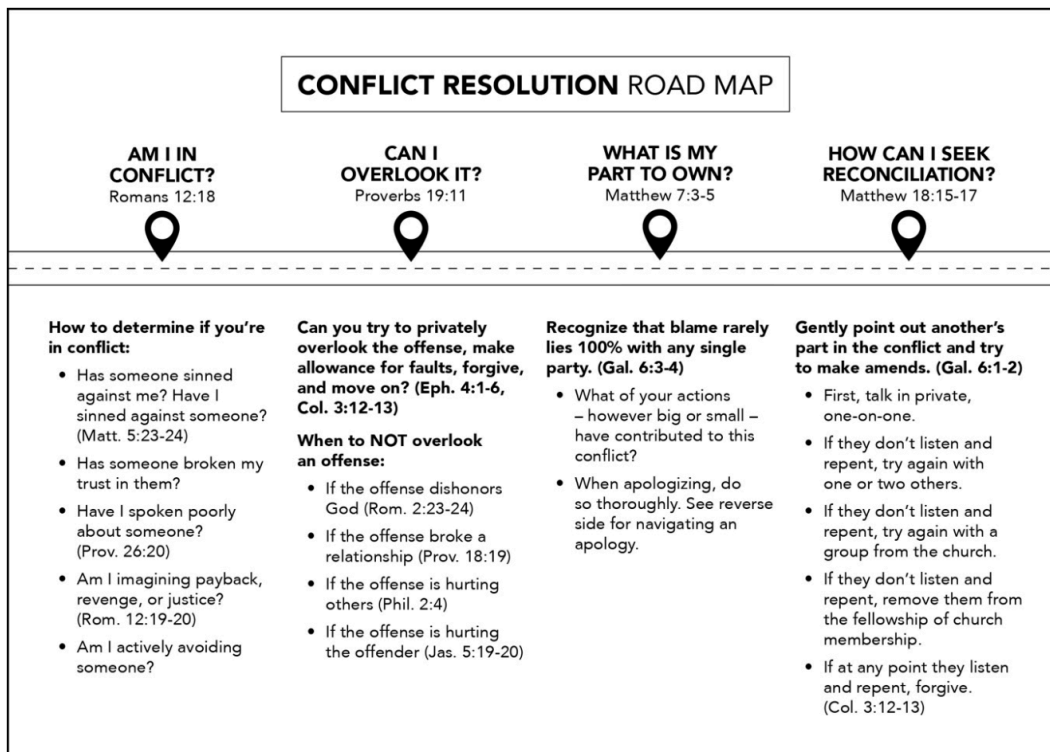
| NAME: | AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION | AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION | AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION | AGE/LIFE STAGE LOCATION |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| HERITAGE: How have your family relationships, ethnic, or geographical influences shaped your life? | | | | |
| HEROES: What relationships influenced your character/shaped your direction (positively & negatively)? How? Why? | | | | |
| HIGH POINTS: When did you come to know Christ? What experiences have you especially enjoyed? Felt closest to God? Why? | | | | |
| HARD TIMES: What experiences were especially difficult or painful? Felt furthest from God? | | | | |
| HAND OF GOD: When/how have you seen God's hand at work in your life? List specific events that illustrate his work in your life. | | | | |

Appendix B: Conflict & Communication

As you deepen your relationships with one another, conflict is unavoidable. At the first sign of conflict in your life group, you may ask yourself, “Did I make a huge mistake getting in this group?” As you have tough conversations and experience conflict with others, you may even be tempted to leave the group. But God’s people are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the world. Conflict actually provides an opportunity for you to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). Though conflict is inevitable, healthy community groups will commit to respond to conflict with biblical principles to maintain “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). They actively pursue peace and reconciliation instead of accepting premature compromises or allowing relationships to wither.

Below is the Conflict Resolution Road Map. Be sure to take the time to read the Scriptures it references. You will see a few key ideas surface, like how to identify when conflict needs to be addressed (Romans 12:18), taking responsibility for your own contribution to the conflict (Matthew 7:3-5), showing your brother his fault (Matthew 18:15), and seeking reconciliation (Matthew 5:23, 24).



Personal Reflection

- How was conflict handled in your home while growing up? How do you think that affects your view of conflict now?
- Do you have a tendency to run from conflict or create unnecessary conflict? Give one example.
- Do you have conflict with anyone now? What steps can you take to move toward peace in this relationship and in your ability to resolve conflict in the future?

Ideas for Living Out Peacemaking Principles

- Pray that God would reveal any unresolved conflict in your life; ask him to show you any “logs” in your eye (Matthew 7:3-5)
- Process with your community group about how to best reconcile any known relationship conflicts (consider family, co-workers, friends, etc.)
- Memorize scripture with your group that will help you during conflict
- Ask loved ones to list some ways that you can grow in how you respond to conflict

Communication in Conflict

Handling conflict in a healthy way begins with managing yourself. This is difficult—especially during conflict. It requires honesty about your shortcomings, a humble assessment of your response patterns, and care for how to best communicate with love.

“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 2:24-25)

Unhealthy Communication Patterns

Study the list below of destructive communication patterns that often appear during conflict. See if you can identify your natural tendencies. Try not to be a W-E-N-I when you communicate!

Withdrawal: When one person prematurely “checks out” of a conversation without any chance for understanding or resolution. It may appear gracious (“I don’t want to fight about this”), frustrated (“You just do what you want”), or apathetic (“I really don’t care”). The person may also stop engaging or physically leave the room. (Proverbs 3:11-14)

Escalation: When a conversation’s intensity increases because of inflammatory comments or someone raises the emotional stakes. Common escalation methods include bringing up side topics or sensitive issues, exaggerations, and character attacks. (Proverbs 15:1)

Negative Interpretation: When a listener receives a message negatively, falsely assuming the speaker had poor intentions. For example, a negative interpreter might receive the comment, “Are you feeling okay?” to mean the speaker thinks his or her physical appearance looks bad. (Proverbs 3:5-8)

Invalidation: When someone responds in a way that minimizes or denies the significance of another’s feelings, ideas, logic, or goals. Rather than listening and understanding, an invalidator discredits. Responses such as, “That doesn’t make sense!,” “How can you believe that?,” and “You’re being silly and irrational,” are examples of invalidation. (Proverbs 18:2)

Choosing the Right Method of Communication

In recent decades, technology has given us the ability to communicate with each other in many new ways. Communication channels like email, text messaging, and social media allow for quick exchanges, but without the context of body language and tone, they can also generate misunderstandings. Like most tools, electronic communication can make life easier when used properly; but when not used properly, it can fracture relationships. To minimize this risk in your community, here are five suggestions to help you choose the best manner and method of communication:

1. Stick to the facts in electronic communication. Navigating emotional topics is difficult in face-to-face conversations, but it is almost impossible in electronic communication. So, keep electronic communication to factual or organizational conversations like, “Do you want to meet up for dinner soon?” Or “Letting you know that lunch with Dad went well. More details later. Thanks for praying.”

2. Don't use electronic communication for conflict resolution. Electronic communication is a terrible medium for conflict resolution. Expressing ideas and articulating emotions in a healthy way is almost impossible without the benefit of tone, body language, and vocal inflection. All of these are essential elements of good communication. In addition, electronic messages easily become “one-sided” statements rather than two-way communication.

3. Do use electronic communication for encouragement. While text and email are bad channels for resolving conflict, they are good for encouraging someone. Sending a quick praise by text or emailing how you've seen someone grow builds relationships. In fact, encouragement by any means will strengthen your group.

4. Keep electronic communication short & simple. If you are writing more than five lines, your message might be too long and run the risk of others not reading it carefully. If you find yourself writing more than five lines, it is probably best to make a phone call or shorten the message to “just the facts.”

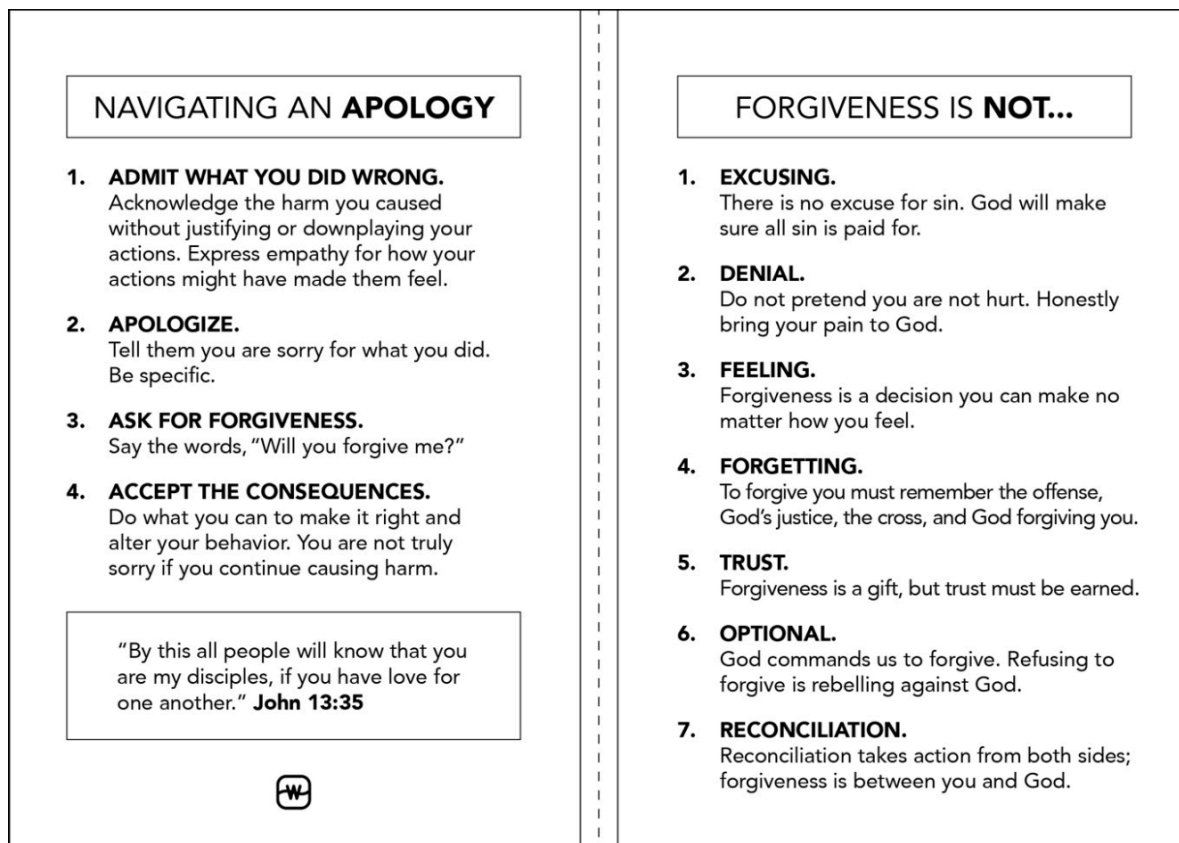
5. Meet face-to-face when possible. A phone call is second best. Electronic communication is a good tertiary means of communication, but face-to-face communication is always best. If you feel more comfortable sharing something electronically rather than during your group time, it may indicate that a sensitive issue needs discussion. The group will likely benefit from talking with you about the issue when you are all in the same room.

Conclusion

Healthy communication takes work, especially during times of conflict. Guarding against your natural destructive communication patterns and being purposeful in the way you communicate will help build relational trust as you work together through life with your group. Pray that God would give you the courage, patience, and wisdom to make the most of the opportunities he puts before your group to pursue peace with one another.

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;” (Hebrews 12:14-15)

Below is another helpful diagram which will help you engage in biblical forgiveness, seeking real repentance and reconciliation when necessary. As followers of Jesus Christ, we always want to see grace have the final word in our relationships.



Personal Reflection

- Which destructive communication patterns (W-E-N-I) are a struggle for you?
- When have you used electronic communication in a way that caused harm?
- What method of communication do you prefer? Why?

Ideas for Healthy Communication Practices

- Memorize 2 Timothy 2:24-25 as a group
- Ask family and friends which destructive communication patterns they most often see in you, then pray that God would help you respond differently during conflict
- As a group, commit to resolve conflict face-to-face

Appendix C: Confession

Confessing sin might feel terrifying to you. Publicly revealing ways that you fall short can make you feel unworthy, unloved, or unwanted. However, God is not out to make you miserable. He wants you to find healing, seek restoration, and create freedom through the act of confessing your sins to both him and others in your life.

What is Confession?

The word confess, in the original language, means to say the same thing, acknowledge, or agree with (Mark 1:5, Matthew 3:6, Acts 19:18, and James 5:16). So, a practical definition of confession is to vocally agree about disobedience toward God (sin).

Why Do We Confess?

We confess sin because God commands it; he already knows about the sin and he wants us to agree with him about sin. We also confess because it is spiritually healthy for us. Read the comparisons below about the harm of unconfessed sin and the blessings of confessing sin:

| UNCONFESED SIN LEADS TO: | CONFESSED SIN LEADS TO: |
|---|---|
| Hardship for self (Proverbs 28:13) | Life and glory to God (John 3:17-21) |
| Weariness (Psalm 32:3) | Cleansing (1 John 1:9) |
| Sickness (1 Corinthians 11:30) | Healing (James 5:16) |
| Heaviness (Psalm 32:4) | Burdens relieved (Psalm 32:5) |
| More sin (Genesis 4:6-11) | Freedom and mercy (Proverbs 6:5, 28:13) |
| Hardening of the heart (Leviticus 26:40-41) | Forgiveness and a clean heart (James 5:15; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 51:10) |
| God's discipline/opposition of pride (Luke 18:9-14) | Honor and justification (Luke 18:9-14) |
| Hardship for others (Joshua 7) | Reconciliation/warning for others (Matthew 5:23-24; 1 Timothy 5:20) |
| Blocked communication with God (Psalm 66:18) | Worship of God (Leviticus 5:5; Numbers 5:7) |
| Separation from God (Genesis 3:9; Isaiah 59:2) | Restoration with God (2 Chronicles 7:14) |

Confess to God

Your most important relationship is with God. Sin hurts that relationship. So, your first step when you recognize sin in your life is to confess your sin to God. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God has promised to always forgive your sins, no matter how grave the sin. Scripture also encourages you to confess these sins to him daily (Matthew 6:11-12a). As you are devoting daily with God, make it part of your practice to also confess sin in prayer or in your journal. Bring to God any sin that the Holy Spirit or Scripture has brought to your conscience. But remember, confession is not what wipes your slate clean. Jesus has already done that at the cross (Colossians 2:13-14). If you forget a sin, know that Christ’s blood cleanses and purifies you from all sin—even those of which you are unaware.

Confess to One Another

Though it may be uncomfortable or difficult, confessing sin to your brothers or sisters in Christ can be a freeing, healing process. God’s instruction is for your good. James 5:16 says, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.” God wants you and your community to be well and to battle against sin together. Make a regular practice of confessing sin when it occurs. You can send a text to your community group if appropriate or spend some of your scheduled group time confessing. Answering the question, “How are you feeding your flesh?” during community is a great way to open the door for confession. If you listen to someone confess sin, remember to meet that person’s humility with grace. Offer to pray quickly after confession for healing and victory. Affirm that person’s courage and give help with reconciliation, if necessary. You can also sympathetically share a time when you struggled with sin and God was faithful to restore you.

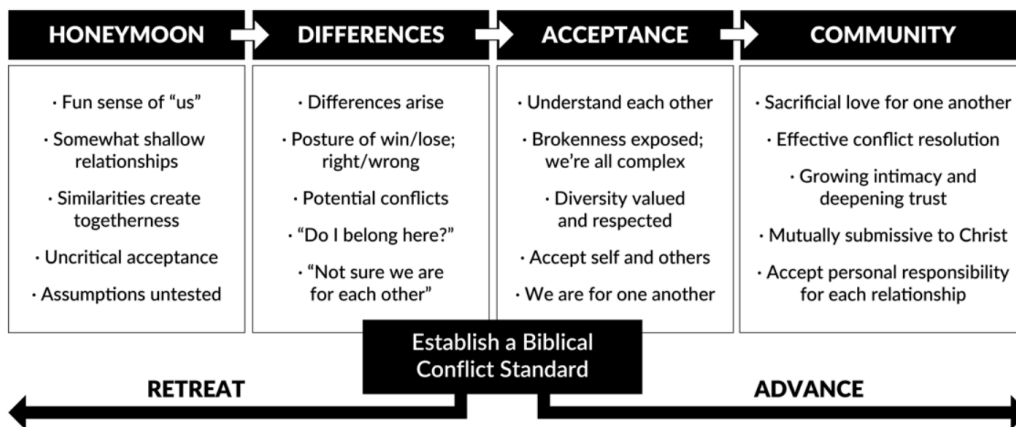
Confession in *Life Together*

- “He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer. It is nothing else but our fellowship with Jesus Christ that leads us to the ignominious dying that comes in confession, in order that we may in truth share in his Cross. The Cross of Jesus Christ destroys all pride. We cannot find the Cross of Jesus if we shrink from going to the place where it is to be found, namely, the public death of the sinner.”
- “Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace... His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray...”

Appendix D: Group Dynamics

Groups who are committed to stay together encounter four key stages: the Honeymoon Stage, the Differences Stage, the Acceptance Stage, and the Community Stage. As you begin to do life together, you'll notice a natural progression from one stage to the next. The tendency is to stop at Stage 2 ("Differences") when conflict arises; people either leave the group or retreat to Stage 1 ("Honeymoon"). However, if your group matures onto Stages 3 ("Acceptance") and 4 ("Community"), you will experience new depth, rich relationships, and God's beautiful design for provision through community.

THE STAGES OF COMMUNITY



Setting Your Group Up for Success

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

God has given his Spirit, his Word, and his people to protect you, build you up spiritually, and provide for you. That's good, because all of us are naturally prone to wander into sin. Since biblical community is a priority for your overall spiritual health, it is something that you should begin to schedule your life around. Setting specific meeting days and times to block your calendar will help prevent the busyness of life from crowding out community. Also, it is important to structure how you will spend your time when you are together. Work together to establish a rhythm that prioritizes presence in the following three areas:

- 1) Present to God
- 2) Present to Self
- 3) Present to One Another

Life groups can prioritize presence weekly during group time. Remember, relationships are strengthened throughout the week, so work to connect outside of your set group time, too. If your group feels crunched for time, try to email updates during the week to keep others informed and to prioritize discussion topics when face-to-face. Share in the ownership of your group. Volunteer to serve your group in areas of giftedness and be willing to participate in one another's lives in different ways so that you can experience the joy of fellowship that God intends for you together.

The following questions will help you discuss group expectations and roles going forward. What you decide as a group now does not have to go on forever, but it will provide a starting point that can be adjusted in the future when necessary.

When Do We Meet?

Consistency is vital for the ongoing health of any group. Most men's and women's groups meet weekly for around two hours. Married groups often meet together as couples every other week, and then the husbands and wives meet separately in same-gender groups in the off weeks. When life gets busy or children get sick, many groups struggle with knowing whether or not to meet. When considering whether you should miss your group meeting, a helpful comparison would be that if something would cause you to miss work, then it might also be something that would cause you to miss your group meeting. Discuss with your group when it is okay and when it is not okay to miss your meeting so that you do not frustrate one another. Wedding showers, happy hours with co-workers, family in town, etc., are all scenarios to discuss. When you think it may be best to miss the group, assume a posture of humility and ask for your time commitment back.

Where Do We Meet?

Most groups meet in homes, which can create a warm environment for people to connect. Some groups choose to rotate each session in different homes or take turns hosting every month. This can also allow groups to coordinate shared childcare, if necessary.

How Will We Share Group Ownership?

The best groups share ownership. All responsibilities should not fall to your Community Group Leader(s). Ask group members what they are passionate about and how they would like to use their gifts. Then, assign ownership to an area for which they are passionate. While every person may not have a designated role, it is important for everyone to participate with their gifts and passions as integral parts of the group. Below are a few examples of some possible ownership roles within a group:

Administrative: This person will be in charge of keeping the group moving forward. He or she can send out prayer requests after each meeting or help implement a plan to follow up on group initiatives. Reminding groups of events, meetings, and serving opportunities would also fall under this role.

Fun & Fellowship: This person finds creative ways to have fun together and build relationships outside of group time. Examples include planning meals, retreats, or events with other community groups.

Service: The person in this role will find and coordinate opportunities for the group to serve together, considering each member in their area of service or passion.

Personal Reflection

- What are the best days and times of the week for you to meet with your community group? List two possibilities.
- What are some ways that you can personally share ownership with the group?
- What are some things you will commit to do in order to build relationships with members of your community group outside of your scheduled meeting time?
- What stage of community development sounds most exciting to you? Least appealing? Why?

Ideas for Sharing Group Ownership

- Take a personality or strengths assessment and discuss the results together as a group
- Take time to share about your gifts and passions (service areas, people groups, pastimes, restaurants, travel destinations, etc.)
- Plan a retreat somewhere away from home
- Designate some roles for group members and find ways for everyone to contribute

Appendix E: Navigating Life Decisions

Thankfully, Scripture gives practical advice on how to wisely process major decisions. The ten questions below are principles pulled from the book of Proverbs. They form great questions to ask yourself and your community when processing big decisions. When processing major decisions, get everyone into the room at the same time. Don't have one-off conversations that would make it easy to frame details in a different light or ignore important topics.

Do I have all the facts?

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." (Proverbs 18:13)

Am I fully entrusting this decision to the Lord?

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6)

Is the pressure of time forcing me to make a premature decision?

"Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way." (Proverbs 19:2)

For better or worse, what are the possible motives that could be driving this decision?

"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit." (Proverbs 16:2)

How should my past experiences inform this decision?

"Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (Proverbs 26:11)

What is the collective counsel of my community?

"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." (Proverbs 12:15)

Have I honestly considered the warning signs?

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." (Proverbs 16:25)

Have I considered all the possible outcomes of this decision?

"The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps." (Proverbs 14:15)

Could this decision jeopardize my integrity or hinder my witness to the Lord in any way?

"Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked." (Proverbs 25:26)

Is there a better option that would allow me to make a greater impact for the Kingdom?

"The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise." (Proverbs 11:30)

Much of the material in the Appendices of this Life Group Guide was developed with gratitude for the Community Launch Curriculum created by Watermark Community Church in Dallas, Texas.



VERTICAL CHURCH