

Small Group Guide

****Make It Real — A Vision for Reaching a Disillusioned Generation****

Rivers Edge Church

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed for groups of three to twelve people. It works best when the leader reads through it in full before the gathering. The goal is not to cover every question but to find the two or three that spark the most honest conversation and stay there. Leave room for silence. Leave room for people to disagree. That is the point.

SETTING THE TABLE

Before diving into discussion, open with a shared meal or at least a drink and a snack. Take five minutes for everyone to answer one low-stakes question together:

****Icebreaker:**** Think of a time someone made you feel genuinely welcome somewhere — not because of a program or a process, but because of a person. What did they do?

THE BIG IDEA

The vision can be summed up in one sentence:

****Make it real. Make it relational. Make it deep.****

The instinct of the last thirty years has been to reach the next generation with a better experience — brighter production, tighter music, a more polished show. This vision argues for something different: a place where people can belong before they believe, where they find people who know their name, where truth has enough weight to build a life on, and where they have permission to come exactly as they are.

Three pillars carry that vision:

- ****Presence over production**** — the week, not the Sunday event, is the true unit of spiritual formation
- ****Fathers and mothers, not programs**** — a mentoring culture that structures belonging without engineering relationships
- ****Depth without pressure**** — a safer room, not a smaller truth

PART ONE — THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

****Key Takeaway****

There is a specific group of people our doors are not reaching: older teenagers who have outgrown the youth-group performance, young single adults navigating work and loneliness, and young couples who have quietly concluded that church is not for people like them. Most of them are not hostile to God. Many are aching for something true. What

we have been handing them is not landing — not because it is not good enough, but because it is not real enough.

****Discussion Questions****

1. Do you personally know someone who fits this description — someone who has drifted from church not out of hostility but out of quiet disillusionment? Without naming them if it feels uncomfortable, what do you think they are actually looking for?

2. The vision document says this generation "can sense a produced experience from across the room." Do you agree with that? What experiences — inside or outside of church — have made you feel like something was performed for you rather than offered to you?

3. Be honest: have you ever walked into a church gathering and felt more like an audience member than a participant? What created that feeling, and what would have changed it?

PART TWO — THE LESSON FROM THE CARPET

****Key Takeaway****

In the late 1960s, Chuck Smith watched a burned-out, disillusioned generation wash up on his doorstep and chose to meet them in their actual condition rather than require them to clean up first. When someone suggested putting up a sign to protect the new carpet from all those bare feet, his response was: "Tear out the carpet before you turn a kid away." That single instinct — that people matter more than the institution's comfort — helped set off one of the most remarkable movements of the century. They were reached not by lowering the bar, but by radical welcome, verse-by-verse substance, no manufactured emotion, and a steady man they called "Papa Chuck" who gave a fatherless generation a father.

****Discussion Questions****

1. "Tear out the carpet before you turn a kid away." What is the carpet in your own life — the comfort, the preference, the routine — that you might be tempted to protect at the cost of a person?

2. The vision document points out that Chuck Smith handed strung-out, disillusioned young people dense, verse-by-verse Scripture — and they came in waves. What does that tell us about what people are actually hungry for, even when they do not know how to say it?

3. The document includes an honest caveat: "A genuine move of the Spirit is never something we manufacture." How do you hold the tension between doing the things that make room for God to work and trusting that the outcome is not in your hands?

PART THREE — PRESENCE OVER PRODUCTION

****Key Takeaway****

The attractional model places almost all of its weight on a single polished Sunday morning experience. This vision spreads that weight across a few low-key, repeatable touchpoints across the whole week. The table, the triad, ordinary presence in daily life, and a regular outward serve — together these form a rhythm where real discipleship can happen, most of it in unscheduled hours rather than official meetings.

****Discussion Questions****

1. The vision document says "the relationship is the program" when it comes to leaders showing up in people's ordinary lives. Think about the most formative relationships in your own faith journey. How much of the real growth happened in a formal meeting versus in an ordinary, unplanned moment?

2. The triad — a group of three or four people, the same people over many months — is described as "too small to hide in, too consistent to stay on the surface." Have you ever been in a group that small and that consistent? What was different about it?

3. The document notes that young couples without children and single adults have something most of the church does not — open evenings, energy, and homes. How does it change the way you think about ministry to frame it as something we hand to people rather than something we do for them?

PART FOUR — FATHERS AND MOTHERS, NOT PROGRAMS

Key Takeaway

The moment a mentoring culture becomes an application form and a matching spreadsheet, it dies — because this generation reads assigned intimacy as fake. The task of leadership is to structure the conditions, not the relationships: to engineer dense contact between the generations, and then to notice and bless what grows. The fathers-and-mothers tier is the one most missing in modern ministry and the one a family-fractured generation is most starved for. Their stumbles are the curriculum, not their expertise.

Discussion Questions

1. The document says the obstacle to recruiting mature mentors is almost always that they feel unqualified — they assume they must be cool, bridge the culture gap, or have all the answers. Does that resonate with you? What would it look like to free someone from that assumption?

2. Think about someone who has functioned as a spiritual father or mother in your life — formally or informally. What did they actually do? What made the relationship trustworthy?

3. The document includes this guardrail: "A healthy mentor consistently points past himself, to Christ and to the wider community, so that if he disappeared tomorrow the person would not collapse." How do you know when a mentoring relationship is building dependence rather than building someone up? Have you seen either version play out?

4. The vision is that this year's mentee becomes next year's near-peer guide. Who in your life right now is a step or two behind you on the road — someone you could walk with, not as an expert, but simply as someone a little further along?

PART FIVE — DEPTH WITHOUT PRESSURE

****Key Takeaway****

Depth is almost never what scares off the de-churched. What actually makes wary people bolt is pressure, control, manufactured emotion, and the bait-and-switch of being welcomed warmly and then handed an agenda. So we do not dilute the depth — we strip out the things that trip the alarm. We lead with questions rather than verdicts. We make doubt welcome. We let belonging precede believing. We are honest about suffering. And we trust the material and trust the Spirit to move people on his timeline, not ours. The reframe is simple: don't make the truth smaller — make the room safer.

****Discussion Questions****

1. The document draws a sharp line between depth and pressure. In your experience, what does pressure in a spiritual community actually look like? What does it feel like to be on the receiving end of it?

2. "Nothing rebuilds trust faster than a leader who can honestly say 'I don't know.'" Do you believe that? Has that kind of honesty ever changed the way you thought about someone in a leadership role?

3. The document says a great share of the de-churched left over glib answers to real pain — and that the depth they actually want includes the willingness to sit in lament without tying a bow on it. Is that a posture your group is comfortable with? What makes it hard to just sit with someone in pain rather than reaching for an answer?

4. Ancient practices — silence, fasting, confession, fixed-hour prayer — are described as landing hard with this generation "precisely because they are slow, counter-cultural, and the opposite of production." Have you tried any of these practices? What happened?

KEY TAKEAWAYS — SUMMARY

Take a moment before closing to let the group name what stayed with them. Here are the core ideas to hold onto:

- The people we are losing are not hostile to God. They are aching for something real.
- A better show is not what they are missing. What they are missing is precisely what the show was never able to give them.

- The week, not the Sunday event, is the true unit of spiritual formation.
- The relationship is the program.
- Their stumbles are the curriculum, not their expertise.
- Don't make the truth smaller — make the room safer.
- Belong, believe, become.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

These are not assignments. They are invitations. Choose one that is honest for where you actually are.

****For individuals:****

- Name one person in your life who fits the description in this vision — an older teen, a lonely single adult, a young couple who has drifted. Pray for them by name this week. Then consider one ordinary way you could show up in their life.
- Identify one comfort or preference — your carpet — that you have been protecting at the cost of being more present to someone. Sit with that honestly before God.
- If you are a mature believer, ask yourself whether you have been waiting to feel qualified before investing in someone younger. Consider whether presence and honesty about your own road might be enough.

****For the group:****

- Commit to meeting at least one more time with the same people before adding anyone new. Let the trust compound.

- Try opening your next gathering with a shared meal before any formal discussion. Notice what changes.

- Identify one person outside your group who belongs at the table. Not to recruit them — just to invite them to eat.

****For leaders:****

- Identify one or two people in your sphere who already have the gift of spiritual fatherhood or motherhood — who are naturally present, honest about their failures, and willing to listen more than they talk. Ask them personally, not through a sign-up sheet.

- Resist the pull to measure this season by the old scoreboard. Choose one different metric — depth of conversation, names learned, tables hosted — and track that instead.

CLOSING

End by reading this paragraph aloud together, or asking one person to read it slowly while everyone listens:

"The people we are describing are not a problem to be solved or a market to be captured. They are sons and daughters who have mostly been handed a show when they were aching for a home. We have it within us to offer them something the show never could: a table with

their name on it, people who will not leave, truth heavy enough to stand on, and the freedom to come as they are. That will cost us some carpet. Let's tear it out."

Close in prayer. Ask God for the courage to be present, the patience to build slowly, and the faith to trust that he is at work in the ordinary.

Rivers Edge Church — Make It Real Vision Series