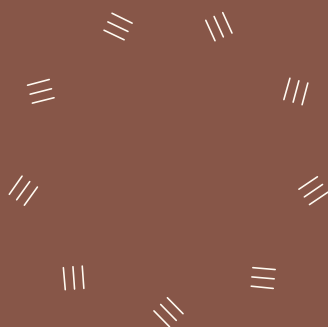


A Four-Session Companion
Guide to Cultivate Community
in the Way of Jesus



The Community Practice

From John Mark Comer
and Practicing the Way

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Getting Started

Welcome

The modern world is facing a crisis of loneliness. The digital age has confused connectivity with community. Many of us ache to know and be known, to love and be loved, to belong to a family.

And yet we fear it too; scared we'll get hurt, or be rejected, or feel constrained by commitment.

In our lonely age, Jesus' invitation is more provocative than ever before. His call to "come and follow" him is a call to join his community — which he likened to a family. But not a family in the modern, Western imagination of mom, dad, and 2.5 kids, but in the ancient Mediterranean sense of a large, extended family of parents and grandparents and cousins and neighbors and co-workers and friends who aren't technically blood, yet are family — what sociologists call "fictive kinship groups," and the New Testament writers call "brothers and sisters."

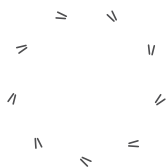
But we won't find this kind of community just by attending church on Sunday. As important as it is to gather for worship with our local church, we still have to find and form our own "fictive kinship groups" — our own family within the larger village or tribe that is the church.

In this Practice, we will explore the key skills required to do this. It's not rocket science; it's as simple as sharing meals, building joyful connections, being vulnerable with each other about our sorrows and sins, and staying together when (not if) things get hard.

Living in community is not easy, and it won't just "happen" in our busy, disconnected world. It will require practice. But if you say yes to Jesus' invitation to becoming a part of his family, it has the potential to deeply change your life for the good.

Welcome to the Practice of Community.

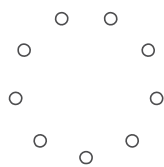
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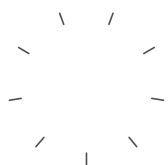
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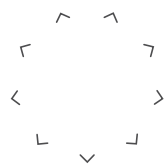
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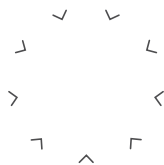
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SOLITUDE



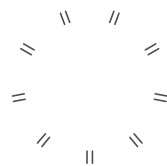
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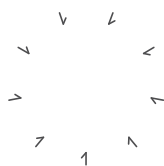
SCRIPTURE



COMMUNITY



SERVICE



WITNESS

Community is just one of nine core practices in our body of resources. The Practices are spiritual disciplines centered around the life rhythms of Jesus. They are designed not to add even more to your already overbusy life, but to slow you down and create space for the Spirit of God to form you to be with Jesus, become like him, and do what he did. Ultimately, they are a way to experience the love of God.

To run another Practice or learn more, see the back of the guide.

How To Use This Guide

A few things you need to know

This Practice is designed to be done in community, whether with a few friends around a table, your small group, in a larger class format, or with your entire church.

The Practice is four sessions long. We recommend meeting together every week or every other week. For those of you who want to spend more time on this Practice, we've included an additional four weeks of bonus conversations in the Appendix to go deeper in Scripture and discussion. You are welcome to pause for these conversations in between sessions or skip over them.

You will all need a copy of this Companion Guide. You can order a print version at your preferred retailer or find a free digital PDF version at launch.practicingtheway.org. We recommend the print version so you can stay away from your devices during the Practices, as well as take notes during each session. But we realize that digital works better for some.

Each session should take about one to two hours, depending on how long you give for discussion and whether or not you begin with a meal. See the Sample Session on the following page.

Are you a group leader or facilitator? Log in to your online Dashboard or sign up at launch.practicingtheway.org to find ideas, best practices, and tips on running this Practice.

Our Practices are designed to work in a variety of group sizes and environments. For that reason, your gatherings may include additional elements like a meal or worship time, or follow a structure slightly different from this sample. Please adapt as you see fit.

Sample Session

Here is what a typical session could look like.

Welcome

Welcome the group and open in prayer.

Share a meal (60 min.)

Gather around a table to eat together and share a conversation.

Introduction (2-3 min.)

Watch the introduction to the Session and pause the video when indicated for your first discussion.

Discussion 01: Practice reflection in triads (15-20 min.)

Process your previous week's spiritual exercise in smaller groups of 3-5 people with the questions in the Guide.

Teaching (20 min.)

Watch the teaching portion of the video.

Discussion 02: Group conversation (15-30 min.)

Pause the video when indicated for a group-wide conversation.

Testimony and tutorial (5-10 min.)

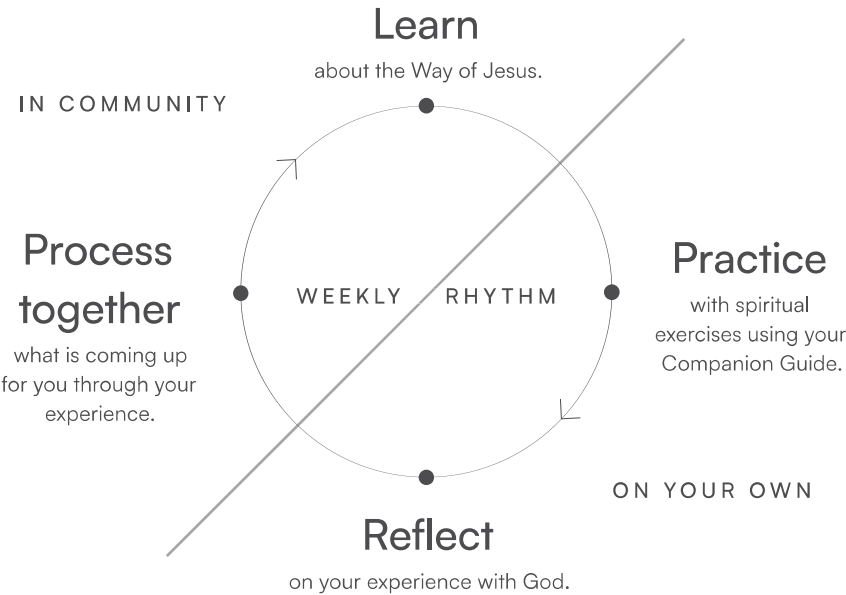
Watch the rest of the video.

Prayer to close

Close by praying the liturgy in the Guide, or however you choose.

The Weekly Rhythm

The four sessions of this Practice are designed to follow a four-part rhythm that is based on our model of spiritual formation.



01 Learn

Gather together as a community for an interactive experience of learning about the Way of Jesus through teaching, storytelling, and discussion. Bring your Guide to the session and follow along.

02 Practice

On your own, before the next session, go and “put it into practice,” as Jesus himself said.* We will provide weekly spiritual exercises to integrate this practice into your everyday life, as well as recommended resources to go deeper.

03 Reflect

Reflection is key to spiritual formation. After your practice and before the next session, set aside 10-15 minutes to reflect on your experience. Reflection questions are included in this Guide at the end of each session.

04 Process together

When you come back together, watch the introduction and then start by sharing your reflections with your group. This moment is crucial, because we need each other to process our life before God and make sense of our stories. If you are meeting in a larger group, you will need to break into smaller sub-groups for this conversation so everyone has a chance to share.

* Philippians 4v9

Tips on Beginning a New Practice

This Guide is full of spiritual exercises, time-tested strategies, and good advice on the spiritual discipline of Community.

But it's important to note that the Practices are not formulaic. We can't use them to control our spiritual formation, or even our relationship with God. Sometimes they don't even work very well. Over the coming weeks, there may be some days when you feel more deeply known and loved in your relationships than you ever have, and others where it just feels frustrating, ordinary or even painful. That's normal.

The key with the spiritual disciplines is to let go of outcomes and just offer them up to Jesus in love.

Because it's so easy to lose sight of the ultimate aim of a Practice, here are a few tips to keep in mind as you begin living more deeply in Community.

01 Start small

Start where you are, not where you “should” be. It’s counterintuitive, but the smaller the start, the better chance you have of really sticking to it and growing over time. It’s better to integrate relationships into your life slowly than to commit to an ambitious social schedule that asks too much of you too soon, and risks burning you out a few weeks in.

02 Think subtraction, not addition

The goal here isn’t to add social events and obligations to your already overbusy, overfull life. Instead, think: how am I currently living independently or even in isolation, and is there an opportunity to live more relationally there instead? Formation is about less, not more — about slowing down and simplifying your life around what matters most: life with Jesus, done in community.

03 You get out what you put in

The more fully you give yourself to this Practice, the more life-changing it will be; the more you just dabble with it, the more shortcuts you take, the less of an effect it will have on your transformation.

04 Remember the J-curve

Experts on learning tell us that whenever we set out to master a new skill, it tends to follow a J-shaped curve; we often get worse before we get better. If you are introverted, socially anxious, or have been hurt by your community before, this may be especially true. This Practice might feel a bit difficult at first; it will get easier over time. Spiritual formation, the process of becoming people of love, requires community. So just stay with the Practice.

05 There is no formation without repetition

Spiritual formation is slow, deep, cumulative work that happens over years, not weeks. The goal of this four-week experience is just to get you started on a journey of a lifetime. Upon completion of this Practice, you will have a map for the journey ahead, and hopefully, some possible companions for the Way. But what you do next is up to you.

Before You Begin

The following resources are designed to enhance your experience of the Community Practice, but they are entirely optional.

Recommended reading

Reading a book alongside the Community Practice can greatly enhance your understanding and enjoyment of this discipline. You may love to read, or you may not. For that reason, it's recommended, but certainly not required.

The recommended reading for the Community Practice is *Made to Belong* by David Kim.

David Kim is a pastor, author, and speaker passionate about Jesus and all things discipleship, formation, and community.

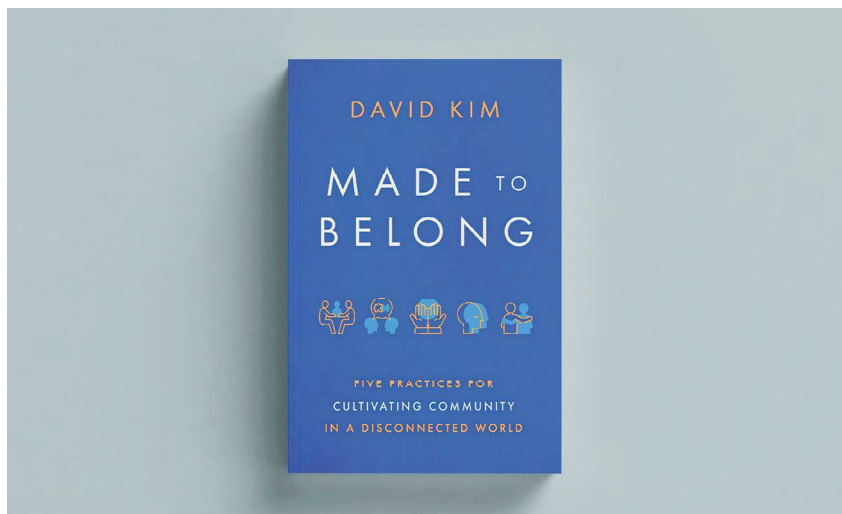
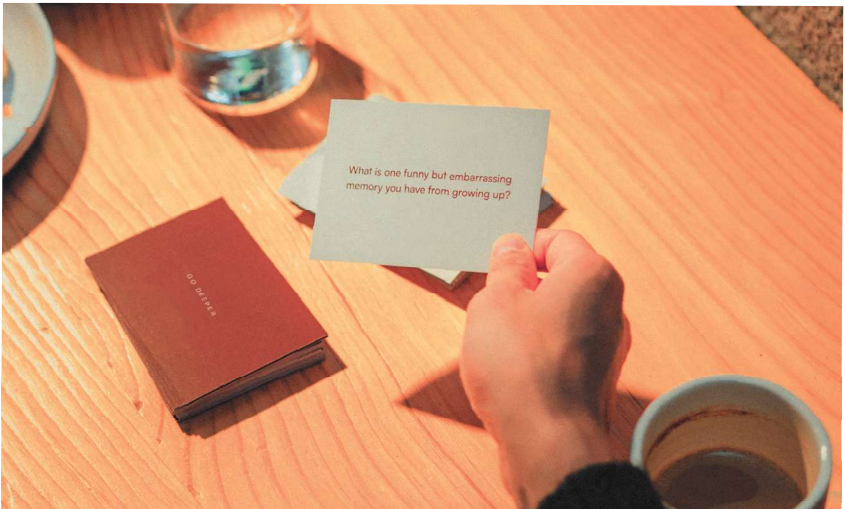


Table Conversations

Table Conversations includes 100 curated questions divided into two sets: “Start Small” contains simpler prompts for groups getting to know each other, while “Go Deeper” contains more probing questions around life, faith, and formation.

Learn more at practicingtheway.org/tableconversations.



The Spiritual Health Reflection

One final note: Before you begin Session 01, please set aside 20-30 minutes and take the Spiritual Health Reflection. This is a self-assessment we developed in partnership with pastors and leading experts in spiritual formation. It's designed to help you reflect on the health of your soul in order to better name Jesus' invitations to you as you follow the Way.

You can come back to the Spiritual Health Reflection as often as you'd like (we recommend one to two times a year) to chart your growth and continue to move forward on your spiritual journey.

To access the Spiritual Health Reflection, visit practicingtheway.org/reflection and create an account. Answer the prompt questions slowly and prayerfully.

Spiritual Health Reflection

Part 2: Reflection (14 / 40)

I am becoming more honest and transparent with myself, God, and others

DISAGREE

AGREE

CANCEL

PAUSE

SHOW NOTEPAD

PREVIOUS

NEXT

The Practicing the Way Primer

If this is your first time engaging with a Practicing the Way resource, we invite you to set aside 15 minutes before Session 01 to watch a primer on spiritual formation. This will give you a brief overview of the “why” behind spiritual practices and key insights to guard and guide your coming practice.

Log in to your online Dashboard, or sign up to watch the primer at launch.practicingtheway.org.



The Sessions

SESSION 01

Be Family Around a Table



Overview

Throughout the library of Scripture, there is a recurring theme of a feast. Picture a table filled with food and drink, where the family of God — every tribe, tongue, and nation — is gathered together singing, laughing, and giving thanks to God the Father. One diverse, but unified, family under God.

Yet today most, if not all, of us in the West would say we experience being formed away from a table and community like this, not towards it. Radical individualism is the dominant experience of our day, and it's breeding a widespread feeling that though we are more connected than we have ever been, we are also lonelier than ever.

In our culture, living in regular, intentional community is a vital act of counter-formation and a radical witness to our surrounding culture. But this invitation to community is about more than weekly attendance at a Sunday service — as important as that is. It's an invitation to live deeply into a new family, not based on blood, background, or biases, but on our shared apprenticeship to Jesus.

And the life of this new family starts at one ordinary, level place: the table.

Opening Questions

When instructed, circle up in triads (smaller groups of 3-5 people) and discuss the following questions:

- 01 What brought you to the Community Practice? What are you hoping to see God do in your life through it?
- 02 What is one question you would like to explore in this Practice?
- 03 What's your primary feeling around living more deeply in community? Excitement? Hesitance? Fear?
- 04 Share about a time when you felt a strong sense of belonging in a particular group or community. What made that experience memorable for you?

Teaching

Key Scripture

Genesis 1v26-27

Session summary

- Spiritual formation — the process of becoming people of love — occurs primarily within community.
 - Community is emphasized all throughout Scripture:
 - We are created in the image of a Trinitarian God.
 - Jesus called disciples (plural), not just one (singular), to join his new community the church
 - The church is to be like a family based not on blood, but on apprenticeship to Him.
 - This family is to be like an ancient Mediterranean kinship group.
 - We can categorize this new family into four circles of community:
- 01 Our Brothers and Sisters (or Intimates):** 1-5 close relationships who deeply know us and love us as we are.
 - 02 Our Kin:** About 15 family and friends who are like family, sharing life and supporting one another.
 - 03 Our Village:** Up to 150 broader connections providing a social network for support and resources.
 - 04 Our Tribe:** The larger group we identify with, such as our church, where we find purpose and community.
- While we need all four circles, our deepest formation, healing, and growth occur in the inner circles.
 - The best way to start building these inner circles is to start gathering a small group of people around a table for a regular meal.

Teaching Notes

As you watch Session 01 together, feel free to use this page to take notes.

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Discussion Questions

Now it's time for a conversation about the teaching. Pause the video for a few minutes to discuss in small groups:

- 01 What examples of radical individualism have you seen at play around you, or even in your own life?
- 02 What are the most common barriers you personally face to living more deeply in community?
- 03 What most stood out to you about the four circles of community?
- 04 For week one, the exercise is to share a meal together. What were meals around the table like with your family, and how might that influence your view of this exercise?

[illegible]

Closing Prayer

Take a few deep breaths, become aware of God's presence, and pray this prayer slowly, leaving short silence between each line.

Jesus Christ, you have called us
your brothers and sisters, giving us
a home and a place of belonging.
Help us to say yes to it, and to
make room for one another at
the table of your love; in our homes,
in our schedules, and in our hearts.

Amen.



Exercise

Share a meal together.

We invite you to begin each session by sharing a meal together as the baseline for the remainder of the Practice. You may already share a weekly meal with another group, such as a home community or small group. In that case, feel free to adapt this practice to your own life. But if at all possible, begin each of the next three sessions by sharing a meal together.

As you plan for your weekly meal, keep these tips in mind:

- 01 **Choose Your Place(s):** Decide on the location(s) where you will host your dinners.
- 02 **Set a Consistent Day and Time:** Choose a specific day and time each week that works for everyone, ideally before each of the remaining sessions.
- 03 **Organize a Potluck Style Meal:** Have everyone sign up for specific elements (mains, desserts, drinks). Be mindful of any dietary restrictions in the group.
- 04 **Encourage Contributions Beyond Food:** Participants can also help with setting and cleaning up.

A LITURGY FOR

Community

O Triune God,

Father

Son

Holy Spirit — the joyful relationship
at the center of the Universe.

Let us not be mistaken to think
that the ordinary nature of this gathering
means You are not here.

Meet us, O Lord, in every curious question,
honest prayer, and offering of attention.

May we share in Your life
as we now share in one another's.

For some, the table brings memories of
connection and plenty;
for others, absence and lack.

Grant us compassion, O Lord.

May the table we set be wide enough
for all these stories.

Open our hearts to love today, knowing
that in receiving our brother, our sister,
we are surely receiving You.

Amen.

Reach Exercise

We recognize that we're all at different stages of discipleship and seasons of life. To that end, we've added a Reach Exercise to each of the four sessions for those who have the time, energy, and desire to go further in the Community Practice.

This week, we have a guided reflection designed to help you identify who God may be drawing you to be family with. Some people call this “spiritual adoption,” which is a way of talking about the way the Spirit of God will often gently move our hearts toward particular people to be family with.

You should come out of this exercise with a clearer sense of who your “kin” could be, and what the right next steps are for you.

Part 01: The four domains of life

Consider the following four domains of life.

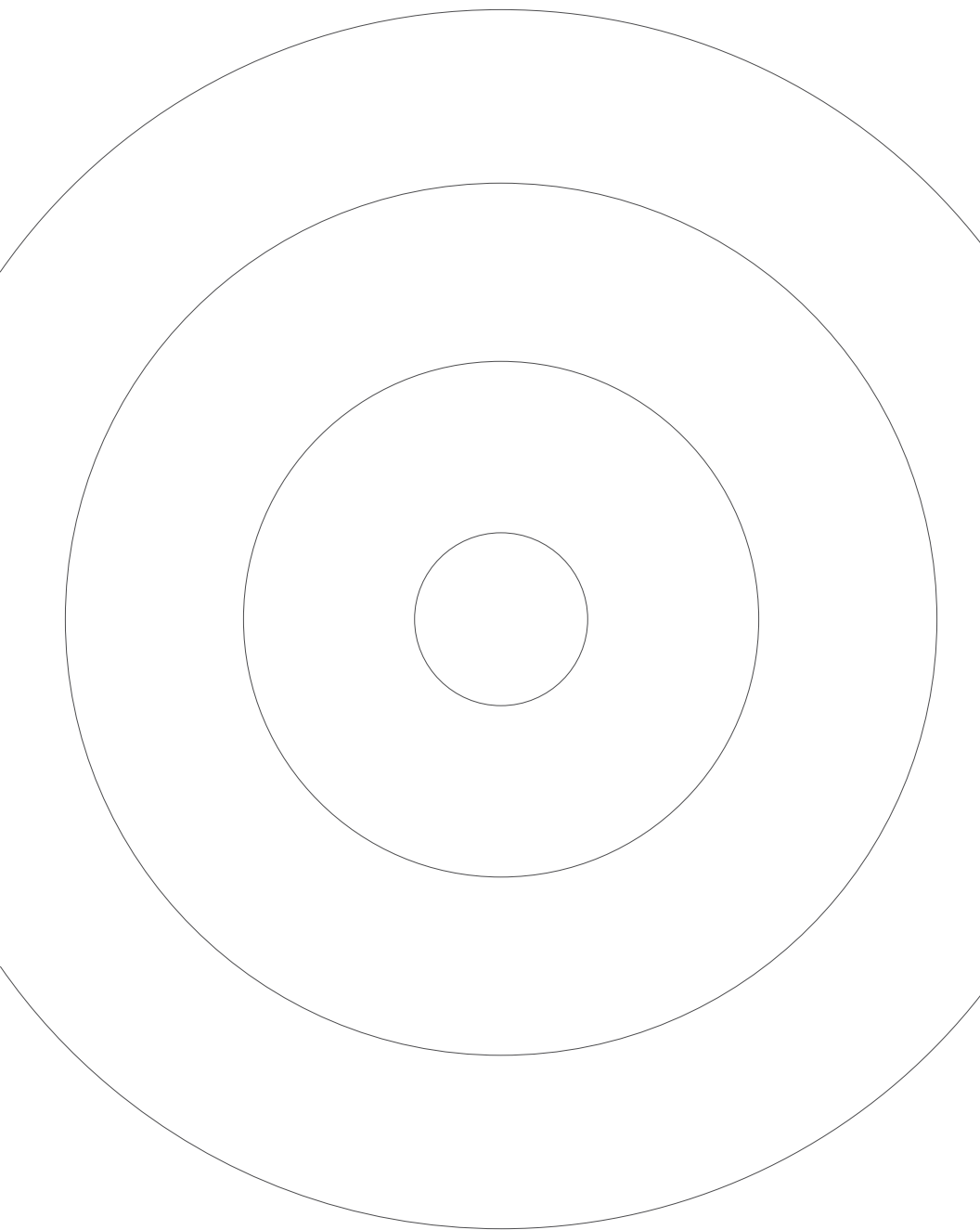
- 01 Begin by inviting the Holy Spirit to fill your mind and guide your imagination through this exercise.
- 02 Go through each domain and write down the names of anyone you know. You don't need to make an exhaustive list; simply write down any relationships that come to mind, from a lifelong best friend to a casual acquaintance.
- 03 Now go back through each list slowly and circle any names you feel your heart drawn to. You're not committing to anything right now, just exercising holy imagination. Listening to the Spirit in your heart, gently instructing the desires of your heart.

<p>Church</p>	<p>Work</p>
<p>Third spaces (your gym, school, book club, coffee shop, etc.)</p>	<p>Family and friends</p>

Part 02: The four circles of community

In this session, we covered the research of Dr. Robert Dunbar on the four circles of relationship, based on differing group size and levels of vulnerability. This exercise is an attempt to map your current relationships on this grid.

- 01 Pause again and invite the Holy Spirit to fill your mind and guide your thinking.
- 02 Go through each circle and write down the names of anyone you are already in relationship with in that sphere.
- 03 Pause to evaluate these questions:
 - Are there any areas where you are missing relationships? For example, you may have lots of family and friends but few intimates, or you may have 2-3 close brothers or sisters, but be lacking a larger village to draw on in times of need. Where do you need to add to your community?
 - Are there any areas where you are overextended? Where do you have too many relational commitments? For example, you may be trying to go deeper with seven different people, when you really only have the capacity for two or three. Where do you need to subtract from your community? (To clarify, we're not talking about rejecting or hurting people, but graciously pulling back from relationships that are beyond your limitations)
- 04 Now go back through your four domains worksheet. Move any names you circled over to this four circles worksheet. Place a question mark after their name. You're not committing to anything right now, just dreaming with God about a possible future.



Pause to prayerfully listen for God's direction:

- 01 God, who of these precious people are you highlighting right now?
- 02 God, what next steps do you want me to take with each person?
- 03 God, what areas of my relational life need change, healing, or attention?

Part 03: Finding and forming your own kinship group

Now let's zoom in on circle two — your kin, or family in the Way of Jesus.

If you are a part of a healthy biological family following Jesus together, reflect on these questions (if not, move to the next section):

- 01 In the smaller box, write down the names of your biological family members that you are intentionally following Jesus with. This may look like being in a home community together, attending the same church, or doing regular family meals together. Include your spouse if you are married, children, parents, siblings, etc.
- 02 To the side, write down what gifts, strengths, and resources your family has to offer other others — this could be a home to meet in, money to buy food, ability to cook meals, a spare room, hard-won wisdom, a stable marriage, etc. No family is perfect, but what is your family's offering?
- 03 In the larger box, write down the names of people God may be spiritually adopting into your family to become "kin." Think of friends that could become like your brothers and sisters if you were to go deeper together. Think of people in other stages of life (young single people if you're middle aged and married, or older couples if you're younger). Especially think of those who don't have a family like yours, either because of geography (their family is far away), spirituality (their family doesn't follow Jesus), tragedy (they've lost their family and are a widow(er) or fatherless or motherless or an orphan), or any reason at all. Who may God be drawing you into a closer relationship with?

ON YOUR OWN — PRACTICE

- 04 To the side, write down their gifts, strengths, and resources they could contribute to your family. For example, if you have kids, they may love being around twenty-somethings from your church who become like aunties or uncles or older siblings.

If you are single or married but not a part of a healthy biological family following Jesus together, reflect on these questions:

- 01 In the smaller box, is there a biological family you find yourself drawn to? This could be a family you know through your church, or home community, that you feel an affinity of heart toward.
- 02 In the larger box, write down your group of friends that you may loosely follow Jesus with, especially if they too are drawn to the same biological family.
- 03 Below, write down what steps you could take to move toward the family you named. This could look like offering to babysit for a date night, or inviting yourself over for dinner, or taking their family on a picnic, or asking one of the parents to get coffee with you for mentorship.
- 04 Then, write down what steps your friend group could take to begin to operate more like a family. This could look like eating a weekly meal, moving in together, going on vacation together, adopting a biological family into your group, etc.

To end this Reach Exercise, spend a little time in prayerful reflection. You don't need to do anything just yet. Sit with these worksheets over the coming four weeks of this Practice. Continue to write down names or make notes as thoughts come to mind you feel are from the Spirit. Pay close attention to the movements of your heart. Keep your eyes open. Continue to listen for where God is leading you.

Family

Kin

Next steps

Practice Reflection

Reflection is a key component in our spiritual formation.

Millenia ago, King David prayed in Psalm 139v23-24:

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

The South African writer Trevor Hudson has said, “We don’t change from our experience, we change when we reflect on our experience.”*

If you want to get the most out of this practice, you need to do it and then reflect on it.

* Trevor Hudson, *A Mile in My Shoes: Cultivating Compassion* (Nashville, Tenn.: Upper Room Books, 2005), 57.

Before your next time together with the group for Session 02, take five to ten minutes to journal out your answers to the following three questions:

01 Where did I feel resistance?

02 Where did I feel joy?

03 Where did I most experience God’s nearness?

Note: As you write, be as specific as possible. While bullet points are just fine, if you write it out in narrative form, your brain will be able to process your insights in a more lasting way.

Reflection Notes

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Keep Growing (Optional)

The following resources were created to enhance your experience of this Practice, but they are entirely optional.

Read

Made to Belong by David Kim (Chapters 01-02)

Listen

Rule of Life Podcast on Community (Episode 01)

Bonus Conversations

If you would like to slow down this four-week Practice to give your community more time to sit in each week's teaching and spiritual exercise, you can pause and meet for an optional conversation in the Appendix.



SESSION 02

Share Your Joys and Sorrows