

SESSION 5 – Growing in Authentic Community

Sharing About Exercises (25/20 MIN)

Keep in mind that in order to have time for everyone to share, each person should plan on around two minutes. The goal here is for you to share with the group how your exercise from last week went, and possibly something you learned about God, or yourself (it is not a teaching time).

Opening Prayer (1/1 MIN)

Premise of this Session (2/2 MIN)

The Church is designed by God to fulfill a vivid reality of Abraham's promise: a global community of God. Christian discipleship has always depended on two risky endeavors: trust yourself into God's hands and choose to live in faith communities where everyone can find a place to belong.

Key Scripture Passage (2/2 MIN)

Romans 15:7 (NIV) Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Commentary (to be read aloud in the meeting) (10/10 MIN)

Have you ever spent a holiday alone? Take Christmas for example. You can practice all the same traditions you've done with your family or friends dozens of times ... set up the tree, drive around and look at lights with hot chocolate, read the Christmas story from Luke 2 by the fireplace, attend the Christmas Eve service, eat a slow-cooked ham. While it can still be a sweet celebration, there is something special about being together with others that allows us to experience the holiday season on a more fulfilling level.

In the same way, although the life of a Christian disciple revolves primarily around our vertical relationship (our relationship with God), we have been given horizontal relationships (our relationships with others) as a means to experience our relationship with God more deeply and richly.

Community is a theme that runs through the Bible from the very beginning. We see the first mention of "us" in Genesis 1:26, where God speaks to the other members of the Trinity, saying, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness" (emphasis added). One chapter later, after the creation of the first man, Adam, we read that "it is not good that the man should be alone," and so God fashions Eve.

Humans were created both *out of community* and *for community*.

In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham a great nation of descendants. This nation would become Israel, God's chosen people. And now, thousands of years later, we are given the opportunity (and the command) to continue to choose people. To choose community.

Many of us tend to shy away from community out of fear of rejection; it's a vulnerable thing to trust another human being with our truest selves. In today's world, it often feels easier to hide behind the highlight reels on Instagram and our perfect profile pictures on Facebook. And yet, these shallow forms of "friendship" can never replace the real thing.

We were not made to do this alone. Humans need encouragement. We need accountability. We crave togetherness. And yet, more people are lonely than ever – even in a room full of people – because we often refuse to connect authentically. We can tend to only allow others to see the curated version of ourselves, robbing others of really knowing us.

To immerse ourselves in community is to open ourselves up to being known. And that can be scary for some. But in allowing others to truly know us, we are also opening ourselves up to encouragement, accountability, deep joy, and growth.

Not only do we need to push ourselves to be vulnerable and real with others, but we need to conduct ourselves in a manner that allows and encourages others to do the same. Are you a person who makes others feel welcome and safe to be themselves? Or might others hide around you because of fear of rejection? As believers, we are charged to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

Sometimes, it can be hard to let go of our expectations of others or our expectations of what community should look like. There will always be someone whose authentic self is more challenging for us to deal with than we'd prefer. However, community is not just about what a group of people can do for us, but what we can do for one another. We are not just to look only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4).

Cultivating a space where authentic community will thrive takes work, but it is worthy of our time and energy. It not only does our souls good, but it brings God praise and glory. More often than not, we will find that this kind of community will push us deeper into the presence of God, encourage and grow our faith, and give us a feeling of purpose.

Who are you becoming?

Discussion Questions (25/10 MIN)

1. **Have you ever** spent a holiday alone? How did that feel different from celebrating with family or loved ones?
2. **Have you ever** experienced a "close-knit" community (either inside or outside the church)? What were some of the characteristics that brought that group of people close together?
3. **Are you** a person who tends to lean in or back away from community? Why do you think that is?
4. **What is** the most challenging aspect of being in community with others for you? (Vulnerability, time commitment, etc.)
5. **Do you struggle** more with feeling accepted or being accepting of others?

Spiritual Formation Exercises (15/14 MIN)

Please pick one exercise (or make up an exercise) that you want to do for the coming week.

1. **Meal.** Take someone out for a meal. During the time together, focus on encouraging him or her.
2. **Encourage.** Write a letter or an email to someone who has enriched your life. Note ways they have impacted you and thank them for caring for you.
3. **Worship.** Go to whoamibecoming.org > Session 5 > Worship Exercise. Listen to the video
4. **Prayer.** Pray for every member of your group every day this coming week.
5. **Journaling.** Go to whoamibecoming.org > Session 5 > Journal Exercise. Listen to the video about journaling the Bible and transformation. Meditate on and journal your thoughts about Romans 15:7.

Prayer Time (10/1 MIN)

Online Resources for this Session

Visit whoamibecoming.org and click on **Session 5** tab for: **Session 5 Intro** video, the **Going Deeper** commentary, **Sermon Video** and **Transformation Story** about being rooted and established in God's love.