

1 THE CONNECTING LINK

Destination

To understand that the Christian community is crucial for

- helping us clarify what it means in our own lives to follow Jesus' command to "love one another as I have loved you"
- helping us put this understanding into action amidst the experiences, challenges and choices of life.

Read aloud.

Food For The Journey

Life in the resurrection is different.

The early Christians knew firsthand of Jesus' love, sacrifice and resurrection. That was positive assurance for eternity and also for the present – their life now must be radically different.

Before ... , but now

Ephesians 5:8-9

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Prayer

O God, we confess that we often ignore your presence during the ebb and flow of our lives. Forgive us and teach us "what is good and acceptable and perfect" amid the challenges and choices of daily life. Amen.

Encounters Along The Way

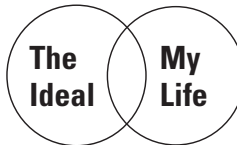
My Faith and Life Journey

- Which of these circle diagrams describes you? How much does My Life connect with the Ideal Christian Life that Jesus taught? (i.e., Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you") How often is any thought given to the loving and forgiving response to a situation at home, at work, at the grocery store, etc.?

First Encounter

Pair up for discussion.

3 minutes



- What affects the amount of overlap between your life and the Ideal Christian Life? Your faith? Spiritual disciplines such as Bible Study and Prayer? Christian communities you are involved in?

Share with entire group what affects your overlap.

7 minutes

To think about during this and succeeding sessions:

- How does Christian community help us progress towards living more closely to Jesus' vision for our lives?

Envisioning an Ideal Christian Community

What is community?

Sociologists have over one hundred definitions for community. This one is from *Habits of the Heart* by Bellah, *et al.*, p. 333, a frequently cited classic on community. (Theologians and other authors have expanded the vision of community as you will read in the Re-entry section at the end of this session.)

“A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past.”

- Do the churches in the following stories fit Bellah's definition of community?

Second Encounter

Read aloud.

Each person underline the most important characteristics.

A modern story: Margaret and Mayfair Church

Setting: A conversation between Pam, a member of Hope Church, and her cousin Jane who lives in the same town as Pam's mother Margaret, a member of Mayfair Church.

Pam: Hi, cousin! It's Pam. I hope you're not too surprised by a phone call from 800 miles away.

Jane: Hi, Pam. What's up? Are you calling to check on your hometown? How are you?

Pam: We're all fine here. I haven't talked to you since we saw you at the reunion

Two women read the parts of Pam and Jane. List the behaviors, attitudes and actions of Mayfair Church.

8 minutes

last summer. And, Jane, I want to say thanks for visiting Mom so regularly. She has always loved the company of her favorite niece!

Jane: You're very welcome. Chuck and I don't get over there as often as we should, but we do try to see your Mom every two or three weeks. You know, the nurse you've hired for your Mom is terrific!

Pam: She sure is! It's what Dad really wanted for her. And your visits plus the monthly ones by either my sister or me with our families connect Mom a little with the family. I wish Mom and Dad had moved here before it was too late.

Jane: Move away from their home, no way! Besides, they were too connected to Mayfair Church to do that. They couldn't bear to leave it after being so involved for over 60 years.

Pam: Yes, they always loved Mayfair and rarely missed a Sunday. We have a little church service with Mom every time we visit. She always joins right in with us on the Lord's Prayer and sometimes on her favorite hymns. ... Well, that brings up another point. Our nurse said that no one from the church had visited Mom during the past year. So when we were in town last weekend, I met with the new pastor. I'm hoping things might change now. I feel like she's been forgotten. Do you know what's going on?

Jane: Well, your mom had lots of friends in her church, but many of them have died. Maybe those that remain are tired of caring for others, or maybe some just don't want to see their friend in her present condition.

Pam: I know what you mean. One of Hope's members is in a nursing home and it's been months since we've visited her. It's hard to have much of a conversation with her. ... Just like with Mom now. ... It used to be different at Mayfair, didn't it? Dad used to drive folks to the doctor and take Mom to visit the shut-ins.

Jane: Well, I've never been a member there, but I know that they've been without a pastor for quite a while. And there's another possible reason. Recently, they've been spending lots of time working on their new building program.

Pam: Uh-huh. Whatever the reason, their contact with Mom is far less than I'd hoped. I'm disappointed and sad for her. ... Well, Jane, I think I've taken enough of your time. Thanks again for visiting Mom so often. I'll call again.

Jane: You're welcome, Pam. Bye now.

A Biblical story: Acts 6:1-6 “Serve dinner? Who, me?”

Setting: The Grecian Jews or Hellenists, a minority group within the early church in Jerusalem, are feeling discrimination.

Narrator: Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said,

One of the twelve disciples: “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.”

Narrator: What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Two people read the parts of the narrator and the disciple. List the characteristics of the Early Church.

7 minutes

Compare the Biblical story with the story of “Margaret and Mayfair Church”.

- Was the need given serious consideration by the Christian community?
- Was the problem handled within the community of Christians?
- Was consideration given to God’s differing gifts to individuals?
- Was the entire community connected to each other and to the persons in need?
- Did the community help members connect their faith with the challenges and choices in life?
- What is the attitude towards dealing with new challenges in each story?

Discuss.

Add responses to the two lists.

5 minutes

Describe the attitudes and behaviors of the Ideal Christian Community that intentionally follows Jesus’ command to love one another. Consider items from the two lists and the definition of community, then add more characteristics.

List the characteristics of an Ideal Christian Community.

5 minutes

Rank independently.
Share with entire group.

5 minutes

What about *Our Story*?

The following list comes from the stories as well as the readings in Re-Entry. For each activity mark where you feel that our community is on the scale.

Never Sometimes Usually Always

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Welcoming others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stimulating, supporting and encouraging each other
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Actively caring for others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Connecting with God through prayer and worship
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Encouraging a sense of community history
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Including others who we do not like or with whom we are not close friends
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Working for justice
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Helping each other with life's choices through listening, conversation and group discussions
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Forgiving others

Make a list for "Our Community."

10 minutes

- What specifically could OUR Christian community do to increase the connection between faith and life's challenges and choices? That is, helping individual Christians to move closer to an "Ideal Christian Life" and moving our community closer to the "Ideal Christian Community." What additional steps might be considered? (Example – start a "Faith in the Workplace" discussion group.)

Third Encounter

3 minutes

My Journey from Here to Community

Make your personal commitment to work on the connection between today's session and your everyday life by doing the Re-entry section each week. Write your goal on a 3 x 5 card, sign it and seal it in an envelope with your name on it. Give it to the leader who will return it in session 12.

I will spend 15 – 20 minutes after each session doing the Re-entry section (Reflection, Action, and Digging Deeper) to help me connect the journey in today's session with my everyday life.

Signed

Read aloud.

Notes For The Travelogue

The Christian Community -- The Crucial Link

- Faith that is strengthened by the Christian community helps us live Jesus' command to love one another.

- It is through local Christian communities (family, small group, and/or church) that we learn to love selflessly, as illustrated in the story from the early Christian church.
- Helping Christians connect their faith with life's challenges and choices is a crucial responsibility of the Christian community.
- The idea of community includes discussion, decision-making, and sharing certain practices.
- Fostering Christian community should be central in Christian life.
- Intentional acceptance, love, and forgiveness are important assets in the Christian community.

Food For The Journey

Pray together.

Dear God, we ask for your blessing on our community. Forgive us when we fail to follow Jesus' example. Send your Spirit to guide us in the weeks ahead as we strive to become a stronger Christian community. Amen

Re-Entry

For next session

Reflection

You've ranked the group. Now rank yourself on these activities that characterize a Christian Life.

Never Sometimes Usually Always

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Welcoming others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stimulating, supporting and encouraging each other
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Actively caring for others
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Connecting with God through prayer and worship
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Encouraging a sense of community history
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Including others who we do not like or with whom we are not close friends
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<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Forgiving others

- Considering God's gifts to you, which of these can you do more intentionally?

Reflect on the following description of Christian community from *A Royal "Waste" of Time* by Marva Dawn.

- Does this describe our community?

"Community in the biblical sense is more open to the realities of differences, more openly gracious to all, more deliberate, an act of will. It does not depend on feelings of affection. In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community together with people whom we don't like so that we learn the real meaning of agape – that intelligent, purposeful love directed toward another's need which comes first from God and then flows through us to our neighbor. To develop a community that practices biblical principles is very difficult in this technologically efficient society. It takes a lot of work and time, sacrifice and commitment." (pp. 179-180)

Action

Read the Foreward and the Introduction to ***From Here to Community*** for an overview of this discussion series. Write in the space below at least one change you will make towards helping your Christian community move closer to the ideal one that has been described today. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you think about this change.



Digging Deeper to Expand the Vision of Christian Community

From *Life Work* by Donald Hall pages 5-7

Excerpt from a moving account of becoming part of a Christian community in New Hampshire

From *Truly the Community* by Marva Dawn

“However, such love cannot be created out of our own resources. We must be connected to life-changing experiences of God’s love, of the power available when faith frees us from legalism, and of God’s immense faithfulness toward his people.”
(p. 7)

“This understanding of God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will must be applied very practically to the nitty-gritty situations of our daily lives, and this is especially the arena in which the Christian community is immensely important. Because our world is so marred by sin and so many things run contrary to God’s perfect designs, we need each other for encouragement and hope. We can help one another to sort through options, to search for the ways in which God will bring good out of evil, to share the Hilarity of serving God even in the midst of trying circumstances.” (p. 61)
(Dawn defines Hilarity as joy and cheerfulness.)

Travel Guides

Bellah, Robert N., Madsen, Richard, Sullivan, William M., Swidler, Ann and Tipton, Steven M., *Habits of the Heart*, New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

Dawn, Marva J., *A Royal “Waste” of Time*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

Ibid., *Truly the Community*, 1992.

Hall, Donald, *Life Work*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.