

# YOU HAVE OPENED THE DOOR TO GREAT BEGINNINGS!

I am thrilled that you have chosen this resource. It will catapult your group toward Christian Community. You may wonder about the genesis of this Great Beginnings concept. While serving Living Hope Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, I sat with our first generation of small-group leaders. During our conversation a key question continued to arise: "How could we arrive at Christian Community more quickly?" Each of the groups had created various unique, fun, and meaningful experiences. As this great team of leaders merged their ideas, we realized the need for a resource that would reveal what small groups were and launch groups from the beginning toward authentic community. It would include:

- A covenant to unleash the power of commitment
- A resources profile to uncover the uniqueness of each individual God brought into the group
- A spiritual gifts assessment to increase effectiveness of service within the group
- A mapping of our personal stories to help us deepen our relationships and engage our God-given passions
- A discussion of our needs to jump-start the process of sharing real life together
- An understanding of life in Christian Community

Incorporating all of these elements into one six-week study seemed like genius. We all knew that having these vital experiences in the first six weeks of a group's life would establish what group life should be like and compel it to happen more quickly.

Today that study has become a reality. What you have in hand is a resource that will allow the people in your group to know one another's stories, resources, giftedness, passions, and needs in the first six weeks of doing life together.

In the leader notes at the back of the book, you'll find some general leader helps as well as tips for each session. These will help you enhance the group experience in each meeting.

Be aware that the dialogue in each week's study was written as though I was leading each group session. In essence, it's written from the small-group leader's perspective. Reading this material aloud in the meeting may be helpful, especially for first-time group leaders.

I hope this study does all we dreamed it would do for you and your group!



Rick

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# WELCOME TO COMMUNITY

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Meeting together with a group of people to study God's Word and experience life together is an exciting adventure.

A small group is ... *a group of people unwilling to settle for anything less than redemptive community.*

## CORE VALUES

### **Community:**

God is relational, so He created us to live in relationship with Him and each other.

Authentic community involves *sharing life together* and *connecting* on many levels with the people in our group.

### **Group Process:**

Developing authentic community requires a step-by-step process. It's a journey of sharing our stories with each other and learning together.

### **Stages of Development:**

Every healthy group goes through various stages as it matures over a period of months or years. We begin with the *birth* of a new group, deepen our relationships in the *growth* and *development* stages, and ultimately *multiply* to form other new groups.

### **Interactive Bible Study:**

God provided the Bible as an instruction manual of life. We need to deepen our understanding of God's Word. People learn and remember more as they wrestle with truth and learn from others. The process of Bible discovery and group interaction will enhance our growth.

## **Experiential Growth:**

The goal of studying the Bible together is not merely a quest for knowledge, but should result in real life change. Beyond merely reading, studying, and dissecting the Bible, being a disciple of Christ involves reunifying knowledge with experience. We do this by bringing our questions to God, opening a dialogue with our hearts (instead of killing our desires), and utilizing other ways to listen to God speak to us (group interaction, nature, art, movies, circumstances, etc.). Experiential growth is always grounded in the Bible as God's primary means of revelation and our ultimate truth-source.

## **The Power of God:**

Our processes and strategies will be ineffective unless we invite and embrace the presence and power of God. In order to experience community and growth, Jesus needs to be the centerpiece of our group experiences and the Holy Spirit must be at work.

## **Redemptive Community:**

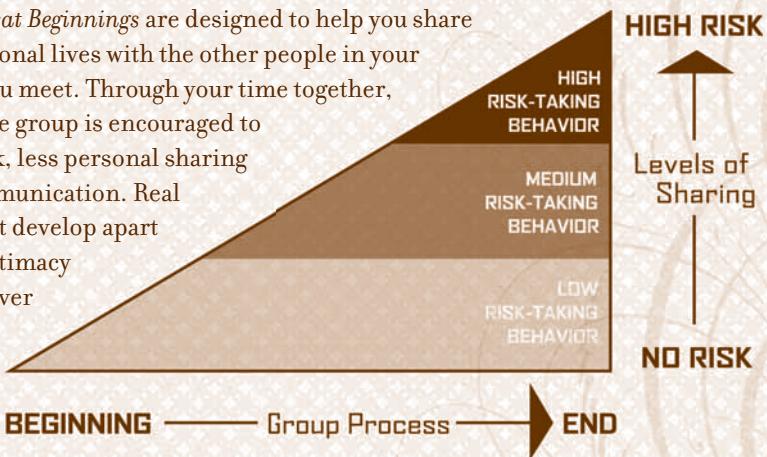
Healing best happens within the context of community and in relationship. Key aspects of our spiritual development include seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, sharing our stories, and ultimately being set free from the secrets and the lies we embrace that enslave our souls.

## **Mission:**

God has invited us into a larger story with a great mission. It is a mission that involves setting captives free and healing the broken-hearted (Isaiah 61:1-2). However, we can only join in this mission to the degree that we've let Jesus bind up our wounds and set us free. As a group experiences true redemptive community, other people will be attracted to that group, and through that group to Jesus. We should be alert to inviting others while we maintain (and continue to fill) an "empty chair" in our meetings to remind us of others who need to encounter God and authentic Christian Community.

# SHARING YOUR STORIES

The sessions in *Great Beginnings* are designed to help you share a little of your personal lives with the other people in your group each time you meet. Through your time together, each member of the group is encouraged to move from low risk, less personal sharing to higher risk communication. Real community will not develop apart from increasing intimacy within the group over time.



# SHARING YOUR LIVES

As you share your lives together during this time, it is important to recognize that it is God who has brought each person to this group, gifting the individuals to play a vital role in the group (1 Corinthians 12:1). Each of you was uniquely designed to contribute in your own unique way to building into the lives of the other people in your group. As you get to know one another better, consider the following four areas that will be unique for each person. These areas will help you get a “grip” how you can better support others and how they can support you.

**G – Spiritual Gifts:** God has given you unique spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12:3-8; Ephesians 4:1-16; etc.)

**R – Resources:** You have resources that perhaps only you can share, including skills, abilities, possessions, money, and time (Acts 2:44-47; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, etc.)

**I – Individual Experiences:** You have past experiences, both good and bad, that God can use to strengthen others (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Romans 8:28, etc.)

**P – Passions:** There are things that excite and motivate you. God has given you those desires and passions to use for His purposes (Psalm 37:4,23; Proverbs 3:5-6,13-18; etc.)

# GROUP MEETING

Each of your group meetings will include a four-part agenda.



## 1. Breaking the Ice:

This section includes fun, uplifting questions to warm up the group and help group members get to know one another better as they begin the journey of becoming a connected community. These questions prepare the group for meaningful discussion throughout the session.



## 2. Discovering the Truth:

The heart of each session is the interactive Bible study time. The goal is for the group to discover biblical truths through open, discovery questions that lead to further investigation. The emphasis in this section is on understanding what the Bible says through interaction within your group.

To help the group experience a greater sense of community, it is important for everybody to participate in the "Discovering the Truth" and "Embracing the Truth" discussions. Even though people in a group have differing levels of biblical knowledge, it is vital that group members encourage each other share what they are observing, thinking, and feeling about the Bible passages. Scripture notes are provided at the end of each session to provide additional Bible understanding.



## 3. Embracing the Truth:

All study should direct group members to action and life change. This section continues the Bible study time, but with an emphasis on leading group members toward integrating the truths they have discovered into their lives. The questions are very practical and application-focused.



## 4. Connecting:

One of the key goals of this study to lead group members to grow closer to one another as the group develops a sense of community. This section focuses on further application, as well as opportunities for encouraging, supporting, and praying for one another.

## BONUS – Taking it Home:

Between several sessions, there is some homework for group members. This typically includes completing a brief individual assessment. These experiences are designed to reinforce the content of the session and help strengthen your group.

# BON VOYAGE!

## OPENING THE DOOR TO A NEW ADVENTURE

We're about to undertake a life-changing voyage. Each of us has chosen to ascend the ladder that leads to the deck of the cruise ship Small Group, a floating party boat owned by the charter company Authentic Christianity. Once we leave the dock, there is no turning back. And once on board, jumping ship is out of the question because this adventure just wouldn't be the same without you.

Before we set sail, you deserve to know the expectations and responsibilities of each person on board. So, later in our session, we're going to unveil a covenant agreement—a pact that will make this expedition extraordinary. We'll also discover what a small group is. Most importantly, we'll set our eyes on our destination, Christian Community. Our map to this amazing island will be revealed a bit more each week as we travel together on this exciting journey of life.

Before we launch, let's find out a bit more about our fellow travelers. Each week we'll begin our study with a "Breaking the Ice" experience that will help us know each other better. All you have to do is play along. Would each of you answer a couple of questions? We'll discuss these one at a time so that everyone can share.



### BREAKING THE ICE

15 Minutes

*LEADER: Be sure to read the introductory materials in the front of this book before the next session. To help your group members get to know one another better, have each one introduce him or herself and then take turns answering all of the "Breaking the Ice" questions. Be sure you don't skip the last one.*

1. Which excursion appeals the most to you and why?  
 Hiking in the Rocky Mountains  
 Snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef  
 Meandering through the Metropolitan Museum of Art  
 Shopping in New York City  
 Salmon fishing on the Kenai River in Alaska  
 Other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which Starbucks® purchase would your best friend say most accurately describes you?

- Café Americano – I tackle the hard stuff in life.
- Toffee Nut Crème – There's a crazy side of me just waiting to erupt.
- Coffee of the Day – I like being stylish.
- Apple Juice – I may seem bland to you, but I enjoy helping everyone else remain healthy.
- Pumpkin Spice Latte and a Blueberry Muffin - I thrive on diversity and am a multi-tasker.
- Iced White Chocolate Mocha – I have led a complex life that hinders my ability to warm up quickly to other people.
- Tazo® Chai Crème Frappuccino® Blended Tea – I like being different.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What promise did you make in your teen years that was the most difficult to keep?  
Why was it so difficult?



## DISCOVERING THE TRUTH

15-20 Minutes

Our definition of a small group is, "A group of people unwilling to settle for anything less than redemptive community." Redemptive community is authentic and life-changing Christian Community. Many Christ-followers have been duped into believing they've experienced a redemptive Christian Community in their Bible study, Sunday School class, or church. The truth is they've experienced a community that is made up of Christians, but just being present in a group of Christians is not the depth of community we're aiming for.

I know I've experienced redemptive Christian Community when I'm as passionate about praying for you as I am about praying for myself, when I celebrate the extraordinary wins in your life as passionately as I celebrate my own victories, and when I find your tearstains on my shirt and mine on yours. In this sort of environment, your laughter rings in my ears and mine rings in yours. It is only when we pray for one another, hold each other accountable, respect one another, and look forward to our small-group meeting (so we can grow together and become more like Jesus) that we can say we've truly experienced the thrill of Christian Community.

## Community According to ... Solomon?

Apart from Jesus, Solomon became the wisest man ever to live on this planet. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, he paints a profound image of what Christian Community looks like. Let's do a little evaluation of his depiction and find out what we can do in community that we cannot do alone. Check it out ...

*LEADER: Select three people from your group to read Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. Ask for three volunteers to be reader 1, reader 2, and reader 3. Have them read the passage emphasizing the words "one," "two," and "three" when those words are spoken.*

### Readers 1 and 2:

<sup>9</sup>Two are better than one  
because they have a good reward for their efforts.

### Reader 3:

<sup>10</sup>For if either falls,  
his companion can lift him up;

### Readers 1 and 2:

but pity the one who falls  
without another to lift him up.

<sup>11</sup>Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm;

### Reader 3:

but how can one person alone keep warm?  
<sup>12</sup>And if somebody overpowers one person,

### Readers 1 and 2:

two can resist him.

### Readers 1, 2, and 3:

A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12

**LEADER:** Discuss as many discovery questions as time permits. The strongest application questions appear in "Embracing the Truth." It will help to highlight in advance the questions you don't want to miss.

Be familiar with the Scripture Notes at the end of this study to help clarify any issues. Be sure you leave enough time to read through and discuss the Group Covenant during the "Connecting" time.

1. According to Ecclesiastes 4:10-12, what three situations might we might find ourselves in when we are living life alone?
  
2. In each of these situations, how would it be helpful to have a real friend there with you? What are the benefits of two people working together rather than one working alone?
  
3. Looking at the end of verse 12, we see that three people are even better than two to help us up when we've fallen ethically, spiritually, or physically. In your experience, why is this true? How can you create a life with a "cord of three strands"?
  
4. Why would you pity the people who find themselves alone in any of these situations?

## EMBRACING THE TRUTH

15-20 Minutes

**LEADER:** This section focuses on beginning to integrate what group members have learned from the Bible into their individual small-group philosophy.

1. Was there a time in your life when you needed someone to pick you up, keep you warm, or help defend you? Share this experience with the group. Who helped you? What did they do for you? Describe your relationship with that person today.

2. Of the battles noted below, which ones might this group need to help you fight over the duration of our life together? Please explain.

- Civil War - Sometimes I want secede from the union I have with an acquaintance.
- Battle of the Sexes - Men really are from Mars, and women really are from Venus.
- 9 to 5 War - I would love to go AWOL from my job right now.
- Revolutionary War - My kids are trying to run my life.
- Three-Day War - There's too much to do and too little time to do it in.
- The Crusades - My religion is getting in the way of my Christianity.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What are some ways that we could strengthen and lift each other up in both good times and bad?

4. What could we do in a practical way to help you this week?



## CONNECTING

15 minutes

*LEADER: If people in the group are hesitant about agreeing to the covenant, give them the week to continue to read through the covenant, and then discuss it shortly at the next meeting. Be sure all group members agree to the covenant in the first three weeks of group meetings.*

The truth is, none of us were destined to stand alone. Even Jesus surrounded Himself with a few close friends, people He depended on to be by His side. We all require Christian Community. In order for our group to encounter this incredible lifestyle, we're going to need to reach an agreement on a few important principles and practices.

Covenanting together is vital to our experiencing Christian Community. When everyone embraces the goal of being in Christian Community, and everyone reads the same map to discover how to arrive there, we've traveled the first mile toward our destination.

The Group Covenant is the map to our destination. When each of us agrees to live what the covenant states, we've pushed off from shore and set our sails. Let's see if we can all agree with the expectations of the covenant.

# OUR GROUP COVENANT

## We all agree to follow the ground rules:

**Priority:** While we are in this group, we will give the group meetings priority.

**Participation:** Everyone is encouraged to participate and no one dominates.

**Respect:** Everyone is given the right to his or her own opinions, and all questions are encouraged and respected.

**Confidentiality:** Anything that is said in our meetings is never repeated outside the meeting without permission.

**Life Change:** We will regularly assess our progress toward becoming an authentic community. We will complete any "Taking it Home" activities to reinforce what we are learning and better integrate those lessons into our lives.

**Care and Support:** Permission is given to call upon each other at any time, especially in times of crisis. The group will provide care for every member.

**Accountability:** We agree to let the members of our group hold us accountable to commitments we make in whatever loving ways we decide upon. Unsolicited advice giving is not permitted.

**Empty Chair:** Our group will work together to fill the empty chair with an unchurched person or couple.

**Mission:** We agree as a group to reach out and invite others to join us, and to work toward multiplication of our group to form new groups.

**Ministry:** We will encourage one another to volunteer and serve in a ministry, and to support missions work by giving financially and/or personally serving.

I agree to all of the above \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Record group prayer requests in the space below. In addition to specific prayer requests, ask the group to join you in praying for one another's war zones and for God to help you in finding the right person to fill the empty chair.

### Prayer Requests:

## TAKING IT HOME

*LEADER: Explain that the "Taking it Home" section appears at the end of this session and two others, providing activities to reinforce what the group has discussed.*

*It will help to have your own Resources Profile completed in advance. Show it to the group and ask them to complete their own profiles and bring them back completed next week. Encourage everyone to complete this assignment before the next session.*

Great beginnings foster fantastic endings. We've had a great start! Next week, please come with your Resources Profile completed (see next page).

## SNEAK PEEK

Next time we meet, we're going to have even more fun. A great small group embraces the mosaic God created, displaying the beauty of the diversity that makes up each group. We'll find out how unique we really are and how to unify our diverse group of people to make a strong cord that "is not easily broken."

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

### ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12

*4:9-12 Two are better than one.* The human solution to life's misery is companionship. Life is much better with a companion or companions, but even with intimate friendship one still experiences the troubles life brings.

## MY RESOURCES PROFILE

This session we've touched on the concept that Christian Community means caring for each other 24/7 and includes sharing what we have with one another. The charts below were designed to help you understand your varied resources at this time in your life. Most people think about money and possessions when they think of resources, and these are important. However, our skills, abilities, and time are also vital resources we can share. Knowing each other's unique resources will help your group relate in practical and daily ways. Please complete the inventory below focusing on unique resources that you could share within your group.

Please complete the schedules below. Keep in mind that sometimes schedules must change if you truly want to experience redemptive Christian Community.

### My Typical Monday Schedule

**Time frame:**

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### My Typical Sunday Schedule

**Time frame:**

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