



Together Alive

Rediscovering Community Living in God's Family



- Lesson 1 **The Gospel and Community**
- Lesson 2 **The Community That Serves**
- Lesson 3 **The Community That Gives**
- Lesson 4 **The Community That Imparts Faith**
- Lesson 5 **The Community That Suffers Together**

How to Use This Resource

Warm Up

Use these questions to think about the key topic of the day. Try not to spend too much time on them. You can also use them to surface some questions that you can come back to later.

Read

Read the Bible passage and spend some time reflecting on what it means. You can use the questions to help you focus on the key issue.

Article

Read the article, which summarises key biblical truths about the day's topic and helps you to think deeper on it.

Discuss

Use these questions to consider what God's Word and truths might say about the topic, and discuss how you can apply them to your lives.

Challenge

Share with one another one thing that you will put into practice today.

The Gospel and Community

Warm Up

- What is your idea of an ideal church community? Share your experiences of a community that you think represents this ideal.

Read: Acts 2:42–47

- The first church in Jerusalem is often referred to as the “Acts 2 community”. What is so attractive about it?

Why the Gospel and Community Come Together

The gospel and community are inseparable. It is dangerous to preach the good news apart from the context of community. There are at least three reasons why this is so.

First, *the gospel gives birth to community*. Peace with God leads naturally to peace among those saved by God. Wherever the gospel is preached, faith families ought to be formed.

Second, *the gospel lives in community*. The family of God is the primary setting where the teachings of Christ come to life. The community is needed to act as a repository of Christ’s wisdom.

Finally, *the gospel goes forth from community*. It is the church, the body of Christ, who bears witness to the good news. Others will come to know that we are Christ’s disciples if we love one another (John 13:35).

Therefore, the gospel will be like a fish out of water without the context of Christian communities. In fact, the gospel message risks being corrupted if our faith journey is devoid of authentic community experiences.

In the book of Acts, Luke reported that the first followers of Jesus were “devoted . . . to fellowship” (Acts 2:42). In fact, they were so committed to their solidarity that “all the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people” (vv. 44–47).

So, here’s the thing. When believers love God and love one another, they want to live their lives together. They want to share with one another. They want to get real. They are simply not contented with doing religious things.

LESSON 1

Needless to say, the above commitments require a radical shift in mindset: Christians will no longer see their church as a place where they go for “spiritual activities” like worship services and Bible studies—instead, they will see the church as family. Christian leaders will no longer see their role as managers managing the church’s programmes and budgets—instead, they will see themselves as parents and elder siblings.

Discuss

- What would a “community” look like for your church? What might it take to grow such a community?
- What strengths does your church have at present that makes it a community? What’s missing? What can you—as an individual, as a group, and as a church—do to grow these strengths and address what’s missing?
- What would your own role be in such a community? What can you do to be part of it, and how can you help to grow such a community?

Challenge

One thing that I will put into practice today is . . .

The Community That Serves

Warm Up

- What are some gifts you have observed within your church community? How are they a blessing to others and to the church?

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:4–11

- What do you think is God's purpose for giving a variety of gifts? How do they serve a "common good" (v. 7)?

Three Principles of a Serving Community

Christian theologian Marva Dawn says, "There is no such thing as being more or less gifted than another. All persons are gifted with a fullness of grace, though that grace takes different manifestations in particular individuals. Still the grace is the same." Let's consider together three biblical principles on the gifts from the Spirit:

Principle #1

Gifts from the Spirit are meant to be shared with the community.

The apostle Paul taught, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). God never gives a gift for the member's personal gratification. It is always meant for corporate enjoyment. Hence, a spiritual gift may be defined as any ability which is given to a member of Christ's church, by the Holy Spirit, for the edification of the body.

If there is a ministry in church which allows you to express your gift, join it. If such a ministry does not exist, get the leaders' permission to start one. Alternatively, don't wait for a ministry to be started, simply use the gift to bless others! Spiritual gifts need not be expressed only in the context of a formal ministry. Any gift when exercised is a ministry in itself.

Principle #2

Gifts from the Spirit when exercised grow the community.

The Greek word for "gift" is *charisma*, and the root word for *charisma* is *charis*, which means "grace". Hence, when the apostle Paul wrote, "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (Ephesians 4:7), he meant to remind us that

all believers are given spiritual gifts by Christ. There is no Christian without a spiritual endowment.

All members of the community should cherish their God-given gifts and exercise them accordingly. Only when every part of the body is activated, will the body of Christ become fully functional.

Principle #3

Gifts from the Spirit ought to be honoured by the community.

Every spiritual gift is given for a purpose. Hence, church leaders in particular should be sensitive to the unique fingerprint of God in each believer and empower each person to develop his or her own gifts.

If churches are grown with a keen eye on the kind of gifts available within our communities, we will be surprised by the creativity of God. Every local church will be one-of-a-kind. And as God brings all His churches together, we will be like the beautiful meadow in spring, blooming with a breathtaking splash of a thousand flowers.

Discuss

- How have you used your spiritual gifts to serve God and others in the church community?
- How can you encourage and support others in their efforts to use their gifts to serve God and the community?
- How can your group and the church encourage people to use their gifts to serve?

Challenge

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The Community That Gives

Warm Up

- What kind of community would your church be if members shared sacrificially? How would that glorify God?

Read: Acts 4:32–35

- Why do you think the believers were so generous with their possessions?

Three Lies About Money

When we read about the early church's sacrificial giving recorded in Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–35, some people would respond with scepticism. They say, "That won't work, people will take advantage of our goodwill!" Perhaps, we are doubtful in the radical generosity of the book of Acts because we are fighting the greatest demigod the world has ever known: money.

The problem with the god of money is in its deceptions. It holds so many Christians in bondage through its lies. Here are some of money's seductive lies and how God has crushed them with His Word.

Lie #1

I'd better not give too much in case I do not have enough.

Do not fret! In most cases, the Lord does not require you to empty your bank accounts (notwithstanding those times when God is putting you through a test!). He does want you to provide for your family. But our tendency is to over-provide for our own wants and under-contribute to the Kingdom's needs. The reason is that we take it upon ourselves to secure our own future. We have forgotten that the Lord is our security.

Whenever we are tempted to hoard money, we need to remember that it is dangerous to test God by storing up for ourselves and thinking that we have our future all covered (Luke 12:13–21). We need to remind ourselves of the Lord's conditional promise spoken in the Sermon on the Mount: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

Lie #2**Since I earned it, I deserve it.**

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God gave instructions to them through Moses regarding the way of life they ought to keep. God spoke clearly, “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18). This text tells us that even the strength we exert at work comes from God. It is clear that every cent we earn is a result of God’s grace. Deuteronomy teaches us that it is unwise, therefore, to live with a sense of entitlement to the money we have gained. All that we have, including our lives, belong wholly to God and should be at His disposal.

Lie #3**There are so many poor people, I cannot save them all.**

Indeed, Jesus does not require us to save the world—we can leave that to Him. Hence, we need not feel incapacitated by the overwhelming needs around us.

Christian giving is Spirit-led. If we walk closely with God, He will impress upon us the needs that we must help to meet. And once we are convicted to give, let us give generously. Our task, therefore, is to nurture a spirit that is sensitive to God’s leading. And He will certainly supply us with the necessary resources to help others, according to His riches in glory (Philippians 4:19).

So, how can we be a community that shares sacrificially? Jesus has this to commend to us, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). The way to wean us from our dependence on money as our security is to consistently put God’s words into practice, and through them, be convinced that God is faithful.

Discuss

- What are some misconceptions about money that you might be holding on to now, or are trapped in? How can the Word of God set you free to have the right perspective and attitude towards money?
- How has God provided for you personally and for your church community? How has He enabled you to give? What do you think He is calling you, your group, and the church, to do?
- How can you carry out the principles of Acts 4:32–35? How might these actions look like today?

Challenge

One thing that I will put into practice today is . . .

The Community That Imparts Faith

Warm Up

- What are some good cultures and practices in your church which you think will point the next generation to God?

Read: 2 Timothy 2:2, 3:10–17

- What must be imparted to the next generation? What will help you do it?

Three Ways to Impart Faith

When we speak of imparting faith, we are referring to an elaborate, church-wide disciple-making process through which the entire community, not just a few people, is involved in shaping and strengthening the faith of our next generation.

In this regard, there are at least three crucial considerations.

Generational ministries

Generational ministries refer to age-appropriate Christian education that is given to every member of the Christian community. Discipleship of our people should happen at all ages.

The Christian developmental psychologist, James Fowler, theorised seven stages of faith development in a human from birth to adulthood. Because a person's mental capacities evolve over his lifetime, he will respond to different forms of teaching at different stages. For example, children from ages three to seven respond best to stories and images in faith education, while teenagers respond better to peer influence and benevolent authority.

Hence, Christian education in a faith community ought to be carefully designed to match life stages. Ultimately, faith impartation is not about puffing people up with religious knowledge. Rather, it is about the transforming of people's mindsets and lifestyles to conform to Jesus' standards.

Intergenerational platforms

If we reflect on our own spiritual development, we might realise that much of our thinking and behavioural patterns are learned through modelling other Christians around us. Like it or not, most people pick things up through an unconscious process of spiritual

infusion rather than a conscious process of spiritual instruction. This effect is even more pronounced in young believers.

Therefore, besides discipling all ages, intergenerational platforms are equally important. This is where spontaneous impartation of faith through modelling takes place. Does the church ensure that the different age groups serve and play together often? Or are the interactions in church happening only in homogeneous small groups? We will learn to be lovers of all people only when we get real, constant exposure to people who are different from us.

Cross-generational mentoring

Many young adults hope older people will invest time in their lives to guide them through various endeavours—ministry, career, and marriage, to name a few. Through mentoring, our young people will catch our vision and passion for God. They will be resourced for the spiritual journey ahead. And they will avoid many of the mistakes we used to make because no one was around to watch our back.

Several things may be initiated in our faith communities to this end. We may connect older, spiritually-matured couples to newly married ones. We may ask older, faithful ministry servants to chaperon younger people who have just joined the ministry. We may also encourage our young people to share their life needs with us as we try to match them with adults who are experienced in their areas of need.

While parents are central to a child's training in the Lord, it is invariably better if a community is also at hand to help in raising our next generation. Such an intergenerational, communal impartation of faith does not happen by chance in our urban society. It is the result of intentional as well as intense social engineering within our churches.

Discuss

- What role can you and your group play in building up intergenerational and communal links in your church community? What can you do in your own life, and as a group?
- What are some ways in which you can contribute to the impartation of faith to others? How can you encourage others to do the same?
- What are some pitfalls to look out for when imparting your faith to people of different ages? What should you avoid? What should you do more of?

Challenge

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The Community That Suffers Together

Warm Up

- Has there been a time in your life when you faced a great difficulty or crisis? How has the Christian community been a source of support to you?

Read: Hebrews 12:1–11

- What are the reasons given in this passage for believers to endure hardship? What are some misconceptions about Christian suffering that this passage addresses?

Three Ways to Carry Each Other's Burden

As we flip through the pages of the New Testament and church history, we see a church that was familiar with great pain and deep loss. Widespread persecution resulted in the loss of jobs and even lives. Families were separated because of imprisonment. The pain of following Christ was very real.

But emerging from these sufferings are surprising passages of Scripture, which exhort us to rejoice because a great purpose lies beyond hardship. God is using these excruciating experiences to refine His church. If we bear up under the pressure of His discipline, we shall gain a harvest of righteousness and peace (Hebrews 12:11).

But how can Christians make it through the difficulties of life without giving up on the faith? The answer is the grace of God—a grace that comes through the family of God.

Here are some ways we can help “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2):

The ministry of consolation

The path of life is littered with losses. Job cried out in his agony, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall depart” (Job 1:21). This implies that life’s journey is about losing everything we have picked up! The things we shall lose include our health, our wealth, and our loved ones.

Suffering together means whenever any community member suffers a loss, we do not make light of his season of pain. We give our brothers and sisters ample time for grieving. We do not tell them to move on while they are still grappling with their losses. Instead, we stay by them; we put an arm around them; we offer our shoulders for them to cry on. Just as God comforted us, we extend His comfort to one another (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

The ministry of sharing burdens

Burdens are the constants in life. Either we pick them up or they will be dropped upon us. The approach to handling all these burdens is the same: we carry them together.

In situations where our brothers or sisters are laden with emotional burdens, we invite them to unload their burdens by offering our listening ears. These occasions could either be an informal tea session or a formal course of counselling. There are also other burdens like relational strains, health problems, and financial difficulties. We ought to share in these burdens too. The community may be roped in to reconcile members in conflict, look after the sick, and offer financial assistance to the poor.

It is always a great comfort to the sufferer when the community does not shun him and his troubles, but closes in on him instead. In fact, hardened members have been known to soften their hearts after encountering the love of the community, when they have experienced unconditional care from their brothers and sisters in the days of their troubles.

The ministry of travelling in prayer

Travailing in prayer as a community is also a way of facing hardships together. We carry each other's burdens by petitioning to God with those in need. We conduct prayer chains, we synchronise our prayers, and we fast together, in order to maintain solidarity with those who desperately need a breakthrough in their lives. Corporately, we take on a posture of waiting upon the Lord until He comes to our brother's aid.

There has never been another time in human history when the world is so fearful of suffering. Just as our Lord entered the gateway of resurrection through suffering, may we follow in His footsteps, embracing hardship as a community, knowing that the glory of God lies beyond our afflictions. May the world discover hope from heaven as it witnesses the people in our faith communities drawing near to one another and loving even more deeply during times of adversity.

Discuss

- Who are the people in your community who are suffering now? How can you, your group, and the church be as Christ to them?
- What obstacles and challenges might you or others face in telling others about your own burdens? What can you and your group do to encourage each other, and others, to open up and share?
- What practical things can you do to support those who are suffering emotionally, physically, and spiritually?

Challenge

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