

Building Life-Giving Community

Building a life-giving community requires that the leader and members seek to create a safe environment based upon safe relationships, what Scripture refers to as a place of hospitality. Too often we think of hospitality merely as providing food or a being good at entertainment. Biblical hospitality is so much more than that. Henri Nouwen speaks of hospitality as “creating the free space for change”,¹ which is a wonderful way to think about the small group environment. Leaders work hard to create a safe space for discovery where struggle is expected, learning is welcomed, growth is honored, and trustful intimacy is desired. The following three characteristics at least are necessary for the development of hospitable environments: openness, boundaries, and hospitality. Our desire is for LifeGroups to exhibit life-giving community through the creation of a relational space that is safe, open, and caring with healthy boundaries of confidentiality, structure, and guidance:

- a place where questions, struggles, emotions, and doubts are welcome
- a space that fosters ideas, curiosity, creativity, wonder, and joy
- a space that honors the mundane activities of everyday life as opportunities to encounter divine grace




This hospitable, safe space small group of trust and intimacy will never become a reality unless the leader of that group models vulnerability. Throughout history, healthy leadership has not been based primarily upon training, education, esoteric knowledge, or super spirituality, but is found within a leader’s character, heart, experience, wisdom, love, and discernment. Spiritual learning comes through an incarnational commitment of one person to another in a covenantal community of love that is patient and kind, but isn’t envious or proud, does not boast, act rudely, seek self-interest, become easily angered, keep record of wrongs or delight in evil. Instead, it is a relationship which rejoices in the truth, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.² Discernment is not given, it is shared. Wisdom is not imparted, but portrayed. Character is not taught, but evoked. It takes courage to be a leader of such a group, to be vulnerable enough to love in the way that Christ loved us.

Creating Space takes time. It doesn’t come over night. Leaders should help to build life-giving, vulnerable, hospitable community through steps. On the following page are steps towards increasing community.

¹ *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of Spiritual Life* by Henri Nouwen,.

² 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

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<p><u>STEP 1:</u></p> <p>BUILDING ACQUAINTANCE</p>	<p>Relationships build slowly, starting with acquaintance and initial sharing. Sometimes, in this initial sharing people have their guard up and are testing out whether or not others are trust-worthy. Don't push this stage too quickly. It provides a safe foundation to move forward. Allow for times of non-threatening interaction, fun, and continuing growth in relationships.</p>	<p>Trust Meter</p> 
<p><u>STEP 2:</u></p> <p>DEVELOPING FRIENDSHIP</p>	<p>After spending some time together, members will usually begin to mesh and develop friendships. They'll begin to care for each other and talk or spend time with each other outside the group. Encourage these friendships. Spending time in fellowship and fun activities outside the group can help to grow your group at this stage.</p>	<p>Trust Meter</p> 
<p><u>STEP 3:</u></p> <p>RISKING VULNERABILITY</p>	<p>At some point, as your group grows in health, the people in your group will begin to share vulnerably with each other. This is a critical time in your group life. It's important at this point to protect the members of your group from hurting one another. Appropriate response to one another at this point is key, as is confidentiality.</p>	<p>Trust Meter</p> 
<p><u>STEP 4:</u></p> <p>LIFE-GIVING COMMUNITY</p>	<p>When your group moves to truly trust each other to the point of really loving one another with the love of Jesus, it will exhibit powerful expressions of life-giving community. This is a time of great blessing, growth, and ministry for the group.</p>	<p>Trust Meter</p> 