



Community: A
Living the Way
Workshop





Community is the practice of engaging in activities that gather us together around the transformative presence of Jesus.

This workshop will guide participants to ...

- Confront their proneness to individualism and isolation
 - Reimagine the beauty of life together in Jesus
- Engage in practices that grow their experience of community

¹⁸ Be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Ephesians 5:18-20)

Resources you will need ...

- LTW Community Workshop Guide
- Ruth Haley Barton, *Life Together in Christ*
 - The Bible, any translation
 - startlivingtheway.com

Session One | Real Community



Begin by catching up on one another's lives. What is something recent that is bringing you joy?
What is something recent that is causing you stress?

Then, discuss the following questions about your experience and hopes for community.

1. What is your experience with community? Has it been positive? Negative? A mix of both?
2. How do you hope to grow in your experience of community through this workshop?

Session One | Real Community

An Isolation Problem

Community—the real thing—doesn't just happen. It's not our default position. It's not our everyday experience. Fair warning. Community takes sacrifice and patience. But, as we will see, what we get back is far beyond what we give. Community is nothing short of God's beautiful plan for our flourishing, both now and in the future. If life together in Jesus (i.e., real community) is not our default position, what is? In a word, **isolation**. Being alone. Going at life by your own efforts. Relying on yourself for happiness. That's the go-to position of our world.

We are ruggedly individualistic. We believe a pack of lies about our own self-sufficiency. We believe we already possess everything we need to flourish. We have what it takes to be happy and live well. All we need to do is tap into our inner well of strength. The problem? This is demonstrably and tragically false. And it's destructive. We all feel it deep down. We don't have what it takes to live life on our own. The result is a bone-chilling pandemic of loneliness.

There is much suffering in the world - physical, material, mental. The suffering of some can be blamed on the greed of others. The material and physical suffering is suffering from hunger, from homelessness, from all kinds of diseases. But the greatest suffering is being lonely, feeling unloved, having no one. I have come more and more to realize that it is being unwanted that is the worst disease that any human being can ever experience. (Mother Teresa)

Have you experienced the pain of isolation and loneliness?

Life Together

God knows that we flounder on our own. In fact, he never intended us even to try to live as rugged individuals. He never intended that we seal our lives off from others. We were created to be share life with one another. Relationships are essential to the good life. There's no flourishing without community.

¹⁸ The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." ¹⁹ Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹ So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. ²² Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:18-22)

1. What do we learn about life together from the creation of the first humans?

2. Why is it so crucial that we are in community with others? Why is it that we cannot experience real joy, peace, or fulfillment all alone?



Session One | Real Community

A Challenge to Community

We are created for life together. We can't experience all that God has for us without it. But that doesn't mean community is easy. We've all experienced, at one time or another, the disappointment community can hold. We get hurt. We hurt others. It can bring dissension, lies, and even abuse. If God intended community for our good, why can it also be so destructive?

Well, **first**, we must remember that communities are made up of broken people. We shouldn't be surprised to find the effects of sin made evident, even in churches. We know the world is not yet what God intends it to be. Until the day when God restores all things (that day is coming!), our life together will be flawed.

Have you been hurt by others in community? What might healing look like?

Second, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says we bring "wish dreams," i.e., our dreams for what life together should and will be, to our experience. We bring not only dreams, but expectations. He says:

Innumerable times a whole Christian community has been broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream . . . but God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together)

What dreams about community do you need to relinquish?

The sooner we can relinquish our wishful dreams about community, the sooner God can begin to reveal his plans for our lives together. Here's a hint. It'll be vastly different and immeasurably better than what we could have planned.

The Heart of Community

Let's summarize. In our default state—rugged individualism—we are isolated and lonely. It's a bad place to be. And God never intended for us to be in it. Rather, he intended a beautiful way of living called **community**. We are, undoubtedly, better together. Having said that, community can be challenging, as we've all seen at one point or another. God's call is that we relinquish our dreams and agendas about life together so we can receive better gifts he offers.

Let's close this session with some hope. Massive hope. The pattern for community is not to be found in any human relationships. It's found, in fact, in the very essence of who God is. He's a Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit. These three persons (all fully God) exist in perfect love and harmony with one another. They submit to one another and act in unity of purpose. In short, they exemplify perfect community. A divine community.

Catch this. Before we are called to any human community, we are called to participate in God's community—of Father, Son, Spirit. There, we learn what self-giving love is all about. There, and only there, do we learn how to live together well. The first call to community is the call to be joined with God through the Spirit. Then we can experience real community.



Session One | Real Community

“God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit in a community of greater humility, servanthood, mutual submission, and delight than you and I can possibly imagine. ...They are three but one—and infinitely richer, better, deeper, more joyful than it would be if not for the three.” (John Ortberg)

1. What do we learn about the purpose of human community by starting with God’s community as Father, Son, and Spirit?

2. What does it mean to be joined to the Trinity, as Father, Son, and Spirit? If you feel so led, take a few moments to pray for one another—that you would first experience community with God.

Exercises for Session Two

1. Read “They Stood Still Looking Sad” from *Life Together in Christ* by Ruth Haley Barton.

2. Make time to participate in communion before next meeting. This can be during a church service, a small group, or alone. Make note of how partaking in the elements (i.e., the wine and bread) invites you into community **first**, with the Triune God and **second**, with other followers of Jesus. Communion builds our lives together with God and others.

3. Complete the discussion questions for session two. Come ready to discuss!

Interlude

You’ve finished the first session of this workshop! You’re learning to walk into the heart of human experience—your life with God and others. It’s so crucial that we cannot know joy, peace, and fulfillment to their fullest without it. Community is that central.

Don’t forget that it’s best to go on this sacred journey alongside others. Make some time to get together with your group (however many) and deepen your relationships. Grab coffee just to chat. Go to a baseball game. Gather your families for a movie night. Do something that simply celebrates the joys of being human and knowing others. This is good for its own sake but will also help you grow as you complete future sessions.

Christian community is not and never can be about us. When our dreams and convictions about what we think community should be are dashed against the jagged reef of human limitations and failure to live up to one another’s needs and expectations, then and only then are we ready to accept the fact that Christian community is not about us at all. It is about the transforming presence of Christ—all he will do in and through and for each of us. (Ruth Haley Barton)



Session Two | Carry One Another



Begin by catching up on one another's lives. Is there anything causing you anxiety, worry, or fear in the past weeks? Pray for one another about these things.

1. What does Barton say is the power of our simple presence when someone suffers?
2. Have you ever experienced the need for presence rather than problem solving?
3. Did God reveal anything to you through your practice of communion? Share with one another.

Session Two | Carry One Another

A Paralyzed Man and His Friends

Let's start with an example from the Bible. Once upon a time, Jesus was teaching a group of people that came from many nearby villages to hear him. Jesus was in a modest home covered by a roof likely made of mud and wooden beams. A group of men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing. The following scene unfolded.

¹⁷ One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. ¹⁸ Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹ When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."²¹ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"²² Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ²⁴ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ²⁵ Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶ Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today." (Luke 5:17-26)

There's so much to talk about here. The story displays Jesus' power. It pits his way of living against the cold legalism of the religious leaders. It reveals Jesus' compassion. But, for this session, let's home in on the men's care for their paralyzed friend.

1. Why does Jesus respond favorably to the men's care for their friend (they did, after all, interrupt his teaching)?
2. What do we learn about our responsibility to one another in times of trial and suffering?
3. What do we learn about the appropriate response when others offer to help us in our time of need? Do you ever struggle with letting friends or family carry you?
4. Re-read the passage three times. Imagine yourself (once for each reading) as a carrier, the carried, and as the crowd in the passage. What insights do you gain from this exercise?



Session Two | Carry One Another

Carrying and Being Carried

In session one, we encountered two realities. **First**, community is imperfect. It's made up of imperfect people, after all. **Second**, nevertheless, God's designed community to be a beautiful thing when we surrender it to him. One of the primary aspects of his design is that we carry one another, walk with one another, and share in the trials that life throws at each of us. The world is broken. But God's given us one another to weather the storms. It's a crucial aspect of our life together.

Who do you carry when they experience struggle and heartache? Who carries you?

Carrying well involves a few crucial practices. The good news is that none are difficult. They simply require the desire to love and persevere the long and winding roads with others.

1. **Be Present.** This means, first, being in the physical space with a hurting friend. Make time. Prioritize the other. Be ready to forgo commitments. Your presence alone will be healing.
2. **Grieve Together.** Jesus himself wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (see John 11:17-36). He wept together with Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha. God knows the sadness, grief, and pain we experience. We imitate the very response of God when we grieve alongside others. Sometimes it's the best thing we can offer those who hurt.
3. **Listen Well.** Listening is a marvelous gift. Plain and simple. And it's a rare gift. When we listen well, we absorb ourselves in our friend—his or her words and the struggle they represent. We fight the urge to fix quickly, share irrelevant stories, or give pat advice.
4. **Point Heavenward.** While we don't want to rush or embrace cliché, we do want to speak simple words of hope to those needing to be carried. Stick with what's clear. God loves us. He grieves when we grieve. Jesus is the resurrection—our only hope in life and death.

1. Is there one of these practices that you've extended to others (or received) that's been especially helpful during a difficult time? Describe that experience.

2. Is one of these practices especially difficult for you to extend to others (or receive)? If so, which one and why? How would you like to grow?

3. Share any other insights or concerns about this aspect of community.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it! (1 Corinthians 12:26)



Session Two | Carry One Another

LTW Exercises

1. Read "Were Not Our Hearts Burning Within Us?" from *Life Together In Christ* by Ruth Haley Barton.
2. Meditate slowly on Romans 12:3-21. Make a comprehensive list of what it teaches about the transformative potential of community. Do you see these markers of transformation manifest in the communities of which you are a part? Why or why not?
3. Complete the discussion questions for session three. Come ready to discuss!

"Ultimately, every human circle is doomed to dissolution if it is not caught up in the life of the only genuinely self-sufficient circle of sufficiency, that of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For that circle is the only one that is truly and totally self-sufficient. And all the broken circles must ultimately find their healing there." (Dallas Willard)



Session Three | Transformed Together



Begin by catching up on one another's lives (if meeting as a group). How have you spent your free time over the past weeks? What words would you use to describe it (e.g., rejuvenating, refreshing, wasteful, fretting)?

1. Are you currently part of a community of people who follow Jesus? If so, what has your experience been? If not, what are the barriers to joining with others? What steps can you take to build meaningful community?
2. Discuss your experience with meditating on Romans 12:3-21. What did you learn? Were you challenged in any ways?

Session Three | **Transformed Together**

Let's say it again. God's designed community to be a beautiful thing when we surrender it to him. In the last session, we saw that, in community, we walk with one another through life's difficult roads. No one hurts or suffers alone. Not when they are part of a community of Jesus.

In this session, we will see that God uses our life together to transform us into the people he made us to be. Community shapes us. We, in turn, shape the community by our transformed presence. Here's how it happens.

How Community Shapes Us

We will never become who it is God created us to be without the fellowship of others. That's a strong claim. And it's absolutely true. God makes it clear that our formation happens best alongside others. Why? Well, there are crucial ingredients of formation that require connection in community. Here are a few.

²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

It takes a community to offer the encouragement and exhortation we need.

¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:13-14)

It takes a community to extend grace, love, and forgiveness.

⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:4-5)

It takes a community to practice the gifts God has given to us.

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. ¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

It takes a community to lift us up when we are down.

These are just a few of the many blessings God offers us when he calls us to walk through life together. As we grow, we in turn offer these same blessings to others. We offer encouragement, exhortation, grace, love, forgiveness, our gifts, and our support.



Session Three | Transformed Together

1. Which of these benefits of community have you experienced? Which have you offered to others in a time of need?

2. What other aspects of community are crucial to our formation in Christ?

Practices of Community

Community also involves life-giving practices in which we engage to grow in our life together. We share in them and they shape us. Here are some central practices.

Prayer. This refers to all the ways we practice God's presence. It helps us grow in intimacy with Him. We are called to pray not only as individuals, but also together. As we offer God our praises, gratitude, and requests side-by-side, he meets us in a special way (e.g., Acts 4:31).

Confession. This is a cleansing practice. When we confess our sin and brokenness, we set out on a new path with Jesus. We confess to him, for sure, but also to others. It's formative and cathartic to admit your shortcomings out loud to a trusted companion (cf., James 5:16).

Accountability. This happens when we listen well, extend grace, and remind one another of the commitments we have made. An accountability group can be as simple as asking questions about one another's spiritual lives and encouraging one another towards love and good deeds (Hebrew 10:24-25).

Liturgy. This is when we gather for worship—through song, prayer, and teaching—typically on Sunday mornings and small groups throughout the week. When we worship together, we unify in our convictions, confessions, and actions in the community around us (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Celebration. This involves sharing our joy and delight for what God has done in our lives and the corporate life of the community. Celebration calibrates our hearts towards gratitude. And celebrating together is just plain fun—an underappreciated dimension of our shared lives!

It bears repeating. Our lives are painfully incomplete without community—and these shared practices that help foster it.

1. If you aren't part of a thriving community, discuss together how to make that happen.

2. In which of these corporate practices would you especially like to grow in the months?



Session Three | Transformed Together

Exercises for Session Four

1. Read "And Jesus Himself Came Near" in *Life Together in Christ* by Ruth Haley Barton.
2. The time has come to get practical. Dig deeper into the goodness of community in the coming weeks. Decide on several ways you can better grow alongside others. For instance, you might decide to join a small group at church, identify an accountability partner, or walk through one of these LTW workshops with a few people. Get practical and make it happen!
3. Complete the discussion questions for session four. Come ready to discuss!

Interlude

You've finished the third session of this workshop! You've discovered (or re-discovered!) that, even though communities are made up of imperfect people, God nevertheless wants to give us something beautiful through them. We are called to be a part of the larger body of Jesus. God intends that we not walk the ups and downs of life alone. That's something to celebrate!

Don't forget that it's best to go on this sacred journey alongside others. Make some time to get together with your group (however many) and deepen your relationships. Grab coffee just to chat. Go to a baseball game. Gather your families for a movie night. Do something that simply celebrates the joys of being human and knowing others. This is good for its own sake but will also help you grow as you complete future sessions.

"if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride that cling to us like barnacles cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession, we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied but transformed." (Richard Foster)



Session Four | Atmosphere of Community



Begin by catching up on one another's lives (if meeting as a group). How often have you been jealous, critical, or irritable towards others these past weeks? Reflect on the reasons for this and pray for one another.

1. Why does Ruth Haley Barton say it is so important to "welcome the stranger" into our lives?
2. How have you grown in community since we last met? What are your goals moving forward?

Session Four | Atmosphere of Community

In this final session, let's talk about what we might call the *atmosphere of community*. This is the culture and way of living embraced by members of a community. It's the feel of the space—what it is like to live, move, and breathe alongside others in it. Each one of us who is part of a community plays a role in building such an atmosphere. Community rises or falls based on what it is like to be a part of it. So, let's talk about three aspects of a healthy common atmosphere.

Welcoming the Stranger

We are all strangers, in one sense or another. We sometimes do our best to surround ourselves with people like us (e.g., who look or think like us). But try though we might, we inevitably encounter "the other" and are "the other." That's just the way God would have it. He calls us to a diverse and welcoming community when he calls us to be the Church.

For centuries, followers of Jesus have called this *hospitality*. Despite the modern use of the word, it means something rich in the Bible. It is the practice of welcoming the stranger with open arms into our midst.

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:7-14)

Jews didn't typically associate with Samaritans. They were considered racial outcasts. And men didn't typically speak to women at the well. The Samaritan woman would have been among the lowest on the social ladder. Yet Jesus welcomes her into his midst.

1. What strikes you most about this account? How would you describe Jesus' attitude towards the Samaritan woman?

2. What should churches do to better welcome the outcasts of society? What opportunities do you have to practice hospitality in your own sphere of influence?



Session Four | Atmosphere of Community

Be Unified

Communities centered on Jesus are unequivocally called to this thing called *unity*. It doesn't mean we must agree on every fine point of doctrine. It doesn't mean we look the same or talk the same. Unity means that the fundamental commitment that binds us is to Jesus and his Church. It means that gathering, worship, and shared action is possible even amidst disagreement on nonessentials.

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

1. Why is unity so important? What happens when communities of Jesus—his churches—experience disunity?

2. How can we achieve unity in such a divided world? What can you do in your sphere of influence to promote unity?

Bless and Do Not Curse

You don't have to look far to find curse. We encounter it in crowded traffic, debates about COVID vaccines, and at contentious family gatherings. Curse wishes ill into the life of another. It's filled with death words and intentions. A mark of communities centered on Jesus is that they are filled with blessing and absence of curse. Blessing prays goodwill into the life of another. It speaks life-giving words of encouragement, affirmation, and peace.

²⁴ ""The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace."" (Numbers 6:24-26)

1. What elements of blessing can you identify in these words that God gave to Aaron to say over the people?

2. What would it look like for you to cultivate an atmosphere of blessing for those with whom you are in community, e.g., your family, church, or neighborhood?



Session Four | Atmosphere of Community

Reflections on Community

You've now encountered an essential practice God has given to build us in the way of Jesus. Take some time to reflect and celebrate what He has done. We invite you to continue your journey by digging into one of the other LTW workshops offered at startlivingtheway.com!

1. Compare your initial expectations to your actual experience with community. What was similar? Different?
2. How did you grow because of this practice? What was especially meaningful? What was challenging?
3. How do you plan to integrate community as part of your regular spiritual life?
4. How do you plan to celebrate the good things God has done over these past weeks?

"Spiritual formation cannot, in the nature of the case, be a 'private' thing, because it is a matter of whole-life transformation. You need to seek out others in your community who are pursuing the renovation of the heart." *(Dallas Willard)*

