

## Leaders' Guide

Welcome to Flourishing Communities, a seven-week series designed to help your small group become the kind of community that lives and loves like Jesus, leading to kingdom impact. As InterVarsity's most popular small group Bible study series, we created this version to serve churches that want to cultivate deeper communities of impact within their congregations.

In this guide, you will find resources to help you facilitate meaningful discussions. Reference this sheet before each gathering to prepare well.

### ABOUT THE FORMAT

- **Discipleship Cycle.** InterVarsity uses the discipleship cycle to help students not only be “hearers of the word” but to be “doers of the word” (Matthew 7:24) and you can see this cycle reflected in the scripture study, active response, and debrief that takes place in each study.
- **Interactive Design.** Each of the small group sessions has a one-page guide with an opening discussion, passage background info, discussion questions, response activity, and an action step. The response activities often use supplies like paper and pen, though there are some additional supplies listed in the parentheses below.
- **Series Overview: Components of a Flourishing Community**
  - Session 1: Embodied Faith (paper, markers, color pencils)
  - Session 2: Selfless Love (paper + pens)
  - Session 3: Radical Inclusion ([Cultural Values printouts](#) + pens)
  - Session 4: Mutuality
  - Session 5: Reconciliation (paper + pens)
  - Session 6: Costly Compassion (paper + pens)
  - Session 7: Justice (device to play intro video - computer, tablet, tv)



## DEFINITIONS

When having group discussions, it is often helpful to define terms so that everyone in the group is using the same word with the same meaning. Here are a few terms used in the series and our definitions:

- **Embodied faith** is living as Jesus has called us to live, empowered by the Holy Spirit to love radically and participate in God's work of restoring our broken world.
- **Selfless love** is demonstrating care and seeking the wellbeing of others through our words and actions, motivated by Christ's sacrificial love for us.
- **Mutuality** describes the relationship between two parties that involves mutual self-giving, where everyone's joys and pains are shared.
- **Reconciliation** is an external process of restoring a broken relationship (ex. God and humanity).
- **Forgiveness** is not holding wrongdoing against a person or group that has done wrong. It is a gift rooted in grace that one person or community (the injured) has given to another.<sup>1</sup>
- **Compassion** is when one sees others' suffering and then takes action to help.
- **Empathy** is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person.
- **Diversity** reflects God's creativity and Christian community finds its fullest expression when distinctiveness in God's multiethnic kingdom is valued rather than erased.
- **Equity** is fairness or justice in the way people are treated.
- **Inclusion** is practicing the generous welcome of Christ as we see, hear, and honor one another in community.

## BEFORE THE STUDY

Before you begin your study together, have your group watch these two videos to prepare them to dive in together.

1. [Video Introduction to the series](#)
2. [Testimonial video](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Santos, Laurie (Host). (2019-present). *The Happiness Lab* [Audio podcast]. Yale Center for Faith & Culture. <https://faith.yale.edu/media/the-freedom-of-forgiveness>

### AFTER THE STUDY

Anticipate that the Holy Spirit will meet you and shape your community through the study. It can be easy to move on to the next topic but be intentional about how to put learning into practice. What is God's invitation to your group through the study? Some examples could include:

- Participate in your church's hospitality ministry
- Dive deeper into creating rhythms of spiritual disciplines collectively and individually
- Find ways to give, advocate, and pray for and with your church and neighbors
- Get involved in local service opportunities
- Continue to study topics related to community or justice

Whatever the Lord leads you to, we pray that this study creates space for open dialogue and a genuine desire to follow Jesus fully. May this study bless your community to experience the flourishing that God has designed for the common good and for God's glory!

For more church resources, visit <https://intervarsity.org/church> and sign up for our Church Resources Newsletter.

## SESSION NOTES

### Session 1: Embodied Faith

God's design for a community is one of flourishing. As we embody faith together, individuals, communities, and even systems flourish.

- **Introduction.** Invite your group to share their experiences of meaningful community. Come prepared with a story of your own in case you need to go first. The goal here is simply to build connection and set a vision for what's possible. Keep it light and fun.
- **Passage Study: Acts 2:37-47.** The pastoral goal of this passage is helping your group feel the *weight* of what's radical about this early community: fellowship, generosity, addressing inequity. This wasn't a program or a plan; it was a way of life. Some participants may feel discouraged if their current church experience falls short of this picture. Acknowledge the tension between what we long for and what we experience without seeking to "resolve" it.
- **Response Activity: Dreaming for your Community.** This activity invites your group to imagine what's possible when a community embodies faith like the early church. If people seem stuck or cynical about their church's potential, gently remind them that dreaming is the first step toward change. The action step is an opportunity to begin translating values into practice.

## Session 2: Selfless Love

We love selflessly, through our words and our actions, because of Jesus' love for us. Embodying our faith through how we love is the foundation of the flourishing community.

- **Introduction.** Allow the discussion to surface how differently culture uses the word "love," which will raise the stakes of the passage's more demanding definition. Don't feel pressure to land on a single definition as a group; the discussion itself is the point.
- **Passage Study: 1 John 3:16-24.** The pastoral goal of this passage is to help your group wrestle with love as *action*, not just feeling or intention. John's test for a genuine Jesus-centered community is stark: look at how they love. Draw your group's attention to the gap between the love described here (sacrificial, tangible, costly) and how love is practiced in churches (connect it back to the opening discussion where appropriate). Create space for honest reflection.

- **Response Activity: Spiritual Journey Timeline.** Participants will reflect on significant events and people that shaped their faith journey through a line graph. This is often the most meaningful and vulnerable activity of the series. A few facilitation keys:

- **Go first.** Share your own timeline to model honesty and signal that it's safe to still be in process around faith. This is especially important in an intergenerational or mixed group where participants may not know each other well.
- **Set expectations.** Ask participants to focus on 1-2 formative events or people rather than their whole life story. Remind the group to practice attentive listening—make eye contact, no phones, no interrupting.
- **For participants who don't identify as Christian,** invite them to reflect on formative life events, what has shaped their curiosity about faith, or what brought them to the group.
- **Consider using a timer** to keep sharing equitable and leave room for brief questions after each person.



### Session 3: Radical Inclusion

In flourishing communities, all are seen, heard and honored in the fullness of who God has made them to be.

- **Introduction.** Help participants reconnect with what it feels like to *not* belong or to have belonging mediated through arbitrary markers of inclusion. For intergenerational groups, pay attention to how differently people may have experienced exclusion—a 65-year-old and a 25-year-old may have very different stories, and both are worth honoring (and some may vulnerably share feeling like they haven't belonged in your church). Let the discussion surface that longing for genuine welcome before moving into the passage.
- **Passage Study: Acts 15:1-35.** The pastoral goal here is to help your group feel the weight of what's at stake for the early church in navigating a theological debate about circumcision. Help your group sit with the tension before jumping to resolution: sometimes we ask people to leave parts of who they are at the door to truly belong, or we place unspoken burdens on those who don't fit the dominant culture. Draw their attention to how the text resolves this: we are all received into the Kingdom of God with joy and welcome. We are radically included in God's community because of what Jesus has done for us.
- **Response Activity: Identifying Your Cultural Values.** This exercise gives your group shared language to navigate being a diverse community. Our various worldviews are informed by our values. **Important:** Print copies of the [Cultural Values Worksheet](#) ahead of time. Participants mark along a spectrum how strongly they identify with either value within seven pairings. Next, using a *different* color or symbol, mark where they'd place the church culture on the same spectrum. The real insight for this activity comes in the debrief: help your group honestly name what your community is *actually* like. What are the unspoken rules for belonging? Who bears the extra weight of conforming? This can be a rich and sometimes challenging conversation. It can be helpful to acknowledge up front that tensions discussed might be the lived experiences of people in the room. Welcome honesty but reiterate that there is no pressure to share. If someone shares honestly, be prepared as a facilitator to intervene if the group's response is defensiveness, explanation, or invalidating.

## Session 4: Mutuality

Access and equity in the flourishing community are not based on ability or influence, but on mutual self-giving, where everyone's joys as well as pains are shared. Mutuality leads to unity.

- **Introduction.** Unpack what "mutuality" means through examples from movies, books, or experience. If you don't have one that readily comes to mind, you can use this example from the movie *Coach Carter* (2005). *Coach Carter is one of those inspirational sports movies. There's a scene where the basketball team is wrapping up practice in the gym. A player is trying to earn his way back onto the team, but the coach gives him a seemingly impossible task: hundreds of pushups and running drills. He can't meet the goal, and it looks hopeless. Then one teammate speaks up: "You said we're a team. One person struggles, we all struggle. One person triumphs, we all triumph." One by one, every player starts doing pushups and running alongside him until he makes it. This is a picture of mutuality, where everyone is committed to one another; there is shared joy and shared pain.*
- **Passage Study: 1 Corinthians 12:12-24.** The pastoral goal here is to help your group feel how countercultural Paul's vision is. Corinth was a prosperous, diverse city with deep disparities between rich and poor, and those disparities had seeped into the church. What was valued in the city became what was valued in the church: education, rhetorical ability and wealth. Paul's use of the body metaphor isn't just poetic; it's a direct challenge to that hierarchy. Draw your group's attention to v. 25 as the hinge of the passage: no division, shared suffering, shared joy. Help them sit with how different that is from how most communities function. This diverse community, with various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, flourishes as they pursue unity.
- **Response Activity: Community Assessment.** Together you will have an honest conversation about how mutuality is experienced within the church. The difference between this session's discussion and last session is that this focuses on *structural and relational dynamics*. This might feel like a simple activity, but seeing and honoring lays the foundation for the community to actually be able to practice mutuality. If someone doesn't feel like they're a part of the community, why would they share their joys and pains? Groups sometimes gravitate toward the theoretical rather than naming specific dynamics in their own community. Gently bring the

conversation back to your actual context. Save time for the practical brainstorming at the end.

## Session 5: Reconciliation

Having been reconciled to God through Jesus, we engage in the hard, costly work of being in right relationship with one another. Not only will we flourish, but so will those around us.

- **Introduction.** By this point in the series, your group has been building trust and going deeper together. The opening discussion this week asks participants to go beyond the surface to share real experiences of conflict and reconciliation. Affirm that if we're serious about authentic community, conflict is inevitable, and we have to learn how to work it out. Working to right the wrongs that we've done, even when costly, not only leads to our flourishing, but the flourishing of those around us.
- **Passage Study: Luke 19:1-10.** The pastoral goal here is to help your group see that reconciliation has both *interpersonal and systemic dimensions*. Zacchaeus isn't just privately forgiven—he makes it right publicly and materially. He pays reparations. His encounter with Jesus leads to concrete action that restores both his relationship with God and the community. It's easy to spiritualize reconciliation and keep it abstract, but Zacchaeus' response is tangible and costly. Draw out the connection between being reconciled to God and being compelled to reconcile with others.
- **Response Activity: Addressing Conflict (Situation-Behavior-Impact).** This activity introduces a simple but powerful framework from the [Center for Creative Leadership](#) to help participants reflect on a real conflict they've experienced.
  - Situation - what was the context of the conflict? Was it public? What were the power dynamics?
  - Behavior – what happened? It should be observable.
  - Impact – what was the result?

The three parts help break down conflict in a way that reduces assumptions about intention and creates language for a productive reconciliation conversation. Consider using a feelings wheel if it is challenging to articulate the impact. A few facilitation notes:

- **Hold this space carefully.** Participants are reflecting on real wounds (and perhaps some are still unresolved). Make sure the tone is prayerful and unhurried.
- **Name the limits of reconciliation up front.** Not every conflict can or should result in a face-to-face conversation. Sometimes forgiveness is the work God does in our own hearts over time, without direct contact. Cultural background and the specific

circumstances of a conflict also shape what reconciliation can look like. Naming this early gives participants permission to engage honestly rather than feeling pressure to resolve everything.


- **Connect the personal to the communal.** Practicing reconciliation relationally—in the small, everyday conflicts of community life—is what prepares us for the harder, more systemic work of reconciliation. Help your group see this activity as training ground, not just personal reflection.

## Session 6: Costly Compassion

Communities flourish when we see *and* act (practice compassion), embodying what it means to love God and love our neighbors. We extend compassion to all, even when it is costly or risky.

- **Introduction.** Set the tone early: the compassion Scripture calls us to is not fluffy charity or feel-good generosity. Biblical compassion is about pushing back darkness so the Kingdom of God can break through. Use the opening discussion to help your group surface both what draws them toward compassion and what holds them back. That honest tension is exactly what the passage will address.
- **Passage Study: Luke 10:25-37.** Even if your group knows this parable well, encourage them to read it with fresh eyes - there is more here than a nice story about helping strangers. A few things to draw out for your group:
  - **The lawyer's motivation matters.** He's trying to corner Jesus with a question about eternity, looking for the minimum requirement. The parable that Jesus tells in response addresses the lawyer's legalism and ethnic biases.
  - **The ethnic tension.** The history between Jews and Samaritans was one of deep tension and hatred. Samaritans ethnically descended from Jews that intermarried with Gentiles in the northern Kingdom during an exile by Assyria. Samaritans were viewed as syncretistic and not truly Jewish. Jesus making a Samaritan the example is a provocation. The lawyer can't even bring himself to say "the Samaritan" at the end. Jesus transforms the insult of being called a Samaritan into something to aspire to. Help your group feel that.
  - **The Greek word for compassion** used here refers to something felt deep in the gut, and every time it appears in the New Testament, it is followed by action. Compassion is always seeing and acting. Never one without the other.
  - **The stakes Jesus names are high.** The lawyer is interested in meeting the minimum requirements and checking off all the boxes to inherit eternal life. The implicit challenge of Jesus' parable is: will you be a neighbor? Being a neighbor will cost time, money, resources, maybe even a sense of safety. It will require crossing enemy lines. Make sure your group feels the weight of this before moving on.
- **Response Activity: Peer Coaching Exercise.** The goal of this activity is to build muscle memory, training your group to respond with compassion rather than pass by. As a group, brainstorm scenarios where compassion is

needed, drawing from your own community and from moments when you had an opportunity to act and didn't. Then in pairs, come up with four different ways to respond in each scenario. The point isn't to find the perfect answer but to practice *seeing and acting* until it becomes second nature. Process the barriers with honesty.

 **Important: Preparing in Advance.** Session 7 has a different format than previous sessions. The passage study is shortened to make room for a guest speaker who will share about a justice issue impacting your community—this is the heart of the session and worth the extra coordination it requires.

Start identifying your guest now. Good candidates include someone from a local non-profit, a community organizer, or someone within your congregation working in areas like community development, immigration, housing, or poverty relief. Whoever you invite, make sure their work connects meaningfully to your specific community and neighborhood. The debrief questions will ask your group to reflect on how their efforts align with God's desire for justice, so the more local and concrete, the better.

A few practical notes:

- Brief your guest ahead of time. Let them know the session's theme, roughly how much time they'll have (~20 minutes to share, 10 minutes for Q&A), and that your group will be approaching the conversation through a biblical lens.
- If scheduling a guest during your gathering isn't possible, consider arranging a separate time (a meal, a site visit, or a video call, etc.). You can also record their sharing in advance.
- Pray for your guest and your group as you prepare. This conversation has the potential to be one of the most formative of the entire series.

## Session 7: Justice

We are called to mirror God's heart and participate in God's mission to make all things right in our world. Pursuing justice is integral for true flourishing.

- **Introduction.** The Bible Project video will lay a strong foundation for the session. It traces how justice is woven throughout all of Scripture. Watch it together and let it breathe before moving into the passage. The video will be especially valuable for participants who have not considered justice as a biblical concept.
- **Passage Study: Amos 5:4-24.** The pastoral goal here is to help your group feel the weight of God's indictment and honestly apply it to themselves. Amos hammers home a stunning hypocrisy: the people of God are gathering, worshipping, and bringing all the right offerings, while simultaneously perpetuating injustice against the marginalized. God's response through Amos is not gentle: I hate your offerings. I hate your religious practices. In contemporary terms, God is speaking to people who call themselves Christians, including us. Your job as facilitator is to help the conversation move from heavy and theoretical to honest and practical. A few questions to keep in your back pocket:
  - What might we, as a community, be indicted for?
  - What issues would break God's heart for our city or neighborhood?
  - Where are we perpetuating injustice - even unintentionally - through our inaction?

Similarly, it will be helpful to have concrete examples ready for how to pursue justice: advocating for houseless neighbors, upcoming legislation worth learning about, bystander intervention training, organizations your church could serve alongside. Acknowledge the tendency to only take injustice seriously when our own bodies or interests are on the line, and how painful that can be for impacted communities. This default is exactly what Amos is challenging in the text.

- **Response Activity: Learn from Others.** This is the culminating activity of the series, and it's designed to move your group from reflection to engagement. Give your guest your full attention and create space for the Holy Spirit to speak through the conversation. After they share, help your group resist the temptation to feel overwhelmed. Translating a big justice issue into concrete, sustainable next steps is a skill that will serve the group in your lifelong engagement with justice.
- **Finishing Well.** Consider planning a dinner after you finish the study to celebrate, share stories, and reflect on the journey that you have been on

for the last seven sessions. Invite reflection and sharing on how the series has impacted participants. It's a natural moment to keep discerning what a faithful next step looks like, individually and communally. The vision of flourishing that you started with in Session 1 is meant to be ongoing.