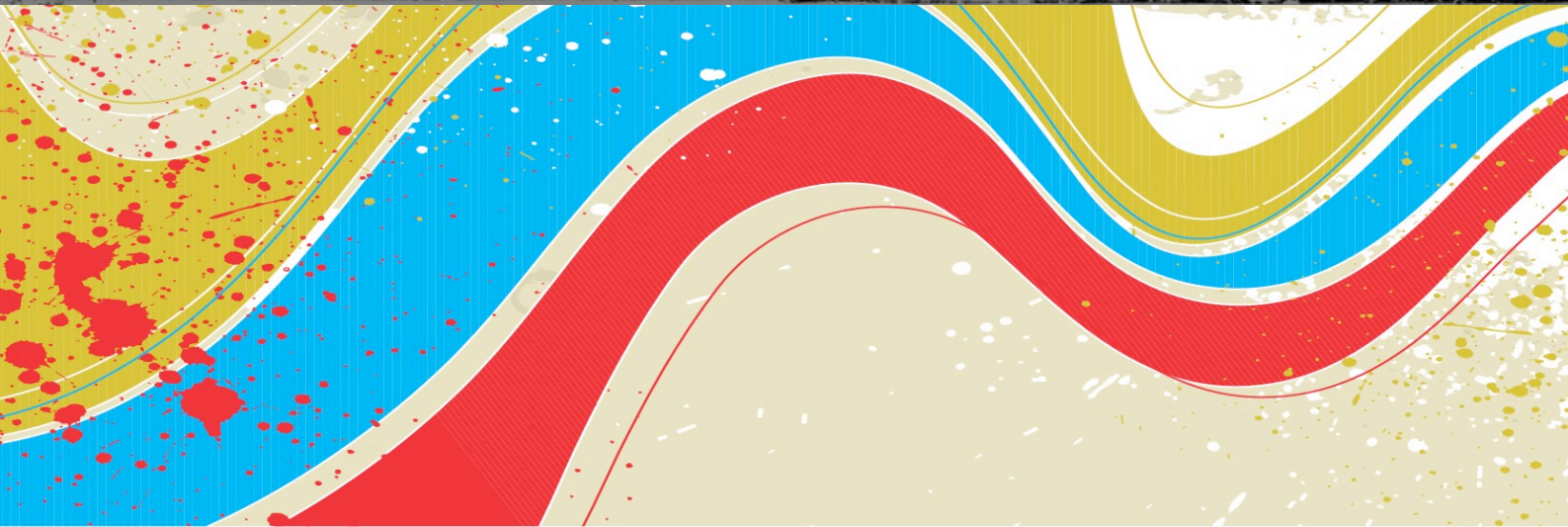


LOVE LIFE

LIVING A LIFE OF LOVE IN OUR SUNDAY MEETING



How to be in a small group

Another year, another Bible study group. Time to sign up, turn up and get things rolling for another year. Time also perhaps to ask some questions about your small group. Do you feel as if you just go along because that's what you're expected to do? Does the group have a clear purpose, or does it just exist because it has always existed?

More to the point, what part are you going to play in this year's group? What can you be doing to make the group a success? There are many books and guides and training materials for small group leaders (like *Growth Groups* from Matthias Media), but what about the humble group member? What can each of us be doing to make the most of our small groups?

Why go in the first place?

People go to small groups for all sorts of reasons to fulfil expectations, to make friends, to pursue romantic possibilities, to receive encouragement and counsel, to learn, and so on.

While most of these might be perfectly acceptable reasons to join a small group, the first and indispensable reason must be clear in our minds. Our primary reason for belonging to a small group is to give us opportunity to love and encourage other people in Christ. It's not about Me; it's about Them. And it's about Them because of Christ.

This after all is what the Christian life is about. Our most basic principle is to love other people as Christ has loved us, to lay down our lives for them as Christ did for us. This applies as much to small groups as it does to marriages, families, workplaces, and larger Christian meetings. We go to small groups not primarily to have our needs met, but to meet the needs of others. Of course, we have needs too, and no doubt they will be met along the way—but we can let others worry about that. In fact, paradoxically, the more we focus on loving others, and doing whatever we can for them, the more encouragement and strength we find ourselves.

There are many ways we can love and encourage the other people in our groups. Here are five powerful ones (complete with alliterative titles).

1. The power of presence

This is the simplest and most obvious, but is no less powerful for being so. Just being there each week without fail is a powerful encouragement to the other members of the group. In making the group time a solid commitment, to be missed only in times of emergency, you send a very clear message to the other members: "Being with you matters very much to me. Unless something very important comes up, you can expect me. Encouraging you is a top priority."

Conversely, inconsistent attendance sends a somewhat less encouraging message: "I don't mind coming, but it's not that important. If I feel a bit tired or something else crops up, don't expect me. Being with you and encouraging you isn't really a very high priority for me."

Turning up regularly requires no extraordinary gifts or talent, but it is a powerful way of loving other people.

2. The power of preparation

Most small groups complete their evening's Bible study with a plaintive plea from the leader for people to read the passage and prepare for next week's study. The leader knows full well that most people won't, but there's no harm in trying!

However, preparing for the group time is another powerful way to love the members of the group. Of course, having read the

passage, or done the homework, greatly increases the benefit you yourself receive from the discussion. More importantly, however, it equips you to encourage others by what you say. Rather than throwing in whatever occurs to you at the time, you have actually thought about the Bible passage and the issues that it raises. You are much better prepared to say things that stimulate and encourage and teach others if you have bothered to give it some thought beforehand.

3. The power of prayer

Paul's friend and fellow worker, Epaphras, would have made an ideal small group member. According to Paul, he was always "wrestling in prayer" for the Colossians, that they might "stand firm in all the will of God". Paul was able to vouch that in doing so, Epaphras was "working hard for you" (Col 4:12-13).

Praying for others is hard work, but real work. It is one of the most loving things we can do for our fellow group members, not only because it is through our prayers that God does his work in people's lives, but because it is such a quiet, inconspicuous form of ministry. Making a casserole for someone, by comparison, is much more satisfying—you see something very tangible for your efforts, and you have the pleasure of delivering it to the person and receiving their warm expressions of thanks. Prayer has none of those rewards. You do it for one reason only: that you care for that person and want what is best for them in Christ. And so you pray for them.

4. The power of personality

The alliteration may be starting to stretch a little thin here, but the point is solid enough—that a powerful way of loving others in your small group is to be willing to share your own life and personality with them.

This is by no means an easy thing to do. Many of us would much rather keep quiet and not give too much away. However, by opening up and sharing our lives and thoughts and struggles and joys, we do others a great service. We not only show them that we have the very same struggles that they have (but thought they were alone in suffering); we also encourage them to open up as well.

Of course, it is anything but loving to indiscriminately dump everything we are thinking or feeling onto the group. We need to heed the advice of Proverbs and think carefully before we speak; as well as the words of Ephesians 4: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph 4:29).

5. The power of love

Whatever you do in the group—every word you say, every action—do it for the sake of others. Look for how you can support and help the leader. Look for ways to care for the members of the group—those who could really do with a phone call or visit; those who would benefit from having someone to pray or read the Bible with; those who need financial or other material help; those who just need a friend to have pizza and a video with.

Belonging to a small group can be a very demanding exercise. It can cost us our lives, because that is what it means to be a follower of Christ—to lay down our lives for the sake of others. If we grasp the possibilities, small groups represent an enormously fruitful opportunity for doing just that.



Loving those on the Inside

Perhaps above all else, God is a God of abundant love. God is the very epitome of love—1st John 4:16 says simply, “God is love”. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.

Because of this, as followers of Jesus, love ought to be ever present in our thoughts and our lives. We'll be **showing** people the love of God in Christ Jesus. We'll be wanting people to **grow** to love Him for themselves. And of course we'll be trying to **live lives of love** ourselves.

For the next three weeks we're going to be spending some time thinking about how we can enhance our 'love lives', in particular in our Sunday meetings at NightChurch.

To know how to better love one another it helps to think of specifics. What different 'groups' of people can you think of who come to NightChurch who would need to be loved in specific ways?



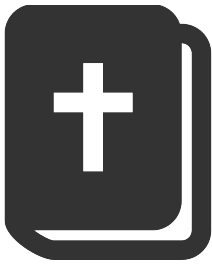
For the rest of this study we're going to be thinking about how to better love those *on the inside*, that is, those who regularly attend NightChurch, who are involved in a Small Group, and who have a network of relationships at church.

In what ways do you feel loved during our time together on Sunday?

In what ways could you feel more loved at our main meeting?

As we seek to love one another, what do you think our aim should be?

What the Bible says



To better love one another we need to be clear what our aim in loving one another is.

Read Hebrews 10:19-31. What is the good news of these verses (19-21)? Five times we're urged 'Let us...'. What are we to do (22-25)? What should we expect if we don't (26-31)? How would you summarise the aim of loving one another from these verses?

Read 1st Peter 4:7-11. Peter gives some commands in these verses, what are they (8-9)? What are our gifts to be used for (10)? Why (7, 11)? How would you summarise the aim of loving one another from these verses?

The hard work of loving one another



As those who are united to Christ and who are members of the church, we seek to live lives of love so that God will be glorified and so that none of us will be found to have fallen short of God's promised rest (Hebrews 4:1).

Practically, what will it look like to be obeying the commands mentioned in 1st Peter 4 on an average Sunday at NightChurch?

What do you think it means to 'faithfully administer God's grace in its various forms' (1st Peter 4:10)? How can you do that this coming Sunday?

Can you think of something we could be doing better as a church family to love one another and to make sure we're helping each other 'hang in there'? How can you help make this a reality?

Loving those on the Outer



In this study we're going to be thinking about how to better love those on the *outer*, that is, those who perhaps semi-regularly attend NightChurch, who may not be involved in a Small Group, who don't have a network of relationships at church and who rarely hang around after the formal part of the Sunday meeting or attend social events.

Why do you think people might fit into this category? (Do you think you fit into this category? If so, why do you think that is?)

Does it matter if people are in this category? Why, or why not?

What the Bible says



Read 1st Corinthians 12:12-27. How is the church (a gathering of believers) described here? What appeals most to you about this description? What do you think these verses have to say about what our attitude should be towards people being (and staying) 'on the outer'?

Read 1st John 1:1-4. In verses 1 & 2, John says that he's testifying to something and proclaiming it—what do you think he's talking about? What does he say are his motives for sharing this information? What do you think these verses have to say about what our attitude should be towards people being (and staying) on the outer?

Read Romans 12:4-16. What gifts are mentioned in these verses? Do you think any of these may be particularly helpful in loving those on the outer? What do you think these verses have to say about what our attitude should be towards people being (and staying) on the outer?

The hard work of loving one another



Practically, what will it look like to be living as 'one body' on an average Sunday at NightChurch?

Think of someone who you think is 'on the outer' at NightChurch. Think of something you can do this Sunday to love them and help them share in our fellowship. (Try and do it this Sunday... and as soon as you have, take a moment to think of what you'll do the following Sunday. Our God is a God of *ongoing, eternal* love!)

Loving those from the Outside



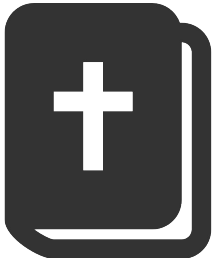
In this study we're going to be thinking about how to better love those *from the outside*, that is, those who are newcomers or visitors at our Sunday meeting.

Do you think our meeting is appealing for newcomers? Why, or why not?

Why might someone visit a church? Why do you think someone would stay in a church?

Is it essential for us to be a welcoming church? Why, or why not?

What the Bible says



Read Ephesians 4:1-6; 1st John 3:14-18; Galatians 6:10; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:9-17; and Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35. What do these examples of the early church show about their attitude toward fellowship and community? Is it essential for us to be a welcoming church?

Read the following passages. What does each passage tell us about God's character and how we ought to act? Is there a command in the passage that applies to welcoming? How can we apply this teaching practically in the way we as a church welcome and love those from outside? Is it essential for us to be a welcoming church?

Leviticus 19:33-34

Luke 15:1-7

Luke 14:12-14

Hebrews 13:1-2

Titus 1:5-9

Psalm 23

Matthew 25:31-46

Acts 28:30-31

Read the following passages from James. What stands out to you from each passage? Do they feel like a rebuke or an encouragement? How can we apply the teaching from these passages practically in the way we as a church welcome and love those from outside?

James 2:1-4

James 2:14-17

James 5:19-20

The hard work of loving one another



Remember, our primary goal is not to make newcomers feel 'warm and fuzzy', but to love them—and that means helping them know and follow Jesus. If we're ever going to talk to someone about Jesus it's when they come to NightChurch! Think about how you could be prepared to turn a conversation with a newcomer toward Jesus.

How did you feel the last time you went to a function where you didn't know anyone? What things could other people have done to put you more at ease? Now apply this to welcoming at church? Identify 4 practical things you could do to improve your welcoming. How can you make them happen?