



The Journey

STAGE THREE: *Relational Foundations*

The Journey
Stage 3: Relational Foundations

VANTAGEPOINT³ is a ministry committed to fostering depth and empowerment in local churches through Christian leadership formation. It is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that relies, in part, upon the generous contributions of others to fulfill its mission. For further information concerning VANTAGEPOINT³, its process and its materials, contact:

VANTAGEPOINT³
www.vantagepoint3.org

*Helping you discover who God is, who you are,
and what God wants to do through you.*

A
VANTAGEPOINT³
PROCESS

THE JOURNEY

Stage 3: Relational Foundations

A
VANTAGEPOINT³
PROCESS

The Journey
Stage 3: Relational Foundations

Copyright © 2009 by VANTAGEPOINT³

REVISED & REPRINTED 2013

All Rights Reserved

Developed by the VANTAGEPOINT³ Team

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1995, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

A
VANTAGEPOINT³
PROCESS

THE JOURNEY: STAGE THREE

Table of Contents

<i>ii</i>	Preface
1	Session 1: Soul Work: Our Need for Others
21	Session 2: Imitating Jesus' Way with Others
39	Session 3: Walking with Others
57	Session 4: Serving Together
67	Session 5: A Shared Meal
79	Session 6: A Spiritual Mentoring Relationship (Part I)
99	Session 7: A Spiritual Mentoring Relationship (Part II)
119	Session 8: Wrapping It Up
131	Appendices
137	Endnotes
145	Bible Reading & Journaling Pages

Preface

At its core, VantagePoint³'s *The Journey* seeks to invite you, along with a group of fellow travelers, into a personal exploration of three primary questions in your life: *Who is God? Who am I? What does God desire to do through me?* These are questions we never grow out of along the way of following Jesus—in reality, we grow *into* them.

In this concluding manual, Stage 3: *Relational Foundations*, we will explore the necessity of spiritual community in Jesus' way of forming us into persons of integrity and influence. In particular, we will pay attention to the role various mentoring relationships play in discovering and cooperating with God's already-present activity in our lives. Stage 3 will also prompt reflection upon what we need next in our own development as followers of Jesus. (Eight sessions)

BIBLE READING & JOURNALING

In Stage 3: *Relational Foundations*, we will return to where we left off with Luke's gospel in the first stage. Be sure to utilize the *Bible Reading & Journaling* pages found at the end of the manual as a place to put your thoughts and questions and prayers. Our *Bible Reading & Journaling* assignments will begin in preparation for Session 1 with Luke 9:51–11:54.

OUR SUGGESTED STAGE 3 BOOK

In Stage 3, Michael Card's *The Walk: The Life-Changing Journey of Two Friends* will invite reflection, conversation and prayer around the story of Michael's life-changing relationship with his mentor and friend, Dr. Bill Lane. Dr. Lane once said, "When God gives a gift, he wraps it in a person." Allow this story to invite you to consider the importance of spiritual friendship for your spiritual formation. Be open to being challenged to consider how you are investing your life in the lives of others. Who might God be inviting you to come alongside more intentionally? Read thoughtfully and with a prayerful spirit.

OUR STRENGTHSFINDER™ ASSESSMENT

Living Your Strengths: Discover Your God-given Talents and Inspire Your Community by Albert L. Winseman, Donald O. Clifton and Curt Liesveld will provide a way to discover and discuss the distinctive talents and strengths we bring to our communities. This book includes a code to take the online StrengthsFinder™ assessment in preparation for Session 4.

WE BELIEVE

We have developed *The Journey* believing the following to be true:

- You are ready to be challenged to grow deeper in your faith.
- You possess a high level of motivation as an adult learner.
- You are “the expert” on your own life and the many experiences you already possess.
- Your learning will happen best in a community of other learners.
- You will need guides along the way to help you “connect the dots” of your life.
- You can learn much from the lives of other men and women who have finished their journey faithful to God and others.

In particular, we believe God is already up to something very good in your life and community, something that calls forth from you a response with the whole of your life (Ephesians 2:10).

Blessings on the journey...

The VantagePoint³ Team

In Preparation for Session 1

Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: The Gospel of Luke

Throughout Stage 3 we will return to reading Luke's gospel. So for Session 1 of Stage 3, continue your reading of Scripture with Luke 9:51-11:54. Remember to keep your entries of the insights you are gaining. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor. You will find some pages for this journaling at the back of the Stage 3 manual.

Part 2 – Read Session 1: Soul Work: Our Need for Others

Read and complete the questions in Stage 3, Session 1. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the group.

SESSION ONE:

Soul Work: Our Need for Others

Invitation & Prayer

God the Creator arranged things so that we need each other.¹

Basil the Great
Theologian (c. 330–379 AD)

Faith is no do-it-yourself project. When it comes to our innermost selves,
the spiritual dimension, we need what only others can bring.
Imperfect as any friendship or mentoring relationship must be,
we will not go far if we don't enjoy something like it.
We need others with whom we can talk and pray.
Without relationships that bring spiritual nurture, our lives with God will suffer.²

Timothy Jones

How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.

Psalm 133 (TNIV)

Overview

This session will explore the reality that the Christian journey is always a shared way of life. In particular, we will introduce our need for others to come alongside us in our formation into Christlikeness.

- I. An Invitation to Discover
- II. Travelers on the Journey
- III. A Shared Way of Life

Focusing Question

- Does community matter to God? Elaborate.

Instruction & Reflection

One of the realities that has been underscored throughout *The Journey* is that God is already up to something good in this world, in our communities, and in our lives. Far before we even recognize his presence and activity among us, God is already working. This is not always easy to see, but from time to time God surprises us with a confirming glimpse, reminding us that we are not alone (John 14:16–19). God goes ahead of us as well as he comes behind us. So as we journey let us continue to pay attention with expectancy, open to being surprised by his kindness and power and generosity. As we begin Stage 3, let us pray the prayer of one such soul who found himself surprised by God's ongoing and loving presence in his life.

You have loved us first, O God, alas! We speak of it in terms of history as if You loved us first but a single time, rather than without ceasing. You have loved us first many times and every day and our whole life through. When we wake up in the morning and turn our soul toward You—You are there first—You have loved us first; if I rise at dawn and at that same second turn my soul toward You in prayer, You are there ahead of me. You have

loved me first. When I withdraw from the distractions of the day and turn my soul toward You, You are there first and thus forever. And we speak ungratefully as if You have loved us first only once.³

Søren Kierkegaard
(1813–1855)

I. An Invitation to Discover

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:12–14

The Gospel of John records that not long after Jesus had finished washing the disciples' feet and just hours before he would be crucified, he looked around the Passover table and said to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15; italics added). As followers of this same Jesus today, we need to listen and learn yet again with his first disciples around the Passover table. We need to ponder the intimate reality of his words to them—*I have called you friends*.

For in Jesus we discover not only a model for the journey, but also we encounter a personal invitation to this "life together." Jesus reaches out to us by his Spirit, speaking and sharing his stunning life with us. Again around that Passover table Jesus continued, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another" (John 15:16–17). This life together with Jesus, a life of *bearing fruit*, a life full of the *Father's provision*, unfolds into a life of commitment and care for others. Jesus looks around the table today and challenges us, "Love one another as I have loved you." In reflecting upon this passage, theologian Gerald Sittser writes that the church's success in being an effective witness in the world today.

...depends on only one thing: not great wealth, political power, sophisticated technology, superior organization, great preaching, public rallies, big buildings or creative programs, but the mutual love shared within the community of faith. *The quality of relationships among Christians* makes the church an effective witness for the gospel, for it creates the kind of community into which others are naturally drawn.... As one in

community, God draws us into the perfect mutual love that exists within himself and allows us to participate in that love. He calls the church to become a community of mutual love in the world so that people will see and experience not only the love that believers have for each other, but also the love that God has within himself. (italics added)⁴

I have called you friends...love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus' words are wonderfully inviting, but they are also very demanding. We have much to unlearn if we are going to live out these words within the nitty-gritty of our everyday lives. For we find ourselves today situated in a time and a place that foolishly encourages going it alone. We tend to adopt self-sufficient approaches to almost all of our greatest life challenges. In contrast, God invites us to discover what it means to live a shared life, a life in which we really get involved in each others' lives. This is simply part of our created design. Our maturing in Christ does not happen in isolation, it takes place in community, within the company of others who provide guidance and support along the journey.

Beginning with Jesus' earliest words to the men and women who would become his disciples, "Follow me," Christianity has understood itself to be a faith imparted by one to another. No matter what stage of development, we need spiritual companions—mentors and guides, friends and peers along the journey—in order to flourish over a lifetime of godly service. Moreover, we need to walk with others, helping them discover God's gracious activity in their lives and communities. Jesus has invited us into a life of learning and growing and friendship with God and others.

Stage 3: *Relational Foundations* concludes *The Journey* by focusing our reflection, conversation and prayer upon the critical necessity of this relational element to the Christian life. If we are to continue maturing into people of integrity, wisdom, compassion, and service, then we must honor the fundamental social character of our lives. We must listen again to Jesus' words, *I have called you friends...Love one another as I have loved you*. So over the next several weeks, we will pay attention to the development of a relational network or community that will stimulate and sustain faithful living in Jesus' name. We will reflect upon and engage in spiritual conversation with others. In particular, toward the end of this stage we will explore spiritual mentoring as one concrete expression or practice of this shared way of life. In all of this, may we become open to God's Spirit apprenticing us today in a more trusting and shared way of life in this world.



Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
(1906–1945)

Reflect & Respond

- *Through the sharing of our life narratives with each other over the past few weeks, what have you discovered or re-discovered about God's presence and provision in people's lives?*

- *Through the narrative-sharing experience, what have you learned about the power of community?*

- *What desires for community are stirring in you? Where do you feel enlivened by this? Where do you feel challenged? Convert your thoughts here into a written prayer.*

II. Travelers on the Journey

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24–25

A. Ancient journeying

Ever since Abram left the familiarity of Ur a few thousand years ago for the unfamiliarity of “a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1), *a traveler’s journey* has been a powerful image for the life of faith. The exodus from Egypt followed by 40 years in the wilderness, Judah’s exile to and return from Babylon, Jesus’ travels through Israel, Paul’s missionary journeys around the Mediterranean world—all of these and more form the portrait of a journey in the Hebrew and early Christian mindset. And within this mindset the faithful were travelers.

Up until more contemporary times, this image of a journey did not hold all the romantic notions it does for us today. At midlife St. Augustine (354–430 AD), reflecting upon his own growth and upon the struggles of pastoring his congregation in North Africa, concluded that the central image used by most of his contemporaries for describing the spiritual life—that of “a vertical ascent” or a ladder—was inadequate. Consequently, he increasingly depicted the Christian life as “a long journey.” And according to his biographer Peter Brown, Augustine “resented traveling; he always associated it with a sense of protracted labour and of the infinite postponement of his dearest wishes; and these associations will colour the most characteristic image of the spiritual life in his middle age.”⁶ Traveling in the ancient world was dangerous. Travelers faced many threats, including hunger, exhaustion, bad weather, robbery, shipwreck and death. Augustine did not have in mind the connotations of scenic vistas and exotic locations and safe adventures when he used this journey imagery in order to encourage and sustain his believing congregation.

Ancient journeying, not its modern counterpart, is the language of faithfulness. It always entails a risky, faith-full movement from the familiar into the unfamiliar. Walking with Jesus involves courage and endurance and conditioning and discouragement and patience and grace and vigilance. One of the clear messages that jumps off the pages of Scripture is that things in this world are “not the way they are supposed to be.”⁷ Our dominant cultural conditions are rarely conducive to living faithfully. Perhaps this is what John had in mind when he wrote, “Do not love the world or the things in the world...for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away....” (1 John 2:15–17). God is certainly



up to something wonderfully good in this world, in our communities, and in our lives. But any believer who desires to live faithfully in the light of this reality must not be naïve to the difficulty of the journey. Storms and setbacks will come. Jobs are lost, friends suffer, children rebel, cancer is diagnosed, spouses are unfaithful, companies go bankrupt, prayers seem to go unanswered, doubts in God persist. And such moments can be deeply disillusioning for the typical modern believer. But these conditions need not be the final word on this journey. There is yet more.

Reflect & Respond

- *Think through the life-stories you listened to over the past few weeks: What are some of the difficulties of the journey that you heard? That is, what are some of the conditions in people's lives—cultural or personal—that have made faithfulness to God challenging? Any consistent themes?*

The Word of God has become part of human history. He is one with us in our suffering; we are one with him in journeying toward the Father, in the Spirit.... He is in solidarity with us through all we experience, a hidden source of comfort and challenge inclining us toward his Father. It is not we who have chosen Christ; he has taken the initiative with us.

With him, too, and with us is the vast company of God's friends.... We are not alone. Often what we need is mysteriously supplied by one whom we would least expect to be an agent of grace. There is but one journey for human kind: all of us who make it make it together.⁸

Michael Casey

B. We must journey together

In her essay, "An Expedition to the Pole," Annie Dillard tells the stories of 19th century polar explorers. In scene after scene she recounts the determination, the ideals, the sometimes-foolishness, and the courage of these men who traveled to the edges and extremes of our world. Some survived the expeditions, but many died. They all faced severe conditions: cold and snow and loneliness and freezing rain and hunger and ice. Dillard writes, "Polar explorers must adapt to conditions. They must adapt, on the one hand, to

severe physical limitations; they must adapt on the other hand—like the rest of us—to ordinary emotional limitations....”⁹ She recounts one expedition in which the cold took such a physical and mental toll on the men that simply putting on their boots required over a half an hour. Ship after ship would get stuck in the ice, and in time, would be abandoned. The realities of the polar conditions subverted any of their Victorian ideals of a dignified journey. For example, the captain’s china and silverware would have to be left behind on the frozen ship. Survival necessitated a singleness of purpose.

Throughout the essay Dillard draws a comparison between the polar explorers and the local congregation with whom she worships. Like the 19th century explorers, our congregations are often ill adapted to the severe conditions they face. For example, the intensity of our busy and hectic lives, our inner realities of loneliness and anxiety, most often knock the feet out from under our ideals of a happy and peaceful Christian journey. In the midst of such conditions we must honestly face our limitations. Dillard writes, “Wherever we go, there seems to be only one business at hand—that of finding workable compromises between the sublimity of our ideas and the absurdity of the fact of us.”¹⁰ In this regard, one such compromise is clear:

“There is no such thing as a solitary polar explorer, fine as the conception is.”¹¹

If we are to persevere to the pole and back, if we are to connect good intentions with faithful living in Jesus’ name, then we must travel together. The conditions require it. Our limitations necessitate it. *There is no solitary Christian, fine as the conception is.* Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen shared, in his mid-fifties:

You might already have discovered for yourself how radically different traveling alone is from traveling together. I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers and sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart, and body. ¹²

How hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when we are alone! When alone, we too easily fail to recognize our need for others or others’ need for us. We either worry we will inconvenience our neighbor with our life or we fear our neighbors will overburden us with their lives. So we conceal our hearts, find shelter in our own survival skills, and keep our neighbors at arm’s length. Such a strategy underestimates both the conditions we face and our own limitations.

In this sense, human persons are not properly understood individually, just as a husband is not understood individually. One could not speak of a flourishing husband without consideration for his wife’s well being. Or how could a mother be wonderful if her children were all estranged from her? By definition,



these are relational terms and imply other people. Husband implies wife. Mother implies children. There is no singular husband or singular mother (or for that matter, son or daughter or friend or grandparent). Perhaps we would do well to consider human persons in a similar manner. *There is no such thing as a solitary human person, fine as the conception is.*

Many of our intentions for faithful living and service may be well meaning, even noble, but our individualistic approaches prove inadequate to the task. We have consciously or unconsciously sought to survive on our own, and have found, over time, our lives desperately lacking, our souls shriveled, without company. We have too often closed off our hearts to others, and thereby dishonored God's intent for our lives. For we humans are not the sorts of things that survive or flourish on our own. God designed us for a way of life shared with him and with others.

III. A Shared Way of Life

Does anyone really know me?

Loneliness is such a pervasive experience in our individualistic and competitive culture. Many believers are startled and saddened by the degree of aloneness they have experienced in adulthood. From the outside it seems like family and work and church would provide a vital sense of place and belonging. For many, though, the reality of their hectic and competitive lives keeps them skimming across the surface of their relationships with spouse and children and coworkers and fellow believers.

For Sam, well into his late forties, this realization came in the form of a question. After a few decades of taking God seriously, serving wherever he found himself, trying to honor God with commitments at work and home, he began to get a growing sense that something was wrong. A question broke the surface of his awareness one evening: *In the midst all of the stuff that I am doing for God and others, does anyone really know me?* This question captured his inner unrest. He began to recognize his soul's impoverishment, the lack of depth and connection in his life and relationships. Many people try to duck this unrest with greater activity or achievement. Others become depressed and paralyzed by the loneliness and withdraw further. But for Sam this haunting question prompted considerable reflection upon the shape of his life. He began to mull over another way of life, one in which he might make greater space for others. Slowly but surely Sam's decisions reflected greater relational priorities. One simple decision, like making regular coffee times with a gentleman he always looked up to and admired, seemed to awaken an awareness of God's goodness in his life. Sam began to suspect that the Spirit of God was converting his inner unrest and loneliness into an invitation to something greater, or perhaps something truer, a more human and holy way of life.

The hunger for connection is one of the most fundamental desires of the human heart. We are like immigrants in a new land, with no family or friends and no sense of place.... Like pieces of a puzzle seeking their adjoining pieces, we long for connections that will assure us that we belong.

But it is not just connections in general we seek. In the core of our being we yearn for intimacy. We want people to share our lives. We want soul friends. We were never intended to make the pilgrimage alone. And attempting to make the spiritual journey on our own is particularly hazardous.¹³

David Benner

A. The triune God created us as relational creatures

Pastor John Ortberg writes:

God did not create human beings because he was lonely or bored.... God created human beings because he was so in love with community that he wanted a world full of people to share it with. He wanted to invite them all to the dance. And life within the Trinity was to be a pattern for our lives. Neal Plantinga writes, “At the center of the universe, self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God.” The persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, defer to one another. Each person, so to speak, makes room for the other two.¹⁴

God revealed himself in Jesus as three persons in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Triune God, who has been in relationship throughout eternity, stands at the center of all reality. And God has created us as relational creatures to mirror his image. This is certainly one of the things that the Scriptures communicate when they testify in Genesis to God creating humanity in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). God’s self-revelation in Jesus further fleshes out the relational implications of being God’s distinctive image-bearers. Theologian Stanley Grenz writes:

Because God is a plurality-in-unity, the ideal for humankind does not focus on solitary persons, but on persons-in-community. God intends that we reflect the divine nature in our lives. This is only possible as we move out of isolation and into godly relationships with others. Consequently, true Christian living is life-in-relationship or life-in-community.¹⁵

We were not only created from intimacy, but also for intimacy.¹⁶ God has created us with an intrinsic need and capacity for relationships. And this need for intimacy has both *vertical* and *horizontal* dimensions. That is, we have been created for (1) relationship with God and (2) relationship with others.

1. The vertical dimension: *relationship with God*

We are made for relationship *with God*. The biblical testimony from Genesis 3 onward recounts the myriad of ways in which humans have sought to deny this vertical dimension of our humanity. And our denial of this *life-with-God* has made an absolute disaster of our lives and of all creation (Romans 8:18–23). But the Scriptures also recount God graciously seeking out the disobedient, the hiding, and the lost as he did in the garden by calling out to Adam and Eve, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). God’s Eden-invitation to come out of hiding—most fully expressed in Jesus—recurs throughout all of history. Jesus goes so far as to express it this way:



Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4–5

God seeks us out for an intimate relationship because he knows who we are and what we need.

2. The horizontal dimension: *relationship with others*

We are also created in the image of God for relationship *with each other*. The Genesis 2:4–25 account of creation and life in the garden poignantly reflects this horizontal dimension of our relational nature. After putting Adam in the garden to take care of it, God concludes, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). This declaration by God reaches far beyond the marriage covenant, into our basic human need for community. Theologian Paul Wadell points out:

God’s original insight into our human condition is that it is not good for us to be alone. We need companionship and partnership with others if our souls are not to shrivel. As Elizabeth Achtemeier observed, God’s first declaration that it is not good for us to be alone is the first of many “merciful words” God speaks to humanity. It is telling that the first merciful word from God concerns our need for human intimacy and companionship; that this insight comes at the dawn of our creation suggests from the very beginning we stand in absolute need of another.¹⁸

We are social and relational creatures. And it is in relationship with others that God nurtures us into an understanding and acceptance of who we are, reflectors of his image. Wadell continues:

We are living, breathing images of a Trinitarian God whose very life is the fullness and perfection of intimacy. Born from this love, we are called to mirror in our lives together the intimacy, friendship, and community we see perfectly displayed in God. *God is intimacy*. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a perfect communion of love.¹⁹

This is quite a high calling—to mirror with our lives together the intimacy, friendship, and community we see perfectly displayed in God. Paul frames the vision, “We are members one of another” (Romans 1:5). There are so many other competing values in today’s world that undermine and challenge this vision of intimacy. A question that will weave through our considerations and prayers over the next few weeks is this: *how does the actual shape of our lives reflect or honor this call for a vital relational life with God and others?*

People are all around us, but they are also inside us. Each of us has a “community of the heart” made up of those people who are most important to us. Our most powerful feelings relate to them, feelings such as love, anger, jealousy, hatred, rivalry, gratitude, hero worship, status seeking, and the urge to dominate. A big part of our inner life is taken up with people, and they loom large in our memories, fantasies, and hopes. So the shape of our living is largely created by our relationships with people....

That is how hearts are shaped—by the music of voices we make our own and by wounds with many faces. To ask “Who am I?” leads straight to the other people who are part of me.

Is there any layer of self where there are no others? We find ourselves partly by remembering those who are the most deeply woven into us and by continuing to relate to them. An experienced psychotherapist told me that a great deal of his work has to do with the quality of the “community” that clients carry around inside them.¹⁷

David Ford

B. *Our challenge today: An individualistic way of life*

If this biblical description of how God designed us is accurate, then it makes sense why we long so deeply for another *way of life* from that which we have been given by our culture. “People are longing to rediscover true community. We have had enough of loneliness, independence, and competition,” writes Jean Vanier.²⁰ Our life stories are too often told today as a sequence of independent and unshared moments. And our hearts cry out. We yearn to know and be known more intimately. Amidst the many things we are up to, we too can relate to Sam’s question: *Does anyone really know me?* We desire deeper, more enduring and meaningful relationships with others and with God.

However, the myth of a solitary Christian remains a most tempting story for any of us who seek to grow up into Christ.²¹ We have a hard time letting go of this stubborn myth because we certainly live in a very individualistic culture. And this culture works like a template by shaping the way we all see and live in the world. By just living and breathing in this part of the world, we have encountered subtle and relentless cultural pressures that cause us to interpret our lives as autonomous individuals. Consequently, our notions of growing up are many times reduced to Christianized self-improvement plans or “Jesus and me” sorts of narratives. Pastor Gordon MacDonald writes in this regard:

The faith taught to so many of us is a faith of individualism. It centers heavily on the transaction between Jesus and me. It rarely focuses on the idea of Jesus and *us*....

It has been pointed out to me more than once that Jesus never seems to have a one-on-one conversation with any of his disciples. Even those that seem to be personal are always done in the company of others who were in a position to listen and form their own conclusions.

It was some of my Asian Christian friends who began to convince me that there was an entirely different way to understand the Bible: through the lens of *community*, God doing His work in our lives through one another. In other words, I cannot grow into what God wants me to be (and do) unless I am in tight formation with some others.²²

This is where the gospel of Jesus both confronts and invites many of us believers in today’s world. God’s life challenges not just the *content* of our individual life, but he also challenges the *template*—our isolating way of thinking and living.

We must not underestimate how these individualizing cultural pressures stand against a life “rooted and grounded in God’s love” (Ephesians 3:17), a life being “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for



God” (Ephesians 2:22). God intends not just to transform our lives; he also intends for us to share in his life and work in the world. And God intends for us to do this *together*. In Ephesians 4:7–16 the apostle Paul communicates a vision of maturity that one New Testament scholar has summarized this way, “each member contributes to the growth of the body.”²³ This is the mystery of how God’s Spirit nurtures us as Christ’s body. Or, as one person has put it, God patiently matures us from a “lonely I” to a “glorious we.”

Reflect & Respond

- Read through Ephesians 4:1–16: what are the ways Paul’s words challenge a “Jesus and me” sort of approach to faith and maturity?

God created humans in his own image, which includes his very essence as community. We are designed to enjoy and to develop mutual relationships of self-giving love, just like the Trinity. But the pain and brokenness and disappointments of life often leave us deeply isolated, unwilling to extend ourselves relationally. Yet intimate relationships remain one of the primary ways God intends to be present with us and among us. We tend to forget this!²⁴

Mindy Caliguire

C. Filled with coming-alongside-ness

And Saul’s son Jonathan went to David at Horesh
and helped him find strength in God.

1 Samuel 23:16

We find ourselves where we are today because at some point a person or a series of people moved toward us and lovingly paid attention to our particular lives. For some it was a grandparent or a teacher early in



In the middle of battles with cancer, arm surgeries, divorce, and finances; in the middle of struggles against homosexuality, bulimia, self-hatred, loneliness, and depression, we yearn for intimacy. We can't help it. We can't stop it. As surely as birds were made to fly and fish to swim, we were made for community, for the kind of community the Trinity enjoys, for spiritual community. And to the degree we experience it, we change, we grow, we heal.²⁷

Larry Crabb

our lives, for others it was a neighbor or a coworker or a pastor. Their impact is written all over the stories of our lives. Their attention may have lasted for decades or it may have been a penetrating conversation at a critical time in our lives. Most often such soul companionship is unspectacular, but its effects are dramatic. Keri Wyatt Kent uses a very helpful phrase to describe what happens as we allow the Spirit to lead us into sharing our lives in this manner. She writes:

If we are led by the Spirit, we will increasingly imitate God and become people who are filled with “coming-alongside-ness.” That is, we listen to God and people and then come into their story, get involved with them enough that we can point out where God is in their story and allow them to do that for us as well. When we are full of come-alongside-ness, we will be willing to walk with people through their pain; we will listen before we try to fix. We will be with people.²⁵

Coming-alongside-ness. Beyond the routine of our lives, beyond the mere roles or functions that we play, the Spirit calls us to be with people in a way that honors both his purposes and our well-being. Testimonies of *coming-alongside-ness* are strewn through the Bible. Just think about Naomi with Ruth, Jonathan and David, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy to name a few. And it is in these friendships that we find women and men empowered and sustained for holiness and influence. In reflecting on the importance of Jonathan's friendship with David, Eugene Peterson writes of our deep need for such soul companions today. He writes:

Each of us has contact with hundreds of people who never look beyond our surface appearance. We have dealings with hundreds of people who the moment they set eyes on us begin calculating what use we can be to them, what they can get out of us. We meet hundreds of people who take one look at us, make a snap judgment, and then slot us into a category so that they won't have to deal with us as persons. They treat us as something less than we are; and if we're in constant association with them, we *become* less.

And then someone enters into our life who isn't looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what's really going on in us, is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what is deepest within us. A friend....²⁶

We will not make it alone—we live amidst serious opposition to Jesus' relational way of life. We need *friends* as Peterson describes them here. God sustains us on the journey in part through the people who come alongside us, reminding us who we are and who God is, confirming where we are heading and how we might get there. Throughout the remainder of this Stage 3: *Relational Foundations* we will unpack at length some of the ingredients of this *coming-alongside-ness* or this *shared way of life*, but for now we want to encourage some reflection upon those who have been these key people in our lives.

Reflect & Respond

- Look through the Scriptures with a friendship lens. Besides the relationships already mentioned, what other testimonies of coming-alongside-ness do you recall throughout the biblical narrative?

- In your journey, who have been the friends that Peterson defined? We have all had key people in our lives who have positively impacted our journey one way or another at different times (i.e. childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, later adulthood). Think along the whole of your life. Identify three or four people who have come alongside you and helped shape your life. Of each of these people ask (1) What type of relationship or role did they play? (teacher, family member, coach, friend, coworker, etc.) and (2) How was your life enhanced, empowered, or changed by this relationship?

- *Think through your list: What qualities of character and style do you notice are essential to this type of soul friendship?*

Prayer

*If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!*

Ecclesiastes 4:10

*Father,
thank you for those
who have helped us up.
Spirit, be generous.
In Jesus' name.*

In Preparation for Session 2

Part 1 – Bible Reading and Journaling: The Gospel of Luke

Read and reflect upon Luke 12-14. Remember to keep journal entries of any insights you are gaining or prayers that are emerging in your heart. Be prepared to share your thoughts and discoveries with your group and/or mentor. You will find space for this journaling at the back of the manual.

Part 2 – An Intentional Spiritual Conversation

How might we grow with one another as disciples of Jesus, being transformed into Christlikeness? How might we learn to listen well? How might we deepen our paying attention to what God is up to? As we acknowledge our desire and need for companionship on the way of our spiritual journeys, we invite you to identify someone with whom you will initiate a three-week intentional spiritual conversation. Appendix A at the back of this manual (pages 132-133) provides a suggested guide for these conversations. At this time, pray for the Spirit's leading to guide you to a person and listen with anticipation.

Part 3– The Walk

Begin your reading of Michael Card's *The Walk: The Life-Changing Journey of Two Friends* by reading the *Prologue* and *Part 1: The Concept*. As you read, reflect on the ways that others have helped in your journey of growing as a disciple. How have others helped you see the life of Jesus in new or deepening ways?

Part 4 – Read Session 2: Imitating Jesus' Way with Others

Read and complete the questions in Session 2. Be prepared to share your discoveries with the group.