

A Way of Life



STAGE ONE: *Friendship with God*

A Way of Life
Stage 1: Friendship with God

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

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www.vantagepoint3.org

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

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Stage 1: Friendship with God

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A WAY OF LIFE: STAGE ONE

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Preface

THE PROCESS AT A GLANCE

VantagePoint3's *A Way of Life* encourages greater attention to and alignment with God's gracious way in your life, your community, and the world. Three overarching themes will structure the learning: friendship with God, community with others, and mission on the way. At its core, *A Way of Life* invites you into a set of reflections, practices, and relationships that will help you explore and sustain a way of life faithful to God's good work.

Stage 1: Friendship with God invites us to pay attention to a life of growing intimacy/communion with God.

Session 1: Invitation to Discover

Session 2: Called to Friendship with God

Session 3: Bible Reading

Session 4: Prayer

Session 5: Worship

Session 6: A Sabbath Rhythm

Session 7: Retreat

Stage 2: Community with Others invites us to pay attention to a life of being with others as God's people.

Session 1: Called to Community

Session 2: Living Gratefully

Session 3: Living Truthfully

Session 4: Living Hospitably

Session 5: Spiritual Gifts

Session 6: Celebration & A Shared Meal

Session 7: Forgiveness (*A book discussion*)

Stage 3: Mission on the Way invites us to pay attention to a life of being sent by God into the world.

Session 1: God's Mission

Session 2: Called to Ministry

Session 3: Connecting Faith & Work (Field Trips)

Session 4: Connecting Faith & Work (Debriefing)

Session 5: Discerning Personal Calling

Session 6: Developing a Rule of Life

Session 7: The Adventure

PRAYER OF EXAMEN

Throughout all three stages of *A Way of Life*, we will adopt the practice of prayerfully reviewing our week. Participants will be posed two questions: *Where were you most grateful? Where were you least grateful?* Each session includes a page to help keep track of discoveries and to guide a weekly sharing time. Our hope is that through this practice we might become more intentional and more skilled in paying attention with God to the everydayness of our lives.

BIBLE READING & JOURNALING

We will be reading together John's gospel throughout the process. We want to pay particular attention to Jesus' relationship with the Father in our reading. Be sure to read the introduction to our reading and journaling of John's gospel found in the back of this manual. Our *Bible Reading & Journaling* assignments of John will begin in preparation for Session 3.

SUPPLEMENTAL STAGE 1 BOOK

A Way of Life will also include an additional book to supplement each of the stage manuals. The authors of these books offer thoughtful perspectives, as well as their honesty, experience, and wisdom from following Jesus over the long haul. Read with both a critical mind and a prayerful spirit. In Stage 1, Richard Foster's *Sanctuary of the Soul: Journey into Meditative Prayer* (IVP, 2011) will invite reflection, conversation, and prayer around the practice of meditation and prayer. We will spend a portion of our retreat discussing Foster's insight and experience.

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

We invite both participants and facilitators to enter into a mentoring relationship during *A Way of Life*. This relationship can be a safe place where we unpack our lives and "learnings" along the way. The role of the mentor is to be a wise presence that shows an interest in what we are learning by asking questions and listening and praying with us. The mentoring guide *Walking Alongside Others* has been developed to assist the mentor in this role.

ORGANIZATION OF EACH SESSION

Each of the sessions will be organized into these seven sections:

Invitation & Prayer

The session begins with brief quotations or verses that reflect the learning content of the session. Pay attention to what stands out to you from these short excerpts. While going over this section during the weekly group gathering, some find it helpful to briefly pray together. Be mindful that our time together includes God's company and care.

Prayer of Examen

Each session will include a page to structure our prayer of examen practice.

Overview

A sentence briefly summarizes the session as a lead-in to the coming reflection and discussion time.

Focusing Question

The Focusing Question attempts to help us think about our own preconceived notions regarding the upcoming subject matter—"What is it that we bring to the table?" As such, the questions tend to be non-objective (meaning there will tend to be no right or wrong answers). Our personal engagement with this question will allow for a more fruitful time interacting with the material in the *Instruction & Reflection* section.

Instruction & Reflection

This section contains the bulk of the session's content upon which the rest of our learning together is built. Read the material and work through the questions in this section prior to meeting with the group. It is essential that we give time to digest, verbally and otherwise, the flow of the session. In addition to answering the *Reflect & Respond* questions that are in each session, mark (or underline or question mark, etc.) those things that really stand out personally. Use the shaded space in the margins to journal thoughts or take notes along the way.

During weekly group gatherings, the facilitator will provide adequate time to discuss those parts of the session that are particularly moving or thought-provoking. So from week to week pay attention to those places in the session that are particularly engaging. Come prepared to share some of these places with the group.



Each session may include a number of windows in the margins that will help enhance the flow of thought developing in the session. Most windows stand apart and are meant to generate further personal reflection and insight into the material by introducing new authors, challenging thoughts, words from Scripture, prayers, songs, poems, or even exercises.

Prayer

Each session will close with a prayer or a thought about prayer. Remind one another each session to be prayerfully attentive to what God might be saying to us during the week. Our personal preparation and our weekly group conversations are all done in the company of a profoundly creative and gracious God who invites us to more holy and human way of life.

In Preparation for the Next Session

This final section is situated in between the sessions and provides an opportunity to look ahead to the coming week's assignments. Typically it will include a Bible reading and journaling assignment, a reading from the recommended text, and an assignment to read and complete the questions for the next session.

WHAT WE CARE ABOUT

We are committed to the good work of fostering depth and igniting faithful service by providing churches and organizations transformative processes that help people discover in a deeper way who God is, who they are, and what God desires to do through them. In cooperation with the Spirit's leading and work, we hope to see:

- Individuals particularized, awakened and ignited for Kingdom life and influence
- Christian leaders paying greater attention to those around them
- Churches and organizations becoming vital places of learning
- A growing tribe of Christian leaders gripped by a more relational way of doing life and ministry

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

SESSION ONE:

**An Invitation
to Discover**

Invitation & Prayer

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you,
even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field,
which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven,
will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore, do not worry, saying,
“What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?”

For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things;
and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:28b–33

The hearing ear and the seeing eye—
the Lord has made them both.

Proverbs 20:12

The Christian life is the practice of living in what God has done and is doing.¹

Eugene Peterson

The God who has always been a part of our stories
invites us to become much more a part of God’s story, and to see what will happen.²

Tom Sine

Overview

This session will introduce *A Way of Life* by (1) inviting reflection and conversation around some overarching themes and elements of the process, and (2) introducing the spiritual practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week.

- I. An Invitation to Discover
- II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship
- III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

Focusing Question

- Why did you say “yes” to *A Way of Life*? What are your hopes for the process?

Instruction & Reflection

I. An Invitation to Discover

There is a story of a five-year-old boy and his mother, who every night put him to bed. She came into his room to talk to him, and to tuck him in, and to pray with him. Some nights they sang together—“Jesus loves me, this I know...” or “The B-I-B-L-E! Yes, that’s the book for me!” or “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” or any other of those many early songs he never remembered actually learning, but always somehow seemed to know.

One night while they sang, Mother began to harmonize with the melody of the song. As the boy stuck to the familiar tune, he could hear and feel the movement of her notes weave beautifully with his. Her voice added depth and breadth and beauty to this simple song. The song felt larger, more beautiful.

“What are you doing?” he asked her.

“I am singing the harmony,” she replied.

Harmony. He had never heard that word before. They continued singing, Mother harmonizing, now deepening, now widening, now filling in, her voice dancing lovingly around his. It was beautiful.

Then she said, "Now you try! You be the harmony."

So she sang the melody, and the boy tried with everything he had to respond, to meet her voice as she had met his. His child's voice hunted for the harmony, but the boy found that his voice only collided and strained and clashed with hers. The resulting sound was many things, but not beautiful. How frustrating it was for the boy!

Still, his mother encouraged him over and again, "Keep trying," until, seemingly by accident, his voice met hers. For a moment, just a moment, he added something very beautiful—and she was the melody, and he was the harmony. And it was wonderful.

For him, that night had been a beginning, an initiation. And night after night he would learn—through much frustration and disharmony, but sometimes with wonder, and always among song—to be the harmony.

In so many ways we are like the boy of this story. In this life of faith, we are learning to harmonize. And it requires much persistence and thought and encouragement and practice. The Scriptures offer us quite a melody—of creation and redemption, of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, of love and truth and mercy—which runs through history. The Scriptures also provide us with quite a few lessons in harmonizing with this melody. The biblical witness of Israel and the Church portrays men and women who sought to align—and realign—their lives with God's way in the world. They learned to "hear the melody" and to "be the harmony."

But when one steps back from this witness of Scripture, and from the testimonies of church history, one has to wonder whether today, in North America especially, so much of our growth as individuals and as communities has been stunted by believing our part is melody, not harmony. Could it be that we have been offered too many models and admonitions to be solo artists while we have instead been invited and designed to join a harmonizing chorus? Have we insisted on singing the melody when we are created rather to sing the harmony?

Throughout *The Journey* we sought to discover more deeply what God is up to in the world, in our communities, and in our unique lives. We looked through the Scriptures; we explored our life stories and our many relationships for the shaping work of God's Spirit—in us, with us, through us, among us. That is, in short, *The Journey* was an extended exercise in listening to the Melody and in learning our harmony.

In *A Way of Life*, this exercise continues. Such listening and learning must become *our way of life* if we hope to mature and sustain a harmonizing presence to God's melody in this world.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that prophets in the Scriptures offered an alternative portrait of life—by both *critiquing* the way people were living as well as *energizing* them to a new way of living.³ And in this regard, Jesus prophetically ministered in the first century: his vision of reality both *critiqued* the prevailing visions of the day and *energized* his followers toward a new way of life.

Surely, Jesus' life marked those who walked with him in Judea and Galilee. We know their stories from Scripture (Peter, John, and the rest of the twelve; Mary, Martha, Lazarus and the many other disciples like them; even Paul). Lives of compassion, service, humility, and sacrifice began covering the landscape wherever Jesus invested his attention.

But Jesus' prophetic presence was not limited to the first century. Many throughout the centuries have sought to walk with him, and many, by walking with him, have found something akin to "a family resemblance" to Jesus, since their way of living takes on the character of his way of life. By God's Spirit, Jesus' life of prayer and community and mission has spread throughout history.

Our sense, though, is that we need to be reminded again of Jesus' prophetic way. Too often, it seems, we have uncritically *settled* for "just enough Jesus" so that our lives do not become too affected, altered, or unsettled. So we wonder now, How well are we listening to the gospel, and how might the gospel be challenging our dominant understandings and practices of life in the twenty-first century? Even today, Jesus' way of life remains critical and energizing, but are we really awake and attuned to it?

Throughout *A Way of Life* we want to offer conversations and relationships and practices that thoughtfully encourage and frame Christian faithfulness. Our hope in all of this is that we might each (1) grow in our capacity to hear how Jesus continues to lovingly speak into our lives (*hear the melody*) and (2) grow in our capacity and courage to faithfully respond to and live out Jesus' way in the world (*sing our harmonizing part*). For out of a growing attentiveness to God's presence and activity we will always find ourselves being invited by the Spirit to cooperate and align our lives with God's work. This is who we are. "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be *our way of life*" (Ephesians 2:10, italics added). By Jesus' life and power, and by the Spirit's guidance, we will continue always to learn, to live—to sing—the harmony, even amidst a culture that demands we master our own melodies.

- What jumped out to you from this invitation to discover?

II. The Structure: A Life of Discipleship

The Christian faith is a way of life lived in response to Jesus' invitation to "follow me" (Mark 8:34).⁴

Christian Scharen

Henri Nouwen began his 1995 *Leadership Journal* article "Moving from Solitude to Community to Ministry" with the observation that the words "discipleship" and "discipline" come from the same root word. He writes,

Once you have made the choice to say, "Yes, I want to follow Jesus," the question is, "What disciplines will help me remain faithful to that choice?" If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to live a disciplined life.

By discipline I do not mean control. If I know the discipline of psychology or of economics, I have a certain control over a body of knowledge. If I discipline my children, I want to have a little control over them.

But in the spiritual life, the word discipline means "the effort to create some space in which God can act." Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you're not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn't planned or counted on.⁵



Nouwen is fundamentally concerned with the sort of life it will take to connect a good start on the journey with a good finish. How does one develop and sustain a way of life that is faithful to Jesus? Nouwen goes on to unpack three overarching disciplines of solitude, community, and ministry. He points out that the gospel writer records in Luke 6:12–19 (1) Jesus spending the night in prayer on the mountain (the discipline of solitude), (2) Jesus choosing at dawn the twelve apostles from among his many disciples (the discipline of community), and then (3) Jesus coming down with the twelve apostles to minister to the crowd (the discipline of ministry). He encourages the reader to take note of Jesus' order here—from solitude to community to ministry. He underscores the significance of the order by way of confession:

So often in ministry, I have wanted to do it by myself. If it didn't work, I went to others and said, "Please!" searching for a community to help me. If that didn't work, maybe I'd start praying.

But the order that Jesus teaches us is the reverse. It begins by being with God in solitude; then it creates a fellowship, a community of people with whom the mission is being lived; and finally this community goes out together to heal and to proclaim good news.⁶

So many of us resonate with Nouwen's confession. We know what it is like to become deeply concerned about some need we notice in our community. We know what it is like to attack that need with our strength and resources. We also know what it is like to feel "in over our head" in addressing the need and, consequently, through some sort of concerted effort, to rally others around our concern. And we know what it is like to become so frustrated and fatigued in our efforts that we are at our wit's end, ready to throw in the towel. In the end, we remember what it is like to end up on our knees in these moments, really praying now as if for the first time—"God, help!" Too frequently we, like Nouwen, move from ministry to community to prayer. And most often this rhythm stems from an I'll-do-it-by-myself, lone-ranger set of impulses that violate Jesus' overall way of life.

Now we don't want to impose this template too rigidly, but we do think that Jesus' movement of solitude to community to ministry will provide a helpful framework for our learning this year. While we are going to slightly deviate from Nouwen's naming of these three disciplines, their overarching concerns and flow will structure our reflections, practices, and conversations around Jesus' way of life in the world. Stage 1: *Friendship with God* will invite us to pay attention to a life of growing intimacy or communion with God. Stage 2: *Community with Others* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being with others as God's people. Stage 3: *Mission on the Way* will invite us to pay attention to a life of being sent by God into the world. Unfolded in these stages are sets of disciplines or practices by which we learn to turn toward God and others, and thereby participate with God's compassionate and reconciling way in the world.

As Jesus' disciple, I am his apprentice in kingdom living. I am learning from him how to lead my life in the Kingdom of the Heavens as he would lead my life if he were I. It is my faith in him that led me to become his disciple. My confidence in him simply means that I believe he is right about everything: that all that he is and says shows what life is at its best, what it was intended by God to be. "In him was life and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4 NAS)⁷

Dallas Willard

III. Practice: Prayer of Examen

O Lord, you have searched me and known me....
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139: 1, 23–24

The practice of prayerfully reviewing one's day or week has been a prescription of development handed down to us throughout the centuries—and a good prescription at that. Ignatius of Loyola formalized the practice in his *Spiritual Exercises*—the prayer of examen. It involves a prayerful review of the events of the day in order to discern God's presence and leading in our lives, where the Spirit might be at work loving, affirming, convicting, revealing, instructing, nudging, and guiding amidst the ordinary stuff of our lives. In the book *Sleeping with Bread*, Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn underscore the importance of this prayerful review of the day by drawing a comparison.

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."⁸

The Linns suggest that this practice of examen can become the spiritual equivalent of the children holding the bread. They ask the reader to daily respond to two questions in prayerfully reviewing their day: (1) Where was I most grateful today? (What gave me life?) (2) Where was I least grateful today? (What drained me?). For some this is best done as one goes to bed; for others it is engaged in first thing in the morning as one looks back on yesterday before praying for grace and guidance for the day ahead. For many this practice is integrated with a regular reading of the Scriptures.

The practice of examen in its many different varieties is not intended to be some sort of inventory or checklist we legalistically work through, but rather an invitation to dialogue daily with God about the ordinary everydayness of our lives. The reflection and prayer associated with this practice are to be engaged in the spirit of Psalm 139's psalmist—*You who know me so well, God; search me yet again and lead me in your way.*

Throughout all three stages of *A Way of Life* we would like to adopt a regular prayerful review of our week. We will include a page in each session to help us keep track of what we are discovering week-to-week. Our hope is that through this practice we might become more intentional and more skilled in paying attention with God to the everydayness of our lives, and thereby submit our whole lives into the trustworthy hands of God. Here is a simple structure to guide us.

Reviewing the week:

- *Where were you most grateful? (What is giving you life?)*
- *Where were you least grateful? (What is draining you?)*
- *What might God be inviting you to notice?*
- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*

Perhaps our daily recollections will lead to thankfulness or wonder; or to remorse or sorrow for something we did or didn't do—something we may need to confess to God; or to confusion or dilemmas we were not aware of, things that we seek God for, either for guidance or confirmation. A key in recollecting one's week is to bring all of it before God sincerely, courageously, patiently. Let us also be mindful of our kingdom responsibility as we prayerfully review our week—of the opportunity to bless others with what we are noticing about God or ourselves. Each session will provide opportunity for us to share some of what we are learning through this practice.

Reflect & Pray _____

As we close this first session of A Way of Life spend some quiet time to prayerfully reflect upon these questions. Allow these questions to invite truthful conversation with God.

- *What has been giving you life over the past month?*



I discovered that if you really keep your eye peeled to it and your ears open, if you really pay attention to it, even such a limited and limiting life as the one I was living...opened up onto extraordinary vistas. Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly....If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.⁹

Frederick Buechner

- *What has been draining life out of you over the past month?*

- *What is God inviting you to notice?*

- *Convert your thoughts into a written prayer.*

Prayer

*Lord,
I believe
my life is touched by you,
that you want something
for me, and of me.
Give me ears
to hear you,
eyes to see the tracing of your finger,
and a heart quickened
by the motions of your Spirit.¹⁰*

Ted Loder

In Preparation for Session 2

Part 1 – Praying for and Identifying a Mentor

We want to encourage you to again link up with a spiritual mentor during *A Way of Life*. Spend the next week praying that God might guide you to someone who might be a good fit for your mentoring relationship. You may want to resume your mentoring relationship from *The Journey*; or you may want to find a new mentor. Come next week with some possible names of people who could offer you this relationship throughout *A Way of Life*.

Part 2 – A Way of Life Assessment

We want to invite you to take a brief online assessment now at the beginning of *A Way of Life* experience and then again near the completion of Stage 3 in order to help you reflect back on how you may have grown through the process. The assessment process will also provide you perspective for some next steps in your development. To take Part 1 of the assessment go to vantagepoint3.org/assessment. VantagePoint³ will send you your results upon completion of Part 2 of the assessment toward the end of Stage 3 of *A Way of Life*.

Part 3 – Read and Prepare for Session 2: Called to Friendship with God

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