

A decorative border made of watercolor washes in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, framing the central text.

LEADING A TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

STUDY GUIDE

Six Sessions for Personal Reflection,
Group Conversation, and Next Steps

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
SESSION 1	
Longing for More in Community	7
SESSION 2	
Theology That Shapes the Soul	14
SESSION 3	
Solitude: Living from the Center Out	21
SESSION 4	
Community: Sustaining Us in the Mystery	29
SESSION 5	
Mission: In God for the World	36
SESSION 6	
Discerning a Transforming Way of Life in Community	41
Appendix: On the Road to Becoming a Transforming Community: A Tool for Gentle Noticing	47



Session 1

LONGING FOR MORE IN COMMUNITY

*The entire life of a good Christian
is in fact an exercise in holy desire.*

SAINT AUGUSTINE

THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING a transforming community is nothing more and nothing less than a journey of desire—so that's where we begin. The whole point of chapters one and two of *Leading a Transforming Community* is to create space for you to tell the truth about church, to put you in touch with your own spiritual desires regarding community, and to give your group permission to have a conversation about desire in the context of your own community's life.

READ AND REFLECT

Prior to your meeting, read and reflect on chapters one and two, paying attention to:

- where you resonate strongly,
- where you feel resistance,
- what seems like a stirring of the Holy Spirit, and
- what questions you find yourself asking and wondering about.

You may want to use different colored highlighters to keep track of these experiences, or make notes in the margins, or keep a notebook or a journal for ease of sharing when your group gets together.



- What is the truth you need to tell about church and community—past and present?

- What kinds of community experiences have been most transforming for you? Which ones have wounded or deformed you? What kind of help and support have you received for processing these experiences, or have you just “moved on” without processing them at all? Speak to God about this as we begin our exploration of transforming community. (Any or all of this can remain between you and God unless you choose to share it, but it is good to be aware that our own and others’ past experiences will be present in the room whether they have been shared or not.)

- These days, where do you turn for help and support in seeking deeper levels of change and transformation? What does that look like?

- What desires are you in touch with right now pertaining to your own spiritual life and your journey of transformation? (If you notice that getting in touch with desire is difficult for you, chapter one of *Sacred Rhythms* can provide helpful guidance.)

- How easy or difficult is it for you to trust that there are desires God has placed within your heart (individually and collectively) that God promises to meet (Psalm 37:4)? If you still have doubt or discomfort about the role of desire in the spiritual life, take time to read the biblical stories referred to on pages 10-11, noticing how Jesus interacted with people in these conversations and what the outcome was.

WHEN YOUR GROUP GETS TOGETHER

Sharing and Listening

Share as much or as little as you would like from your personal reflections above. To share at a personal level like this will be foundational for your group's ability to move forward in leading a transforming community, because we cannot lead others into places where we have not been willing to go ourselves. Hold safe space for each person—no judgment, no fixing or problem solving, no commentary. Just gratitude for what each person is choosing to share of themselves. Be sure to create space for each person to share while at the same time assuring people it is always permissible to pass. Depending on how many people are in your group and how deep they go in their sharing, this could take between twenty and thirty minutes—and it should!

Prayerful Discussion (with Dialogue)

1. How easy or difficult, normal or uncomfortable is it for you to talk about desire? How might you create space and opportunity (as Jesus did) for individuals to speak honestly about their spiritual desires?

2. What is one desire you could each name for what you hope for in your community? In your experience, does Christian community make us better or busier? Does it really make a difference when it comes to the transformation of human beings into the image of Christ?

3. How do you respond to the description of the relationship between spiritual formation and mission found in chapter one (pages 12-15)?

Where have you experienced this false dichotomy to be at work, and how does the approach outlined here both in words (pages 13-14) and in the graphic (page 14) bring the two together? What difference would it make if your community embraced this?

4. How do you understand and experience the relationship between private devotion and life together in community in our spiritual transformation? Is there one that tends to be emphasized more than the other in your tradition?

5. Most Christians would affirm that they desire to discern and do the will of God. In Romans 12:2 Paul identifies a cause-and-effect relationship between our spiritual transformation and our ability to discern and do the will of God. How do you respond to this? Is this a new thought for you?

6. Chapter two opens with a description of stability within community as a practice that is significant to our spiritual transformation. Where have you experienced this? Has stability been part of any tradition you've been a part of?

7. Do you agree or disagree with the statement that stability is “a vow we make to God in the context of the life we have been given because (counterintuitively) to accept one's life as it is, is to begin to find freedom”? What are your thoughts about how stability in community contributes to our transformation?

8. Dr. Elaine Heath distinguishes between tradition (small *t*) and the great Tradition (capital *T*) of following a God who is always making all things new. What is your tradition? How have you experienced following the great Tradition in your own life?

9. What would it look like for your community to follow the God who is always making all things new? Where is God stirring up something new in your community right now?

10. Consider the idea that community is about “coming together in unity” around something everyone agrees is important—in this case our commitment to deeper levels of spiritual transformation in Christ. What would it look like for your community to come together more intentionally around a commitment to spiritual transformation? Be as specific as possible.

NEXT STEPS IN TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

The second half of chapter two describes one church’s journey toward coming together in unity around their commitment to spiritual formation and all that entailed—particularly from its leaders. What would be next steps you could take from this leadership conversation into the rest of the community? It might be something as simple as preaching on the role of desire in the spiritual life and then structuring the kind of conversation you’ve been able to have among yourselves as leaders in such a way as to engage and include others. Another idea might be to consider entering into a season of listening to yourself and your own deep desires as well as creating opportunities for others in your community to reflect on their longings and desires. Go slowly. Listen deeply. Don’t rush to answers. Ask clarifying questions. Seek to be as accurate as possible in understanding and capturing what people say. You may need to simplify your community’s schedule or even eliminate some of your

normal programming and activities in order to create time and space for a year of listening in which you organize your community's life around personal reflection and communal conversation.

You will also need to consider what your role as leaders is in all of this. What needs to happen *in you* to prepare you to lead others? This might even begin to form one of your early next steps. There is no need to rush things, so resist the urge to be overachievers. Instead, do something before you do everything, and be utterly realistic about what's possible. Although you will each be taking your own notes, I suggest appointing a scribe who will take the "official" notes and capture them in a master list at the back of this guide.

PRAY FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Take time to pray together for your journey toward becoming a transforming community, or name and jot down concerns that you commit to prayer until you meet again.

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