

# WHERE JESUS LEADS

## How Loving is Our Church Community?<sup>1</sup>

Living into loving relationships in Christian community is an introduction to living into God's kingdom. Loving relationship is not easy or natural, but it is essential, "for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25, 1 Corinthians 12:25–27).

How is our church doing in asking each of the following questions:

- ***Do we live in harmony?*** Harmony is different notes played together to create a chord, and New Testament writers frequently write about the concept and its importance, even if they don't use that exact word: "Be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). "Live in harmony with one another" (Romans 12:16). "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1).
- ***Do we treat one another as we would like to be treated?*** Christians may think of the Golden Rule as uniquely Christian (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31, 10:25–28), but this rule of reciprocal respect for all people is found in many religions and moral philosophies, including Judaism (Leviticus 19:18), Buddhism, and Confucianism. Jesus extends the reach of our love to everyone, even to our enemies and those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43–48; see also Luke 6:35).
- ***Do we avoid judging others?*** "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned" (Luke 6:36–37). Rather than constantly critiquing others, we need to search for the value and worth of each person and show compassion and forgiveness, which also encourages others to a better way of life. As the accusers of the woman caught in adultery were reminded, none of us is without sin (John 8:3–11). Even when sin breaks community with God and other people, we can forgive and restore community.
- ***Do we reconcile with one another?*** Jesus came to bring us from estrangement into a closer relationship with God and other people. To reestablish a close relationship with another person or group, we may need to accept, resolve, or forgive differences. This brings us back into the kinds of relationships God wants among members of his family, but it is often very hard. Jesus reminds us that reconciliation is needed not only for God's kingdom, but also for our own health and safety. He warns that we might ourselves be wrong, lose our dispute, and be imprisoned: "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:25–26).

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<sup>1</sup> Abridged from Jim Gettel, *Where Jesus Leads: Helping Christian Communities to Follow* (Deep River Books, January 2017), 128-134.

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Beyond this very tangible warning is the deeper truth that we are personally and spiritually imprisoned and destroyed by our hatred and resentment.

- ***Do we confront one another?*** Remember that “confrontation” means simply “meeting face-to-face,” or addressing. Confrontations are required in any successful relationship, especially when love is involved. When we address a problem or a challenge with another person, we often can reconcile with that person or reveal more of God’s love to them. Jesus always lovingly confronts people. Confrontations with the Samaritan woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery seem gentle, while confrontations with the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:25–29) and the Pharisees seem harsh.
- ***Do we confess to one another?*** “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). In confession to another member of Christian community, a sinner is no longer alone and separated from God and community, but truthfully reveals his or her sins and experiences the presence of God in another person. In the humiliation of the confession, we take our sins to Jesus, who will bear them and free us from them. When there is a break from sin, there is a breakthrough to new life and there is conversion. And confession is the beginning of discipleship because “as the first disciples left everything behind and followed Jesus’ call, so in confession the Christian gives up everything and follows. . . . In confession, Christians begin to renounce their sins. The power of sin is broken. From now on, the Christian gains one victory after another.”
- ***Do we forgive one another?*** Saint Paul instructs, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). And Jesus repeatedly emphasizes the importance of forgiveness: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:38); “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (John 20:23; see also Mark 11:25, Matthew 6:14–15, and Matthew 18:21–22). Forgiveness frees us to live in closer relationship with God and with other people.
- ***Do we encourage one another?*** We need to inspire one another with kind words, to “build up” one another, to give each other courage and hope to stimulate action: “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). “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- ***Do we worship God together?*** A Christian church needs to express its love for God in all of its activities, and we begin by placing God first and at the center of all we do. Our worship may share and celebrate God’s living presence (positively and

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enthusiastically), give hope and meaning to our lives, and send us out into the world to serve and proclaim. We mistake worship if we think there is a particular style that it must follow. Inspiring worship is not preserving a tradition or completing a duty; it is honoring God and transforming our lives to offer them in response to God's love; ultimately, it is not what we do but what the Holy Spirit does. We need to make room for God's Spirit, as 1 Thessalonians 5:16–19 says: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." In our worship we strive to remain alive to God's presence and to avoid extinguishing the Spirit's fire.

- ***Do we pray for one another?*** "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). When we pray for one another, we ask God to take care of the other person, and this is the greatest care we can offer. "And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him" (1 John 5:14–15).
- ***Do we welcome others?*** "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). A church community glorifies God by being a place of hospitality and generosity to members and visitors. This happens more in our personal relationships than in programs or processes, so small groups, like Bible studies and prayer groups, may be more invitational than corporate worship, because they support close relationships with one another where we may share our true feelings, support each other, and grow in humility and love.
- ***Do we proclaim the Good News?*** A church community worships God by telling others about God. A worshipping community does not keep God's love a secret but continually shares the Gospel and welcomes new people into the body of Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:19 that as God's grace brings more and more people to Christ, God will receive more and more glory.
- ***Do we teach one another?*** Unlike judgment, advice and guidance is "useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). A church community worships God by coming to know God better. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16). In God's family, God wants us to grow into spiritual maturity, to become like Jesus in the way we think, feel, and act. Paul says as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more like Jesus and reflect his glory even more (2 Corinthians 3:18). Again, small groups, which offer intimate opportunities for people to experience fellowship and love as well as learning, may be a foundation for strengthening personal relationships with God and helping a church community love one another.

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- ***Do we help one another to grow along our Christian spiritual paths?*** We are called to love others by helping Jesus make new and stronger disciples (Matthew 28:19–20). In *The Road Less-Traveled*, Scott Peck says love is helping another person to grow spiritually. The way that Jesus showed his greatest love for people was by helping them become his disciples and drawing them into deeper relationship with him: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said . . . ‘Come, follow me’” (Mark 10:21).
- ***Do we encourage one another to use our spiritual gifts?*** 1 Peter says that we glorify God when we serve one another with whatever gift each of us has received and with the strength that God supplies (4:10-11). A strong and effective mutual ministry happens best as each person is encouraged to recognize and use his or her unique gifts “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” and to accept and celebrate his or her role as part of the body of Christ.
- ***Do we follow a way of living together that helps us treat one another with love?*** Creating a culture of love means intentionally creating the types of relationships we want to have. This means mutually defining and agreeing about the ways we want to treat each other. More than a moral rule book, this “covenant” is an agreement about attitudes, approaches, boundaries, and processes that support mutual love and respect.
- ***Does our community depend on God?*** It is in all these ways that a Christian community loves God and loves one another and lives into the reality of God’s kingdom. The key question is: *Do we care for and serve one another in all these ways?*

In the short Christian classic *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds disciples: “Christ opened up the way to God and to one another. Now Christians can live with each other in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only through Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one; only through him are we bound together.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, 20.