

# PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

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## CULTIVATING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY



### **Faith is relational and cultivating Christian community is critical for**

**forming faith.** That truth cannot be overemphasized. Youth ministers know what many congregations take for granted—all ministry rests on a relational foundation of Christian community. Christian community translates the beliefs of faith into action. When such a community is cultivated, real-world concerns surface; questions about God, sin, and meaning are expressed; and God's presence is recognized. Christian community is the holding environment for forming faith, and cultivating such a community does not happen accidentally.

Forming Christian community is a practice that can be learned. Four elements are core to this practice: *engagement, embodiment, community care, and being open*. The first is *engagement*. Living in a hyperconnected, digital age is weakening relational connections and diminishing authentic engagement. Cultivating authentic engagement strengthens relational ties and transforms congregations from loosely connected relationships to caring communities. As congregations connect people to God and each other, they create the conditions for intimate relationships and meaningful community. As congregations carefully tend connections, all people are valued, good questions are asked, curiosity is encouraged, and the emotional state of people is noticed. All of these factors contribute to the

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*Journeying in the Wilderness, 195*



overall health of the community. **Engagement is a basic element of Christian community.** Probing beyond the pleasantries and getting to know the persons gathered have exponential value in cultivating community.

**The local church is an incarnational community** that embodies (the second element) Christian beliefs and witness. Being thoughtful about living our theological commitments is part of what makes Christian communities unique. Christians are peculiar people who practice forgiveness and reconciliation. *How is forgiveness embodied in your congregation?* Congregations stand up for injustice and see all people as created in God's image. *What tactics could your community of faith employ to embody equality?* Christian communities are spaces where people wrestle with meaning and find hope. *What spaces does your congregation have for people to make meaning and find hope?*

**We are broken people with visible wounds and hidden scars.** Illness and abuse are among us. Congregations cultivate Christian community as they recognize these realities and become *communities of care* (the third element). Care takes many forms, from holding each other in prayer to listening to bearing each other's burdens and walking with people in hard times. Over the years, congregations have often narrowed caregiving to pastors, seeing them as professional caregivers. This has increased pressure on pastors and let the rest of the community off the hook. Pastors do have responsibilities in caring for people, but so does everyone else. Caring is both a specialized ministry and a practice everyone is called to participate in. Being part of a community means caring for others in the community.

Christian communities are *open* (the last element) to people not yet connected. Christian communities exist because God's love unites them and draws people in. They are not

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*Journeying in the  
Wilderness, 196-197*



clubs. Love is foundational, and love reorients us, personally and communally, toward the world. This open spirit is the posture the local church has for people not yet among them. God's openness means there is always room for another person and their story. A Christian community never reaches full capacity.

Professors Angela Reed, Richard Osmer, and Marcus Smucker call the ministry of cultivating Christian community **spiritual companioning**:

"Spiritual companioning is a way of accompanying others in intentional relationships of prayerful reflection and conversation that help them notice God's presence and calling in their lives, local communities, and the world. It involves the provision of support and accountability in responding to God's invitations." (*Spiritual Companionship: A Guide to Protestant Theology and Practice*, xx)

It is mutual accompaniment, where participants give and receive, learn and teach, support and rely on others. Caring and accompanying each other come from an external source—God. As we reimagine the expression of church fitting for today's environment, "the ministry of spiritual companioning is an important element in the life of a congregation to help us learn how to keep opening up to God and to one another." (*Ibid*, xiv) Faith is relational, and cultivating Christian community is critical for forming faith.

**Reflect on your faith community through these four elements.** Where are you strong? Which area could be developed further? Experiment with new ways of cultivating Christian community for the next month and see what happens.

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*Journeying in the Wilderness*, 197