

# | Celebrate the Mess |

*"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:17*

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:8-9*

## **Jesus saves sinners**

We do not have it all together. We need help. That is the fundamental truth to the gospel. We are not okay on our own.

We need Jesus, and thankfully Jesus saves sinners. Jesus saves broken people - the weak, the broken hearted, those who fall short, those who fail. Our Community Groups are not brought together by everyone being the people who "have it all together" - it's actually the opposite truth that made us into family in the first place: We're sinners in need of grace and a savior.

## **Celebrate the Mess**

Discipleship does not happen at arms-length. We grow together in the midst of the struggles and messes of everyday life. In Jesus, we have been transferred out of darkness and into the light. In our groups as we walk in the light, Jesus exposes our mess - sin, brokenness, idolatry, addiction, and wounds.

People are messy. Life is messy. Your group will be messy. The only way to experience the freedom and joy given to us by the gospel is in the midst of our brokenness and sin - so mess should be expected and celebrated. If week after week your group gets together and everyone is "good" and "fine", this does not mean things are actually going well. Often, it simply means people are lying and hiding. They are not good. Everything is not fine. We are sinners in need of a savior. We have pain, pasts, struggle, shame, fear, bitterness, and an almost constant internal insistence that we hide this from those around us.

Walking deeply through life with people can be exhausting, discouraging, and overwhelming. But in the midst of this, we can celebrate. We can celebrate that joining others in the mess of life pulls us into Jesus' line of work. We can celebrate because people in our family aren't having to hide, struggling in silence and isolation. We get to join Jesus as part of God's family by helping real sinners with real pain by bringing real hope and healing. Thank you Jesus that we can join you in loving others and carrying their burdens.

## **The First Line of Defense**

Community Groups are our church's first line of defense against sin. This makes your group the frontline of pastoral care - walking with people through pain, suffering, sin, loss, and struggle. In some ways this means that Community Group leaders are the first-responders of Mill City Church when it comes to

pastoral care - because you'll help lead your group to care well for each other in the midst of sin and tragedy. Christians are designed to serve and shepherd one another. As a group leader, you will walk with people through the normal messes of life by pointing them to Jesus and rallying your group to be family for them in the midst of struggle and pain.

### **Everyday Pastoral Care**

Every healthy group is going to have conflict and sin. It is not your job to "fix" everyone or every situation. Often, you will have no control over the outcomes of the situations in your group. You cannot force people to repent, but you can lead in the midst of these tough situations. Your role will be simply to be there for people and to help them walk through life. This means your group will be involved in helping people develop personal financial budgets while simultaneously rallying together to help pay their light bill. You will take phone calls late at night to listen to someone who has just gone through a tough break-up. Your group will walk alongside people through highs and lows of marriages, parenting, and fighting addiction. You'll help practice and display to your group what loving others looks like. You cannot carry every burden personally, but you will join your group in caring well for one another. Your group will get to *be the church* through loving one another well in the midst of life.

### **In the Storm**

We will face severe pain and difficulty in life. Spiritual health is not defined by whether or not we have sin, struggle, pain, doubt, and tragedy. It's defined by how we respond to each of these. Do we run to Jesus and his people or away from them? Do we rest in the hope of the gospel planted firmly on the Rock? Or are we washed away? All people will have trials and tribulations - but only those who are made new in Christ will shine as gold refined by fire.

One of the beauties of the church is that in God's family, we do not have to go through this alone. Your group will encounter difficulty. There will be long-term depression, overt spiritual warfare, someone becoming suicidal, adultery, unexpected pregnancies, evictions, people getting arrested or falling back into addiction, and the list goes on. In these moments, your group will be called upon to be the church. You will have to tangibly love one another, equipped by the Spirit to keep fighting for each other in the midst of great difficulty. You will bear one another's burdens, following after Jesus by sacrificially serving those around you. **See Appendix for Suicide Procedures and Spiritual Warfare Prayer Guide.**

Here are some helpful tips for approaching pastoral care issues with your group:

#### **1) Remember the Gospel**

It's easy to forget that what everyone in your group needs most is Jesus. During the middle of crisis it may feel like the most important thing is logistics and your mind can be flooded with "Who can let them borrow a car?" "How will we get the money together?" "Where have you sent your resume?" While all of this is important, ultimately their biggest need is for Christ. Give them the gospel.

#### **2) Rally the Team**

Your job as a group leader is not to do everything. In the midst of helping with issues, your biggest role will simply be making sure your group is loving and serving each other well. You will need to help

everyone know how best to help those who are hurting. You cannot shepherd everyone by yourself. Your whole group joins in carrying this burden or no one can. If someone is struggling with something and they want you to be the only one to know - you can love them as best you can, but they have to understand that you cannot carry this weight alone.

### **3) Be a Christian and use your gifts**

As a group leader you model what healthy Christianity looks like. All Christians are called to love one another, serve one another, and bear one another's burdens. You aren't meant to do this alone because you are a group leader. You simply do what all Christians are supposed to do alongside the rest of your group. You are also as a Christian called to use your gifts. Some of you will be amazing at caring for others, serving, and empathizing. Others of you - not so much. Work inside your giftings and model what health looks like. Remember to lean into the giftings of those in your group. God has gifted each Christian for the edification of the body. Give others the joy of utilizing their gifts for the benefit of others.

### **4) Define Reality**

At times, your group will have to walk with someone through very difficult situations that will last for a while. It is important that you help your group understand that this will not be over quickly. You define reality for them - we're going to be paying for this for a while, they're going to need constant contact, they're going to need babysitters for months, etc.

In these moments, it will feel like your entire group is at the bottom of the ocean and everyone has their own oxygen tank except for one person. The only way they can breathe and survive is if others hold their breath and share their oxygen. This is difficult, but the more people that gather around to take turns sharing their oxygen, the more oxygen everyone has and the easier it becomes. The only way those suffering in your group can get through is if everyone gathers around and shares their life, joy, and happiness with them.

Your group needs the gospel too. They will not be able to keep this up without remembering what Christ has done for them. They will need to be reminded of the price paid for them in order to keep going.

In the book *King's Cross*, Tim Keller explains it this way:

Think about it. If you love a person whose life is all put together and has no major needs, it costs you nothing. It's delightful...But if you ever try to love somebody who has needs, someone who is in trouble or who is persecuted or emotionally wounded, it's going to cost you. You can't love them without taking a hit yourself. A transfer of some kind is required, so that somehow their troubles, their problems, transfer to you.

There are a lot of wounded people out there. They are emotionally sinking, they're hurting, and they desperately need to be loved. And when they are with you, you want to look at your watch and make a graceful exit, because listening to them with all their problems can be grueling. It can be exhausting to be a friend to an emotionally damaged person. The only way they're going to start filling up emotionally is if somebody loves them, and the only way to love is

to let yourself be emotionally drained. Some of your fullness is going to have to go into them, and you have to empty out to some degree. If you hold on to your emotional comfort and simply avoid those people, they will sink. The only way to love them is through substitutionary sacrifice...

All real, life-changing love is substitutionary sacrifice...

Therefore it makes sense that a God who is more loving than you and I, a God who comes into the world to deal with the ultimate evil, the ultimate sin, would have to make a substitutionary sacrifice.

### **5) Call for backup**

Call your coach. Make sure others know about the situation. Sometimes, more than one group is needed to help navigate a situation. Be honest about how you are doing in the middle of the situation as well. Our church has access to counseling, recovery programs, and financial resources. Pick up the phone and keep your coach in the loop.

### **6) Start the Party**

These situations can be exhausting. They can feel like a treadmill and often we can go from the situation being bad and then when it finally begins to get better we simply ignore it. Stop and celebrate. Take the time to get off of the treadmill and celebrate what God is doing. Celebrate how your group has been able to help. Tell stories, laugh, encourage one another, toast, and enjoy how God has worked in and through this situation. Help your group celebrate along the way and realize that this is good and healthy. Sometimes you need to stop your group and say "You just repented. You saw sin in your life and want to change. Do you see how big that is? Do you see God at work here?" or "It's been 6 months! Six months ago we didn't know how we would make it a week. Remember? Let's all take a second and thank Jesus and each other for how we've gotten through."