

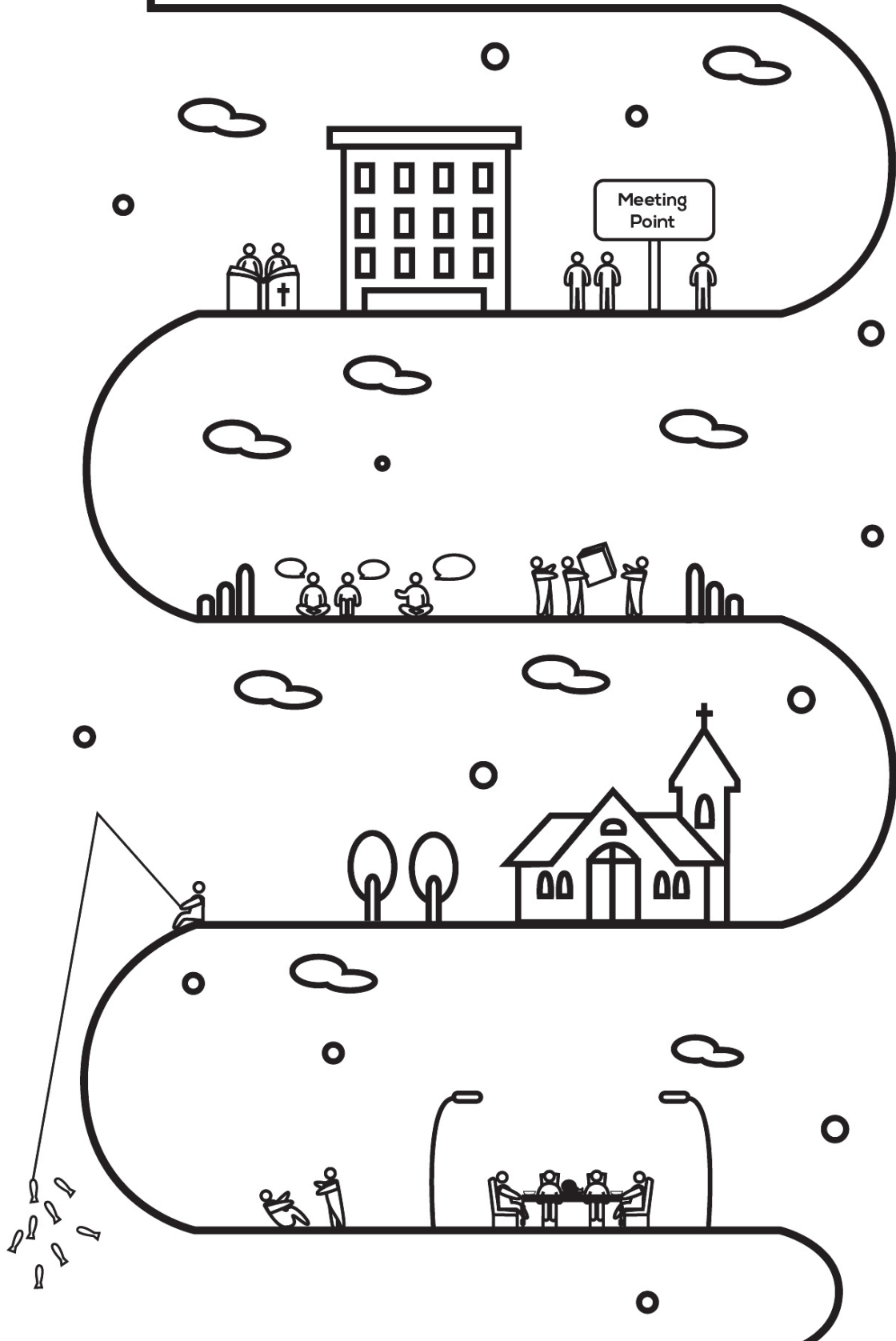
WALKING WITH THE RISEN CHRIST

A Primer For Healthy
Small Groups

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SOO-INN TAN



Walking with the Risen Christ

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Foreword

A fundamental discovery in the Christian life is that learning Jesus' way of life depends upon him — that is, upon his *person*. Knowing and serving God always implies *relationship with Jesus*. We must involve ourselves with the one who says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Sadly we Christians in the 21st century live in constant search of the next technique or tip or program for how to get ahead in the Christian life. But the Christian life is not a methodology, it is Jesus himself. As I read Soo-Inn's words here on small groups I was reminded of this critical distinction.

Certainly much has been said and written about small groups over the years, but what Soo-Inn guides us into here is what has not been said and practiced enough in the life of our small group ministries — that is, the risen Christ among us as we gather together. Jesus by his Spirit sits across the table or on the other side of the living room or class room as the central member of our small group.

By inviting us as readers to place ourselves into the story of those two disciples heading

toward Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), Soo-Inn wisely draws the mindset and practice of our small group ministries into the profound mystery of Christian community — that is, the life of God in Christ among us in the Spirit. Jesus is far more involved in things than we have any idea. He startles us with his wisdom and creativity and presence amidst the most unlikely of situations and relationships.

I have sat in many, many small groups over the years, sometimes as a member, sometimes as the leader for the group. Over and again a great temptation is to proceed in our reflecting and discussing, and even praying together, as if we were, as James Houston puts it, “talking about God behind his back.” It is a wonderful moment when God by his Spirit “taps us on the shoulder” and we realize he has been there among us all along. Our groups take on so much more of an honest, lively, and transformative character when we discover together the risen Christ among us. In addition to many helpful practicalities for leading a small group, much of what you will find in these pages will help you remain alert to God’s gentle and humble “tapping on your shoulder” as you lead a group.

May we all increasingly come to envision ourselves as those fellow disciples on their way to Emmaus on that first resurrection Sunday,

helping one another sort out the nitty-gritty stuff of our lives, always alert and expectant to the risen Jesus coming near us and walking with us. Blessings to you and your fellow companions as you read.

Robert Loane

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Introduction

Most churches today have some form of small-group ministry. This is a result of two things: First, the realisation that the Christian faith is meant to be a communal faith. Second, that the main gathering of most churches, the Sunday morning worship, does not allow for the one-another, face-to-face connecting essential for community.

For the first 300 years of the church, God's people met in homes. The earliest churches were house churches of about 30–50 people meeting in homes. Official church buildings only came after the conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire

House churches were especially suited for the high degree of community that were meant to characterise the church. Some churches today have tried to go back to the house church as the basic expression of church life to varying degrees of success. I think more churches should seriously think about how they can do house churches in the 21st century.

But there are parts of the world where doing house churches will be very difficult. And many churches will be doing community in small groups. Therefore we need to continue to revisit how we do small-group ministry and how we can do better.

Often the approach to small groups is functional. It is seen as a structure that serves a key function — community. Therefore the focus is on how small groups can function well or better. I think this results in the small groups missing out on the most critical relationship — their relationship with the risen Christ.

The most important factor that dictates whether a Christian small group does what it is supposed to do — provide a context for her members to love one another — is the understanding that the group members relate to each other through their common relationship with the risen Christ.

One immediate implication of this is that groups must understand that all that happens in the meeting takes place in the presence of the risen Christ. And while it is important to structure small-group meetings — many function with the 4 Ws, Welcome, Worship, Word and Works — it is more important to understand how all these practices and any others are related to the fact that the risen Christ is in the midst of the group meeting.

Relating to God is basic and foundational to anything we do missionally, but for some reason, we don't often talk about this. When I read most books on small groups, little

is said about God's presence. They contain a lot of tactical information and practical skill training. I read articles on group leadership and it is easy to find information on how to ask good questions, ideas for creative study materials, and instructions on what leaders do in order to be effective. I would rather be part of a group that gets all of the tactical stuff wrong but yet encounters Jesus on a regular basis, than miss out on the presence of God while getting the technical steps to group leadership right.

M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2010), 70.

This short book will look at seven marks of a small group that takes seriously the fact that the risen Christ is in their midst. It does not propose a new programme. The seven marks can be adapted and applied to small groups that run different small-group programmes. The marks are derived from Luke 24:13-35, the account of the encounter of two disciples with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. It is hoped that this book will help revive the life of small groups as they too encounter the risen Christ in their meetings.

1

The risen Christ
is the focus of our
group meetings

REFLECTION

“As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;”

(LUKE 24:15)

The first mark of a healthy small group is that the group recognises the real presence of Christ in their midst as they meet. Followers of Jesus are called to follow Him in the presence of friends (John 9–17). A small group may be aware of the things they need to do: singing, study of Bible, etc., and the members may enjoy each other’s company, but they may forget that Christ is among them.

Wadell’s understanding of spiritual friendship helps us understand the purpose of small groups and the need to be Christ-aware:

... spiritual friendship is a discipleship life, a way in which people who are committed to growing in Christ help one another imitate Christ and grow in gospel virtues. Spiritual friends, through their life together, learn from one another what discipleship means and how we can acquire and develop the attitudes and virtues of Christ — they help each other

become better friends of God.
(*Becoming Friends*, 108)

A healthy small group is one where the members help each other “become friends of God” and a key way that happens is being aware that Christ, their divine friend, is really among them as they meet.

What are some of the things you would do if you were to encounter Christ personally?

1. Worship Him.
2. Confess your sins to Him and ask for His forgiveness.
3. Thank Him for His blessings.
4. Ask Him for help for yourself and/or for others.
5. Ask Him for answers and guidance on matters you are facing.

Well, Christ is there in your group meeting in the person of the Holy Spirit.

The Emmaus road incident also tells us that sometimes the presence of Christ is not accessible to our senses (...they were kept from recognizing him, v.16). But whether we feel His presence or not, Christ walks among us. In the words of the old Orthodox greeting:

Declaration: “Christ is in our midst.”

Response: “He is and ever shall be.”

This then is the first and most important mark of a healthy small group. Their meetings are Christ-aware and Christ-directed.

READING

“We have repeatedly seen, from Aristotle on, that all friendship is based on *koinonia*, a ‘third factor’ held in common by the friends. In the case at hand, this third factor is not a particular interest or object but the Risen Christ, made present in the community by the activity of the Holy Spirit. ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my Name, I am there in their midst,’ said Jesus (Matthew 18:20). To put it succinctly, Christian friendship is friendship *in Christ*. It must endeavor by all means possible to keep the living Christ as its focus. This means rooting itself in prayer, in reflection on the word of God, in the celebration of the sacraments — all realities that point beyond the human dimension of the community to what gives it its identity and cohesion.”

Brother John of Taizé, *Friends In Christ*
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 134.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The opening prayer should be addressed to God and include a request for the Lord to help the group to be aware of His presence.
- 2 Worship with singing should be directed to the Lord and not treated as just a warm up to other things like the Bible study.
- 3 All components of the meeting should be done with openness to what the risen Christ is saying to us.