

# House-Church Gathering Guide\*

Watermark Church

## WHAT IS A HOUSE-CHURCH GATHERING FOR?

God works in **everyday life**. So, we make space to share life regularly--weekly--as Christians one with another. Gathering in our homes, we work out our everyday lives under the reign of King Jesus.

God is **present** through Christ among us especially when we gather around the table. In this presence the Spirit speaks, Christ's presence works to convict gently, to push us towards God and the reconciliation, kinship, hope, sharing, and healing that is the Kingdom. God's presence by the Spirit makes possible the renewal of all things in Christ and His flourishing among us.

The table makes possible a certain **posture toward each other** if cultivated. It levels the playing field. It brings to the surface insecurities of myself in the face to face with others which because we are in the presence of Christ can be calmed. You need do nothing, just be here 'with' us, here 'with' Christ.

In this way **the house gathering is for discipleship**: being formed to follow Jesus and live out the Kingdom. It is also an "open" space where friends, neighbors and seekers of Jesus may come and see a "love feast" where the people of Jesus live out life together.

## HOW DOES DISCIPLESHIP HAPPEN AT THE TABLE?

First, when we see how God actually is working in other people, we naturally reflect on our own lives. We learn how to follow Jesus in this same way by the modelling that goes around the table from different people in different ways. It is a powerful way of discipleship.

*For example, around the table one person may talk about their work, and how they are struggling to resist the draw of success or money and allowing work to consume their life and energy. Another person may share a similar experience and offer some wisdom. A third person may realize that this dynamic happening in his/her life and he/she had been blind to it, and begin discerning a new faithfulness.*

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\* Adapted for Watermark Church, Courtesy of "Peace of Christ Community," and Dr David Fitch.

Second, things brought up around the table will often be followed up in one on one conversations, where a teacher will teach if needed, a pastor will pastor, a person of prayer will meet to pray with, etc. These are one on one moments that activate the gifts around the table.

Third, in patient discussion, prayer, and seeing God at work, we learn how to take the control levers off our lives and open space to submit to God's work and allow the Spirit to come in power and work among us and in us.

## HOW IS DISCIPLESHIP DIFFERENT AT HOUSE GATHERINGS?

**House Gatherings** are centered on hospitality around a table as an extension of the Lord's Table. *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Lk 24:30-31*

The table provides a space for us to gather in our neighborhoods—adults, children, faithful followers, seekers—to be present to each other and to what God is doing in and around us. We slow down and tend to others around a meal in the belief that the table is one of the primary places Jesus reveals himself to his followers.

House gatherings allow for conversation, social reflection and mirroring of ourselves in others in a way that is simpler to access than a traditional church service. House gatherings also provide a variety of voices: women, men and children, into our lives together.

## THE PRACTICES AROUND THE TABLE AT A HOUSE GATHERING

A house gathering typically lasts between 2.5 and 3 hours, depending on how long it takes to gather and prepare food, the age of the children in the group, and the size of the group. House gatherings all share these basic practices.

### **Gathering and Eucharistic Prayer**

When people are gathered and the food is prepared, the leader prays or asks someone to pray a prayer over the meal and the gathering. This is modeled after the prayers at the Lord's Table during Sunday worship.

- Pray thanksgiving and open ourselves to receive from God.
- Invite the Presence of Christ to be here among us. Let us be present to His presence among us and let us tend to what God is doing in each of us and among us as we eat.
- Pray in Jesus name, under His authority and in submission one to another.

### **First hour - Presence**

We are just talking, tending to one another, being. Focusing on each other. Learning to trust one another. This takes time. Be who you are. Those with maturity guide and cultivate mutuality and presence around the table. Nothing more than this.

### **Second hour - Conversation**

Out of the presence established, ask a 'puzzling question.' An 'up (relation to God), in (relation to the Christian community), or out (relation to mission or justice)' question. Sometimes the question will arise out of the lives and conversations gathered around the table. Other times the leader will create their own question or draw from the "deck" of questions provided.

Open space to talk about our lives and our struggles. Try to open space for vulnerability to grow. But don't force it. This takes time. Don't push to solve a problem. Prevent people trying to fix people. Cultivate listening, asking more questions. Over time, as we know our giftings the teachers will teach, the pastors will pastor, usually in meetings other than at the table.

### **Last 30 minutes - Prayer**

The gathering always ends with prayer. We gather to present our struggles and needs and we make space for Kingdom by 'submitting all these things to His Lordship.' This is holy ground. This is space for God to work by submitting our deepest cares, struggles, needs, longings for friends, and issues in our neighbourhoods to His Lordship for Him to work, and us to be alert to join in with Him.

We have found a few ways to guide praying together:

1. Open a time for requests. As each person shares, someone volunteers (or is asked by the leader) and prays briefly right then before the next person shares a request.
2. Open a time for prayer. People pray as they are led for things discussed during the gathering or as they know each other and are led. The leader closes the prayer with a blessing and sending for the week.
3. Open a time for requests. After each person shares, someone volunteers (or is asked by the leader) to pray for the request. After all requests are shared the group prays together as each one volunteers.

## **LEADING DISCIPLESHIP AROUND A DOTTED CIRCLE TABLE**

A house gathering leader leads "from below", gently guiding the gathering. The leader helps set the tone and open space for tending to His presence among us.

- Set a rhythm for where the house gathering is hosted. Some gatherings always meet at the same home. Others rotate between all homes that are able to host the group.

Hosting can be a time-consuming task, and if it is not rotated the group should have practices to help with preparation and clean up.

- No cell phones at the table. It is as stunning distraction that is so hard to break.
- Everyone sits around the table. Even if it takes two rows. Try to prepare a space with a large expansive table.
- Gentle guiding/deflecting away from excessive attention getting, table dominating behavior. "George - thanks for that - can we maybe hear from Sarah on that, she hasn't talked yet".

## CHILDREN IN HOUSE GATHERINGS

House gatherings are for everyone, including our children. Being with children is a practice of presence. Yet having children in a house gathering can present challenges, both in helping children understand the space and in parents being present around the table amidst being responsible for their children. Some of our collected wisdom as a community for being with children in this space:

- Simply serving food and getting to the table can be difficult with many young children to feed! We gather as a family. Help out as able and accept the bits of chaos as a part of sharing life together.
- Children of all ages are present during the gathering and prayer and the meal. Older children (about 7 or older) can be engaged in the conversation. Parents and others can gently draw out quieter children and guide children away from dominating or attention seeking. This is not unlike guiding adults. It requires a willingness from parents both to guide their children and to allow other adults to guide them.  
**Example: drawing out quiet children with a question or asking them to ask a question.**
- Younger children (6 and under) may not stay at the table for long, as they tend to eat quickly and can then be disruptive. Some groups keep children at the table throughout the meal and then serve a dessert before dismissing them to go elsewhere (for free play or a guided time). Others allow children to leave after a briefer time and may serve dessert right before prayer during prayer requests. We would encourage you not to have children leave the table when they are done eating--except for very young children--but to learn that the table is a "together" time and they can be dismissed together.
- Some groups have a space in the host home where the children can go for free play. This works best when there are not too many children, where the children are all a bit older, or when some of the oldest children are attentive to guiding the younger children in their play. Some "free play" groups have an adult responsible for the children, either with them the entire time or available to leave the table as needed. Other groups have an adult lightly prepared a guided time with the children, for some discussion and play.

- Children typically gather back with adults when it is time to pray. For this reason the adults may at times have a special time of prayer around a particularly sensitive or difficult topic that came up during that gathering before bringing the children back for prayer. As during the discussion, children may require guidance during prayer requests and prayer. This is part of being with children and shaping them into the faith, and requires patience and presence from everyone.
- It may be with extremely young children – new borns, early toddlers – that parents find it impossible for both to be present regularly at the house gathering. We recommend seeing this as an important season of life. Yet we need the table, being present, being known in His ‘presence,’ just as much (maybe especially) in this time. We recommend a commitment that one of the parents stay home and one attend the table gathering and alternate from week to week. In this way one of two parents can be present and bring the benefits of this mutuality to the marriage during this season.

## OTHER NOTES

House gatherings are encouraged to host a party every four to six weeks that is open to friends and neighbors. This is not an “open house” for the gathering or a sneaky way of evangelism. It is blessings those around us and living out in how we love one another. There is no need to hide that many are part of a church community. Don’t be sneaky! The purpose of the party is to be a party. Throw a party that you will enjoy and then invite others to it.

House gatherings should be aware of how their table fellowship connects to the wider community. Sometimes issues will come up beyond the resources around the table. The leader or someone from the table will call in the wider community, including the main leaders/elders of the church. This not only brings more resources – whether money – theological help etc. to this table, it makes the leadership aware of key issues in the community so that they can speak to it community wide if necessary.

These tables should be open to new believers in the neighborhood. Indeed, this should be the first place new believers are invited to. Here is where they learn what it means to live their life as a Christian submitted to His Lordship over their lives. From here, they make the final jump into the close circle gathering and preparations for baptism.

These tables should also be open to curious non-believers we are encountering in our everyday life. As they hear about what God is doing, they should be curious. They should be welcomed into this process that does not change. For it is here where they will encounter the deep fellowship they have longed for, they will see modeled Christian life, they will experience by watching what Kingdom prayer is. They will get a small taste of the Kingdom and hopefully want more!

## QUESTIONS

Where have you sensed God's presence in your life this week?

Our God works through suffering versus extract us/Himself out of suffering. Do you have an example of seeing/experiencing God in suffering?

What person has God placed in your life outside of church? How is God working in your life through this person?

How do you make space for God to work in your relationships?

When is it hardest for you to believe in God?

Why do you come here every Sunday evening?

When was the last time you experienced a miracle?

Why do you pray? Do you find it hard to pray? I pray most when? Why?

I find it hard to trust God for/when ....

If you went broke tomorrow, what would you do?

I find it hard to believe in God/trust Him when ....