

Outreach Influence Team Meeting Toolkit

BLESS Missional Practices

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Introduction:

Welcome to the Outreach Influence Team Meeting Toolkit! This toolkit is designed to be a resource for pastors as they consider how to train leaders in their churches with the tools that they have been using in the Evangelism Cohort. It is intended to be used to help you structure the 30-day infusions of inspiration, accountability, instruction and planning. Each of these components are important to a successful Outreach Influence Team meeting because they are necessary to build ownership and momentum towards outreach in both ourselves and our ministry teams.

- Inspiration often comes in the form of story-telling. As we hear about outreach happening in the lives of those around us, it's hard not to be inspired! When we receive consistent inspiration, we are reminded of how powerful, doable and important it is to reach out and or motivation for evangelism is reactivated.
- Accountability is essential for any change process, including our growth in outreach. As we receive both loving support and gracious challenge from others on our ministry teams, we will be posturing ourselves in the best possible way to experience lasting change.
- The Instruction portion is an important opportunity to introduce new concepts to our teams. By incorporating short learning segments, we are able to equip people to be effective in blessing others, reaching out, having spiritual conversations, inviting people toward Christ and the church, and leading others to do so.
- The Planning section provides the time needed to help our leaders implement ways to reach out through the ministries they lead. This is where the learning and growth becomes practical. Without making time for this, we may never experience the change we long to see.

These components can be arranged in any order so long as they are all present. We've included a template of an agenda to help you as you begin to develop your own agendas for your Outreach Influence Team meetings.

60-Minute Template

| Time | 4 Components | Instructions / Tools to Use | Presenter: |
|--------|------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| 5 min | Introduction | Introduce the plan for the meeting, remind people of why we have these times by sharing a Scripture or a story, and then open in prayer. | Lead Pastor or OIL |
| 15 min | Accountability & Inspiration | Influence leaders share a recent evangelistic conversation and lead the Team in the One-Degree Rule. Time people on the stories. | Lead Pastor or OIL |
| 20 min | Instruction | Influence leader and pastor train Influence Team members using an outreach tool from the Toolkit. Practice use of the tool during the meeting or use it in the planning time. | Lead Pastor or OIL |
| 15 min | Planning | Influence Team members take time to apply the instruction and plan how to intentionally prioritize outreach in their personal lives and ministries. Help team members plan how they are influencing their team in personal outreach and how they are integrating evangelism into their ministries. | Lead Pastor or OIL |
| 5 min | Conclusion | Remind people of when next we will meet, what the key takeaway from this current meeting is, what you enjoyed most about the meeting, and close in prayer. | Lead Pastor or OIL |

To help you with the Instruction portion, we've developed this OIT Meeting Toolkit, which is simply a collection of the tools and exercises that pastors have begun to use during the cohort meetings so far. The tools and resources in the OIT Meeting Toolkit are arranged in a suggested flow and can be adjusted as needed for your particular church context.

Meeting One

Scripture Study – Genesis 12:1-3

Introduction:

It all started with Abraham... When we meet Abraham in Scripture, he is in a country far north of where Israel is located today (a far north country called Haran). God called Abraham to leave his country in the far north and wander until he completed his journey to the land God promised him. God called Abraham to leave his homeland because he loved Abraham. And through Abraham, God showed he loved the whole world!

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV)- Have someone read aloud.

12 The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² “I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

Scripture Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ways God promises to bless Abraham?
2. How might Abraham have felt when God called him to leave his country?
3. What is God’s ultimate aim in blessing Abraham?
4. How has God blessed you, or promised to bless you?
5. What is God’s ultimate aim in blessing you?

Blessers vs. Converters

Take a few moments to read the following story:

A compelling contemporary case study of the BLESS approach is the study of 12 “business as mission” groups in Thailand conducted by Mark Russell found in his book¹. Six of the companies Russell researched over time were primarily focused on developing businesses that succeeded, hired local people, and enhanced the Thai economy. Influencing Thai people toward faith in Christ was seen as a by-product of these businesses. Although welcome, conversion was not the main focus. Russell called these businesses the “blessers.”

The second set of six businesses had conversion as their top priority. Developing a successful business was considered a by-product, or secondary goal. In a real sense, they used business as a means to get into the country and as a way to build an initial presence and trust with Thais. These latter businesses were much more concerned for the “spiritual destiny” of the Thai people than for their economic improvement. Russell called these six businesses the “converters.”

Not surprisingly, the “blessers,” the first six businesses, did much more social good, employed more Thai people, and generated more income. That was their goal, and they met it. Perhaps much more surprisingly, the “blessers” also converted more people. And here is what is most surprising; the “blessers” experienced many more people converting to Christ, *by a ratio of 48 to 1!* A whopping 96 people gave their lives to Christ through the “blessers” over a several year period. “Converters” saw only two people make new faith commitments to Jesus Christ over that same period.

Why was there such disparity between the two? Here are some factors: The “blessers” blessed so many more people, built more deeply genuine relationships, hired people for longer term, created greater income and capital in the economy, and built deeper trust. Thai people listened when the founders and leaders of “blesser” companies at the right time did talk about their faith in Jesus! The Thais were genuinely interested and influenced profoundly by the “blessers” natural laid-back manner of sharing their faith.

On the other hand, the “converters” never really became a part of the Thai community, partly because their agenda overshadowed their relationships. That is often how the process of spiritually influencing others works, not just in Thai culture, but in American culture too. People do not care for our agendas unless they know we “get them” and that we care and are committed to their well-being. People want to know we are for real. They want authentic relationships. So the “bless” approach works. But not only does it work. It is also rooted in Scripture, starting with Abraham, whose story is found very early in the first book of the Bible.

¹ Russell, Mark. *The Missional Entrepreneur: Principles and Practices for Business as Mission* (New Hope Publishers, Birmingham, AL), 2010.

Belong Out There!

To BLESS others, we need to be in relationship with them. Here are a few ways we can connect with people who do not belong to church and then develop meaningful relationships with them.

Join something!

Join something you enjoy to connect with those far from God. If we only hang out with Christian friends all the time, we will have very few opportunities ever to bless those far from God. We could join a golf league, become part of a school council, coach a kids' sports team, take an art class, connect to people who have experienced a struggle like addiction or loss that we have experienced, or belong to some other group or club. Let's us do what we love with people far from God.

Invite People to Join You in Something You Love!

A great way to connect with people outside the church and deepen relationships is to invite others into something you're already doing or that you would like to do. You might start something and invite people far from God to join you, for instance for a weekly pick-up basketball game, a book club, or to join you in a hobby or interest you have.

Capture the value of two-fers!

Wherever you can, do what you already need to do, but in ways that include unchurched people where you love, work, study, and play. Office in the same coffee shop a time a week. Coach your kids. Hang out in your front yard instead of your back yard. Turn recreation and exercise into a chance to reach out too!

Reach out in Community

You don't have to reach out to people alone! Reach out in community with a friend. If you are an introvert, for example, partner with an extrovert to BLESS others and belong out there!

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you love to do that you could do with people far from God?
2. What have you struggled with in your life or your family's life that could provide an opportunity to connect with others who have similarly struggled?
3. What step might you like to take that could lead you to joining something that could connect you relationally to people far from God?
4. What do you already need or want to do that you could do in ways that let you build relationships with unchurched people?

Meeting Two: Begin with Prayer

Scripture Study – Luke 11:1-13

Luke 11:1-13 (NIV)- Have someone or several read the passage aloud.

¹One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

²He said to them, “When you pray, say:

“‘Father,^[a]

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.^[b]

³Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.^[c]

And lead us not into temptation.^[d]”

⁵Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ ⁷And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity^[e] he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for^[f] a fish, will give him a snake instead?¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Scripture Discussion:

1. What stimulates curiosity in the disciples about prayer and why do they ask to be taught to pray?
2. What stands out to you about the basic prayer Jesus gives his disciples to pray?

3. Is there anything in that prayer that helps you know how and what to pray for unchurched friends and family members?
4. What is the point of the story about bread needed late at night?
5. What is the point of the story about eggs and fishes?
6. Why do we need to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking when it comes to prayer in general and maybe especially prayer for unchurched family and friends? Why are those prayers usually not answered quickly?
7. How can we pray for the Holy Spirit to be present and at work in the lives of our unchurched family and friends?
8. What gives us encouragement and faith to keep on praying when it seems like it is taking forever to get the answers we long for?

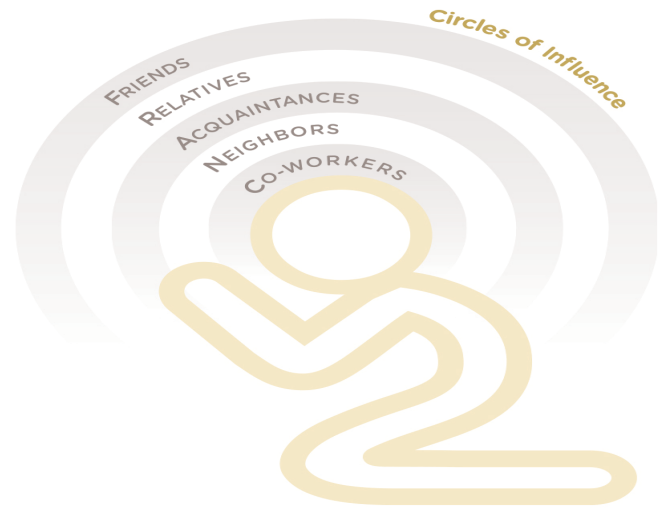
Life Discussion:

1. Where have you been BLESSed in your life by the prayers of other people for you?
2. How do you want to approach prayer for the unchurched people in your life?
3. How might we respond? Consider starting a BLESS prayer list and listening to the Spirit as you write out prayers for your BLESS list.
4. Pray for opportunities to pray *with* the unchurched people in your life. Who might God be nudging you to pray for and with?

FRANC Model for Developing a BLESS list:

Use the following model to help you pray for and BLESS people in your spheres of influence where you live, work, and play.

1. Friends
2. Relatives
3. Acquaintances (esp. 3rd space and compassion)
4. Neighbors (geography and interests)
5. Co-workers (and Colleagues)



Start or Revise your spiritual influence list, which you can use to begin to pray.

Thoughtfully reflect on the following questions to help guide your prayers and BLESS list:

1. Where are you already at work, God?
2. Where do you want me to join you in the work you are doing in my family, friends, and others you are seeking to draw toward yourself?
3. How do you want me to bless the people in the places you have sent me?

Listen to God and journal prayers for the top five people God lays on your heart!

1. _____ : _____
2. _____ : _____
3. _____ : _____
4. _____ : _____
5. _____ : _____

Small Group Practice: Pray in pairs or as a whole group for someone or several people on your BLESS list.

Meeting Three: Listen

Scripture Study – Luke 18:35-43

Luke 18:35-43. Have someone read the passage aloud.

³⁵ As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.³⁶ When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷ They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.”

³⁸ He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

³⁹ Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁰ Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, ⁴¹ “What do you want me to do for you?”

“Lord, I want to see,” he replied.

⁴² Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” ⁴³ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

Scripture Discussion:

1. What do you notice about this situation and what is going on?
2. Why does the blind man cry out when he finds out it is Jesus, and how does he express faith? (Note that Jesus later tells him his faith has made him well).
3. How do the crowds and disciples following Jesus to Jericho respond to this man? Why?
4. How does Jesus show that he listens to, responds to, and values this blind man?

Life Discussion:

1. When have you cried out to Jesus, and felt that he listened, heard you, responded, and that he valued you?
2. In what ways do you need to grow in listening to others and in showing that you value them?
3. Who do you think of in your life who is far from God right now that you want to listen to more deeply, and to care for and value?
4. In what ways do you hunger to learn better how to listen to God and look for clues of his work in the lives of your friends and family who are far from God?

Listening Exercise

Exercise:

Practice the art of listening well and asking good questions as an expression of love for another.

Instructions:

Divide into pairs and designate one person as the listener and one person as the responder. For the next ten minutes, the listener is to initiate a conversation by asking good questions. Feel free to use the questions offered below as a starting point and practice the READ strategy with each other.

Suggested Questions:

- What made you choose to go into your present job (or your most recent one if you are looking for work now), and what is something you enjoy about that role?
- We often go into things because of how we think they may help us achieve a dream or fulfill a hope. What is a dream or hope you have for your life right now?
- What might keep you from reaching your dream?
- How does the spiritual side of your life affect whether or not you reach your dream?
- If it seems appropriate to the conversation, ask your new friend if you can pray for them for the fulfillment of their dream.

As you listen, you might practice the READ strategy that helps you hear others well:

Getting to know someone else?
Areas to ask about:

| R.E.A.D. Strategy | | PAST | PRESENT | FUTURE |
|---|-------------|--|---|--|
| R Repeat what the person shared until they agree that you heard them. E Experience: Name what emotions they experienced in the story they shared. A Affirm every true thing you can about their position D Disclose: Only now do you “disclose” your view. | GOOD | JOYS Something great about growing up? | PRIORITIES Something important to you these days? | DREAMS Something you hope for in the future? |
| | BAD | HURTS Something hard about growing up? | PROBLEMS Challenges you face these days? | FEARS Something about the future that makes you nervous? |

Meeting Four: Eat

Scripture Study – Luke 19:1-10

Luke 19:1-10. Have someone read the passage aloud.

¹Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ²A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

⁸But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

⁹Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Scripture Discussion:

1. Why would the people in Jesus’ time see a wealthy tax collector as a sinner and not worthy to be treated with respect?²
2. What do you think Jesus saw in this man?
3. Why might he have decided to go eat with this man?
4. What is Jesus communicating when he invites himself over to stay and eat in Zacchaeus’ house and on his turf?
5. How does Zacchaeus respond, and why do you think he responds the way he does?
6. Jesus makes clear that today salvation has come to Zacchaeus’ house—what does that imply?
7. Why is the practice of hospitality and of eating together so powerful?

² Tax collectors were Jews that worked for the Romans and were known to over tax their own people and thus were reputed to be corrupt and were considered traitors for colluding with the Romans. Josephus the first century historian reveals that tax collectors were excommunicated from the Jewish Synagogue, a place of worship for first century Jews.

8. What experiences of hospitality have had an impact on you? How?

The Power of Hospitality

Hospitality, and especially eating together, communicated acceptance, created connection, and affirmed the worth of people with whom Jesus interacted. Eating together also often led to significant conversations about life and about spiritual values.

Zacchaeus is a good example. Eating with Jesus changed Zacchaeus' life, and led him to magnanimous generosity to all those he had wronged! The experience of Jesus eating with Zacchaeus is not unusual! Often Jesus is accused of eating with sinners and tax collectors (five times, like in Matthew 11:18 ff.)

Jesus also practiced hospitality by receiving the hospitality and service of others! He especially received the love and service of those who were outcast and of a socially lower status than he was. Socially higher status people noticed and objected whenever Jesus ate with lower social status people! But Jesus loved staying in the homes of people like Mary and Martha and Zacchaeus! He affirmed people by receiving and valuing what they had to give him.

Hospitality then is not primarily about entertaining people, having a beautiful and perfect home, extending an open door to friends and family who will do the same for you, or serving costly gourmet meals to people of your own social status or higher. Hospitality is about sharing what you have, doing life together when you can, communicating acceptance and affirmation through sharing meals, welcoming in the stranger and the outsider to faith, and including the poor and lonely. It is serving the practical needs people have for kindness and acceptance, food and simple beauty, and welcome. It is what we do as individuals, as families, and as churches. And it is not only giving what we have to others, but it is also receiving as valuable what others give to us.

This kind of hospitality, equality, and intimacy is missional to the core. May we learn this practice of regularly eating with the people in our neighborhoods, networks, and communities!

Life Discussion:

1. When have you experienced the bonding power of hospitality and eating together?
2. What have you learned about how to cultivate opportunities to eat with others, and how to initiate?
3. What steps do you want to take to make hospitality and eating with others, including people who may not know Jesus yet, a more regular and natural part of your life?

Meeting Five: Serve

Scripture Study – John 13: 1-17; Luke 22:24-27

John 13:1-17 (NIV). Have someone or several read the passage aloud.

¹It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

¹⁰Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Luke 22:24-27 (NIV)

²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

Scripture Discussion of both passages:

1. What do you know about foot washing in that time: what it meant and who did it and why it was such a surprising act for Jesus to do?³
2. What parallels are there today for this kind of menial service?
3. What gave Jesus the security and confidence and capacity to serve in such a humbling and even humiliating way?⁴
4. How did being secure in his identity and authority and status with God help him serve others?
5. In what other concrete and practical ways did Jesus serve people journeying toward faith in God? In what concrete ways did Jesus receive service from people journeying toward God?⁵
6. Why is radical service a counter cultural activity?
7. What leaders can you think of who have been servants like Jesus instead of lording it over others like “the Gentiles” Jesus refers to?

³ Foot washing was an act performed only by slaves and servants. Feet got exceptionally dirty and grimy and calloused in the arid conditions in which Jesus lived. For the person in power to wash feet would have been considered an outrage and scandal in Jesus’ day.

⁴ Jesus, secure in his status with God (Jn. 13:3), is able to do the menial, invisible, unclean and thankless tasks that higher status people never do (Jn. 13:4). He also gives his followers security and status that they can rest in and serve from (Lk 22:29-30).

⁵ Jesus served others by affirmation and kindness, but also by challenge and speaking the hard truths. He did small practical things (e.g. telling parents of a girl he had just raised from the dead to give her something to eat), but also gave and sacrificed his whole life. He accepted and healed and radically included the hurting and marginalized, but confronted and challenged the complacent and powerful. He identified with people and went to their level and received from them (e.g. Jn. 4, the Garden of Gethsemane). He did not practice the service of the superior to the inferior. He received humbly the gifts and service of others (e.g. the woman who anointed his feet and head with perfume).

Brainstorming Exercise:

Learn the skills of true service—how to help people in ways that accord dignity and communicate love the way they hear it rather than the way you hear it. What in the following list most stands out to you? Why? Can you think of a concrete example of serving in that way?

1. Affirmation of strengths and of character
2. Kindness
3. Gift Giving
4. Meeting concrete needs
5. Giving practical help with tasks
6. Healing
7. Asking for help (Reciprocity- letting other people serve you!)
8. Courageous conversations that speak truth in love about growth areas
9. Challenge toward giving greater effort toward a common goal
10. Belief in a person's potential
11. Hope for a person's future
12. Grieving with people
13. Being present with people in pain
14. Expressing value to people society or your community devalues
15. Serving in the community together with unchurched friends or acquaintances
16. Sacrifice

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about people who have served you in a way that made a difference in your life or that struck you as exhibiting the kind of service Jesus practiced. Tell a story about an experience of being served and what you noticed about why it meant so much.
2. In the skills of true service, what comes naturally to you? Where would you like to grow?
3. Do you care for people in the ways you want to feel loved, or in the ways they want to feel loved? Does your service build up the dignity of others?
4. How well do you receive from others? When have you asked for help from the people in your life who don't know Jesus yet?

Meeting Six: Sharing Your Story

Exercise:

Write out a one-page version of a story about what God has done for you. Share it with one another in pairs.

Introduction:

Here is how Jesus taught people to tell their story: “Tell them how much the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5:19). So we tell people what Jesus has done for us. We take the love and forgiveness we receive from God and we share it with others. We take the joy and peace that God has given us and we share it with others. There's nothing in your life that God has given you and blessed you with that he does not intend for you to share with others. And remember, you don't just have one story, you have many stories of what God has done for you.

Directions:

Consider each of the questions below as you write out your own story about what God has done for you:

1. What was the struggle, crisis, need or longing you had?

When you share your encounter with God, it will only be powerful and significant if the problem, struggle, longing or need you experienced is emotionally compelling. This part of the story is crucial. Don't summarize or skim over the need you had, but rather paint the picture of the circumstances and relationships that make the need real.

2. How did you encounter or experience the reality of God in your life in relation to your struggle or crisis or need or longing? How was that crucial in your change process?

Avoid clichés and jargon about Jesus. In a simple and heartfelt manner, tell the experience of encountering God's presence or involvement as concretely and humanly as you can. Did you hear God's voice? How? Did someone's love and acceptance of you convince you God was really there and loved even you? How did that happen? Emphasize the events and people and not your interpretation of the events and people. How did you know it was God? What part did Jesus play in your conscious experience?

3. How did you respond?

Even here, sharing your struggles in responding to God will be as important as sharing the success of finally responding. Tell your story as it was, with all the pain and doubt, and not as you think it should have been.

4. What difference has it made in your life? What has God done for you?

Tell your story of the changes just as honestly as you tell the rest of the story. Success stories that claim total healing and change may sell well, but they don't often ring true. As you think about how you are different, share especially how the encounter with God helped you change where you put your identity, security and loyalty.

Remember, your story is about an experience with God and how it made a difference in your life. Your story is about how your life was changed. All good stories are.

Meeting Seven: Sharing His Story

Luke 15: 11-32. Have someone or several read this passage aloud.

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So, he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

Scripture Discussion:

1. The younger son asks for his inheritance before his father dies. Why might the son have made this unusual first request of his father (v 12)?
2. How might the father, family, and community have felt about this son’s request?
3. In what ways did receiving his inheritance either provide or not provide for the things and life the son longed for?
4. Have you ever tried to meet needs you have in ways that ended up hurting you and others? Talk about that.
5. What changes the son’s attitude and how does the son demonstrate that change of heart in his second request of his father (v 21)?
6. What do you notice and how do you feel about the father’s response to his son’s return and repentance (v 20 – 32)?
7. What strikes you about the older son and the father’s response to him?
8. With which character (younger son, older son, father) in the story do you most identify and why?
9. What does Jesus’ illustration teach his listeners and us about our heavenly Father?
10. What story do you imagine the prodigal son shared with others? The elder son?
11. This story has been told and re-told millions of times and with amazing impact. What do you learn about telling a good story from the way Jesus tells this story?
12. How could you *this* story as a way to talk about Jesus and his invitation to come back to God? With whom?

Life Application:

1. Practice sharing this with a small group member in order to invite them to respond to Jesus and come back to God. Ask for feedback.

2. Pray for the Spirit to give you an opportunity to share this story with someone on your BLESS list.
3. Pray for your friend to journey toward Christ and to become open to change and to seek God.

Meeting Eight: Inviting People to Belong Before They Believe

Blessing others in ways that help them move closer to God and God's purpose for their lives is what mission is all about. Mission is spelled B.L.E.S.S. We *Begin* with prayer, *Listen*, *Eat*, *Serve*, and *Story* out of love for the people where we live, work, play, and study. On the basis of the trust we build and the belonging we create, we turn B.L.E.S.S. into B.L.E.S.S.I.N.G. We *Invite* them into our community to belong before they believe, share the good *News* of Jesus Christ with them, inviting response, and then *Grow* them in their newfound faith so that they can help others find their way back to God.

Most people today will come to faith in the context of a community. Belonging comes before believing. Evangelism today is about helping people belong so that they can come to believe. How do we involve people in community where they can belong before they believe? The challenge for many churches is that they have no ongoing structures or programs where people who are finding their way to God can be involved without feeling immediately judged, can ask their questions without feeling embarrassed by their ignorance, and can connect with other people on the journey before they commit to Jesus. We need to create such opportunities and then invite the people where we live, work, play, and study into those opportunities.

Scripture Mark 6:30-44: Have someone read aloud the passage.

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

³²So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

³⁵By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. ³⁶Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

³⁷But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages^[e]! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

³⁸ “How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

³⁹ Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³ and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴ The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand

Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus throws a banquet for big crowd. And he starts with five loaves and 2 fish. What are the interactions that lead up to this banquet?
2. Why does Jesus teach the crowd? Why does he feed the crowd?
3. On what basis does Jesus include people and invite people into his teaching and his banquet? Are there entrance requirements? As you look back on what you know of the ministry of Jesus, was this inclusive intentionality typical or unusual for him?
4. What is the role of his disciples, and why do you think Jesus gives them this role?
5. How does this passage illustrate people being able to belong before they fully believe, and seek in a context where they can connect explore before they have to commit and become disciples?
6. How is this banquet a foretaste of what it will be like when Jesus returns?
7. Where do you or your church or community offer places for people to belong before they believe, and connect and explore before they have committed? How could you or your church start offering those opportunities?

Life Application:

1. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being ingrown and 10 being very hospitable and inclusive for anyone wherever they’re at spiritually, how would you rate your church community? Where does your church provide great entry points for unchurched people?
2. How excited are you to invite unchurched people to visit your church? Why?

3. What would help you get more excited about inviting unchurched people to belong before they believe?
4. What steps does your church and do your leaders need to take to become stronger at inviting unchurched people and being hospitable toward them when they attend?

Meeting Nine: BLESS Planning Worksheet

Give people time to fill out the planning sheet below and then take time to share and pray in pairs for personal BLESS plans, and then discuss your church's vision and next steps as a group.

1. What have you personally done this year with the 5 BLESS missional practices? What worked? What didn't? What could have been improved?
2. What were your personal challenges in implementing the BLESS missional practices?
3. What are your hopes, thoughts, or dreams about what you would like to do with the BLESS missional practices this next year personally? Brainstorm possibilities!
4. Which of these possibilities excite you the most? What is your biggest barrier? What steps would you need to take to implement your top three ideas?
5. What are your hopes, thoughts, or dreams about what you would like to do with the BLESS missional practices as a church community? Brainstorm possibilities!
6. What is your next step as a leadership team in moving your church forward in the BLESS missional practices?