

A GUIDE TO

Continuing Community During the Pandemic

One mission. One vision. One another.

We are facing the greatest one another challenge of our age. How do we continue to practice the 31 individual commands of the New Testament that involve our direct, physical ministry to one another and to neighbors when we have continued physical distancing, a tense (isn't that putting it mildly?) election year, and wildly differing considerations and convictions around health?

We can get off track just focusing on the frustrations of even one of these matters, let alone all at once, which is what the world is asking us to do.

But the story is not the pandemic. The story is the continued movement of God in one another. Even as this stretches on, we are a church united in the mission to love God, love people, and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Now more than ever, we need groups to lead the pursuit of biblical friendships and practice the “one another” commands, using all our gifts to share the gospel, together.

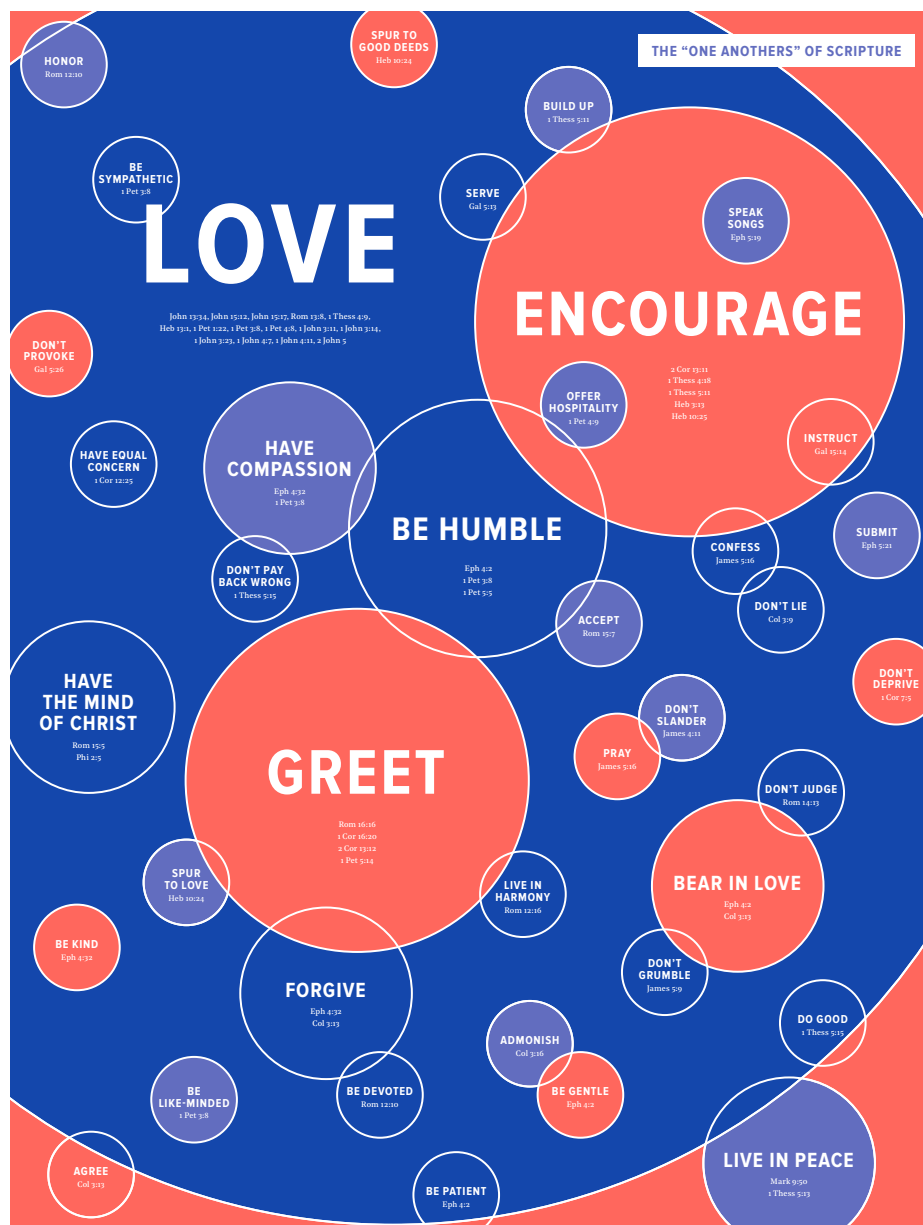
If our [Keeping Community Amid the Pandemic Guide](#) was a first-responder document, this second guide carries through with wise questions to ask as a leader to discern how we might bear in love with one another in light of COVID-19.

This is not a directional, step-by-step document but a guided collection in the truest sense; let us consider together how we might pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding (Rom. 14:19).

— TVC Groups Team

Pray and Practice the One Anothers

Whether it's gender-specific nights twice a month to accommodate for child care and physical distancing, Zoom calls all together the other times, meetings and prayer in a front yard, in a parking lot spaced out, masks, no masks, some masks, **this ongoing pandemic will test our one another culture, so begin with praying these Scriptures specifically.** Pray as a leader over your group and as a group together. Ask the Lord to make us this kind of people.



Is Your Home Group Post-Covid-19 Ready?

[Chris Surratt, LifeWay Groups](#)

Now that social distancing restrictions are starting to be slowly lifted around the country, churches are planning how they will operate safely in this new world. Weekend gatherings will be limited because of ongoing restrictions on capacity and people's proximity to each other. This will alter the number of worship services, how children's ministry is offered, the ingress and egress of people in the building, on-campus classes, and many other ministries, but what about small groups?

Small groups in homes seem like a logical place to start since they are decentralized and mostly come under the gathering restriction numbers, but before you flip the switch back on for your in-person small group, you need to think through the same types of questions every church, restaurant, and retail business is pondering right now.

There is a trust that has to be rebuilt between host and attendee in every environment. We have been conditioned to keep at least six feet between us and the next human being, and that surfaces outside of our home are not to be trusted. Wearing masks to protect those around us may be encouraged, and in some localities, enforced.

With that in mind, here are a few questions to think about before you throw the doors open to the small group in your home.

- **How will you offer childcare?** Childcare issues are already at the top of the list for most small groups, but they are especially important now. It will be some time before parents will be comfortable with leaving their children in close proximity to other kids, so you may have to stop offering group childcare for awhile.
- **How will you handle food?** I am a big proponent of having food options at a small group meeting. It helps people start to feel comfortable quicker, and who doesn't love food? However, how you offer the food may have to change. Our small group will normally have a buffet style of snack offerings with a line of bowls and community dipping spoons for each. That arrangement will no longer be acceptable.
- **Where will people use the restroom?** This is a question that I bet most group leaders have not had to wrestle with before. If you only have one restroom available, that will make it undesirable for multiple people to use in one night.

- **Is there room in the gathering area for people to properly spread out?** The living room where my small group meets is pretty tight. We can comfortably accommodate around 10-12 adults in a semicircle. We are going to have to rethink our numbers and spacing before our next in-person meeting. (Also consider that some may want to wear masks, others may not. How will you lead that discussion of preferences and conviction?)
- **Can you offer a virtual attendance option for some?** Not everyone is going to be comfortable with attending physically right away, and some group members may be in the most at-risk demographic and should not attend until there is a vaccine. Now that people are accustomed to attending online through Zoom or Hangouts, can you set up a computer with a web camera and allow them to still attend virtually?
- **Do you have time to deep clean your house before group every week?** Guidelines for restaurants reopening call for thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting everything between every customer. That includes door handles, tables, chairs and menus. Are you prepared to offer that level of cleaning for your group each week? People will expect it.
- **Are you comfortable with group members wearing masks during at least a portion of the group time?** This may not be necessary during the study discussion when everyone is properly spaced, but may be while people are arriving and socializing at the beginning and the end of group time.

Some of these changes may be temporary and some may be permanent. I would encourage thinking through the detail and having a plan before reopening our homes so group members can come back confidently and safely.

Politics and Your Home Group

[Notes from Group Leader Equipping session by Michael Morris](#)

"Spiritual results will only be accomplished by spiritual people using spiritual methods."

—J. Oswald Sanders

As group leaders, you take a lead role in maturing disciples of Jesus Christ. Tense conversations are often part of growth together. Perhaps nowhere is that becoming more apparent in the 21st century than in our politics.

Even when we aren't facing a global pandemic, "fruitful, meaningful, and productive political conversations can't be had if we jump to conclusions about each other."

Politics may be defined as "the struggle that determines who gets what when and how." They are rife with contention, war, conflict, influence, and power.

The Church does not wrestle against flesh and blood. We are in a spiritual battle of Word, love, and actions. **Our call is to maintain the unity of the Spirit.**

Here are some ground rules for navigating political conversations in your group:

1. If you want to talk politics, it's best to do so face-to-face.
2. Respect one another. Does this conversation seek to practice the "one anothers" of Scripture?
3. Speak with honesty and candor. If you disagree, say so politely. If a statement is hurtful, say that it was, and be quick to forgive. If you say a hurtful statement, be quick to apologize and seek forgiveness.
4. Give goodwill. Are you seeking to understand over being understood or validated? Are you seeking to be right over being righteous?
5. Be informed. And be okay admitting if you are not and wish to talk about something else.

Offering Comfort in Job Loss, Salary Reductions, and Other Challenging Realities

Adapted from [Tim Keller, Miserable Comforters](#)

A major aspect we are hearing in our church body is that some are facing job loss and others significant pay reductions. And many of us may be asking (or expecting) if we are next.

How will we minister to one another through the suffering and loss that comes our way in this pandemic? The answer is comfort. “A shock absorber system in a car doesn’t eliminate the bumps in the road,” Tim Keller says, “but it keeps the car from being shaken into pieces by the bumps. You have to have sources of comfort and strength when you go through suffering—not that it eliminates the suffering, but that suffering won’t actually shake you to pieces.”

Job had three friends (a small group, you might say). They show up, and from chapter 3 all the way into the 20s, they speak to Job in cycles to try to comfort him, to try to help him interpret and understand his suffering. And they do an absolutely terrible job of comforting.

Yet, even by looking at how they don’t comfort well, we can learn something about where sources of comfort can come from as we care for one another in group life.

Bad Comfort

Eliphaz brings a list (Job 4–5). He brings the so-called logic and principles. He’s heard Job crying out in agony. And Eliphaz tells his suffering friend, “Stop your belly-aching, stop your praying, stop your emoting and blubbering. Figure out what you’re doing wrong, where you can get another (better) job, pull yourself together, and get back out there.”

This doesn’t grasp the biblical complexity of human existence. A checklist of questions like, “Have you sinned? Are you believing the promises? Are you confessing sins? Are you reading your Bible? Are you doing your spiritual disciplines? You gotta figure out what God is trying to do here,” may not be what a group member in suffering needs. They may need you to listen, to cry. They may need a hug and ministry of presence, not words or lists. Better comfort is a ministry mix of truth and tears.

Better Comfort

Job responds to Eliphaz with his own self counseling (Job 6). You see this kind of example also in Psalm 42. Job does a healthier job and sets a model for how we might also comfort one another. Would that one of his small group members knew to provide such comfort! Job displayed better comfort through:

1. **Emotional realism** – Job expresses how he really feels—no cleaning it up. He does so in a small group of trusted friends and with God.
2. **Prayer** – In Job 6:8, he prays, admitting that he hopes God would really grant what he's asking. Job says hard things about God, but he says them to God. He never stops praying. He stays in relationship with God.
3. **Rejecting suicide** – Also in Job 6:8, he asks God to kill him, but he refuses to grasp death for his own escape. Job does not believe he has the right to commit suicide. It is no comfort. It is not a right given us by God.
4. **Recognizing God's keeping him** – “I have not repudiated the words of the Holy One.” The one comfort he has is a clear conscience. He knows God loves him, accepts him, knows him. If you know God, you can comfort. You can be comforted—and kept.

Ultimate Comfort

Job said all of the above knowing that even in his initial response, he was prone to crack. No one has ever perfectly kept all the words of the Holy One. Except One.

Jesus Christ could keep every word. He is praiseworthy and excellent. He was righteous and upright and was struck down and destroyed for our sin. He was the only true innocent sufferer, and He also defeated death once for all. If you have a relationship with Him, you are loved and kept.

A question from the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?”

Answer: “That I am not my own but belong, body and soul in life and death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ, who has paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and therefore by His Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready to live for Him.”

What News Can I Trust? What Should I Share?

[Jared Musgrove, writing at For The Church](#)

Recent events have tuned the eyes and ears of Americans toward news sources in ways we have not seen for quite some time. And, as ceaseless reports of disease outbreak, brutal violence, and political fights plaster our screens, believers must be mindful of how we receive our news and what we choose to do with it.

How Do You Get Your News?

As a journalism student, I was told repeatedly that there is no such thing as objective reporting—an accurate assessment. Every person approaches events from a perspective, an existing worldview or set of assumptions that shape how they perceive and share those events. A reporter’s approach is no different.

Because this is true, **Christians must practice discernment when filtering through news updates.** Am I reading that something happened (an event) or what someone thinks about something that happened (a commentary)? Most of the news we receive today is a mixture of both, if not heavier on the commentary side, with the expectation that you take a side. This kind of reporting often buries whatever truth it contains in conjecture and opinion.

Just as very human reporters craft news stories, very human editors make value judgments about which stories to feature and promote. The decision of what goes on the front page and what leads the evening newscast is a worldview decision. Understand this when you consume news reporting and ask yourself:

“Why is this story the lead or on repeat?”

“Is this report concerned with facts?”

“Is there good research that solidly supports this report?”

“Am I being *shown* what is happening or being *told* what to think about it?”

A journalist’s job is to ask questions, but that’s also our job as thinking Christians when we read, hear, or watch a report. Ask questions of the report, the reporter,

yourself, your neighbor, and your worldview. And then make a decision about what to do.

What Do You Do With Your News?

Christians hear news reports through the filter of an objective standard of truth. Having answered the biggest question of all, “Whose world is it anyway?” we’re able to apply the lesser questions that sift fact from commentary—all with an eye toward discerning truth, or at least wisdom and kindness in the navigation of information.

While the bottom line for Christians is truth, the bottom line for networks and newspapers may not be. Journalism is a business, meaning the dollar is often a media corporation’s bottom line. This reality heavily influences reporting. Chasing scandals and political gaffes buffers the bottom line, just not often the one concerned with truth. So, what should we do to ensure we’re well-informed?

Keep digging.

Steer clear of entertainment news traps and go to the sources most likely to bring you the bottom line of truth. These probably aren’t trending on your Facebook feed. Begin to identify trusted sources by humbly engaging in several. Consult news sources across the liberal-conservative spectrum to better understand how stories are being shaped. How is one network reporting this story differently than another? Before reflexively sharing with others something that looks and sounds like a news story, check its source. If the source or the article itself is sensational, treat it with healthy suspicion.

We must also bear in love with compassion (and patience) for those in our groups who may be sharing or posting news or “news.” Lead out in asking open-ended questions: “What have you heard? What do you know? Where have you found good information on this? How does this align with what the Bible teaches? How will we honor the ‘one another’ commands as we discuss this piece of news?”

Even more, we must **pray as events scroll across the screen.** Develop this discipline. Let your news intake get you out of yourself and move you to pray, and then to act as you are able. Let the news be an instigator to get you involved in all that God is doing in this world that belongs—without hype, sensationalism or slant—to Him.

What We Are Learning about Virtual Groups

Small group leaders across the country are learning a lot about what it looks like to try and have a completely online community. Here is a summary of what we are finding and sharing in our discussions.

Virtual platforms are great for content. Groups that are formed around the sharing of content for a limited amount of time (a class or evangelism group like Alpha) seem to do well for the duration of the stated content. While ongoing or in-person community rarely forms, most people stay faithful to finish the online content and discussion.

Virtual platforms are just okay to supplement existing relationships. Nationwide, the report is that most small groups that met personally prior to the lockdowns jumped quickly into meeting virtually via Zoom or other video platforms. That has certainly been the case with Home Groups at The Village, where a reported 99% of our existing Home Groups continued to meet virtually or in socially distanced meet-ups since the pandemic began. The desire for in-person grows stronger and continues to be the stated necessity for forming and continuing community.

Virtual platforms are not able to create nor establish lasting relationships. Groups that meet for the first time on a virtual platform for the stated purpose of community are rarely able to sustain the group past the first two or three virtual meetings. Aspects like care, meeting needs, and true vulnerability are mentioned as significant challenges in purely digital groups.

Continuing the Community Practice of the Unhurried Pace

By Justin Elafros

It's hard to fully understand the full brunt force this pandemic has had and will have.

And even with all of the challenges, there have been some great gifts given to the Church. The Lord is clarifying and slowing. I believe we were on a speeding train and didn't know how to get off. Well, we got off, going from business trips, church functions, kids sports, school, and more to nothing, nada, zilch.

The Lord is slowing His Church. Let's not forget this when we enter back into the fray over the coming months. Following Jesus has nothing to do with business and everything to do with unhurried love for God and others.

"All my worst moments are when I'm in a hurry—love, joy, peace are incompatible with hurry."

"Love is patient, love is kind..."

Psalm 23 does NOT say, "The LORD is my shepherd, therefore I gotta run faster."

You see, hurry actually says more about you at your core than you think it does.

Questions to consider together in your household and in your Home Group before the hurry returns:

- What does/did your hurry say about what you value? Take it a step further: if you had to stop all of your responsibilities and extracurriculars, what would you feel? Unworthy? Unloved? Free? Why is that?
- Slowing down and listening to the voice of God takes time. How will you take this past season and make changes as it relates to how you spend your time in the years ahead?