

THE SANCTUARY COURSE®

SESSION 6

COMPANIONSHIP



SCRIPTURE: PSALM 42:2B-3

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”*

The cry to behold the face of God captures the longing of the human heart for relationship. In these verses the loss of homeland and temple is magnified by the grief of broken communion with God. Exile has removed Israel from the very presence of God, and now the psalmist’s tears have become prayers. This session deals very directly with the significance of relationships and the power of presence in the human experience.



SESSION OVERVIEW

In this session you will:

1. Explore the need for community
2. Define and examine the practices of companionship
3. Reflect on the nature of biblical community and the gift of personal presence



CORE CONTENT

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPANIONSHIP

In Session 1 it was stated that this course was designed to strengthen communities. After all, the New Testament makes some very significant claims about the importance of community. Christ told his disciples that they would be known by their love, and the apostles had a lot to say about the way that we treat one another. From the very beginning, it seems that Christian community has been at the heart of the proclamation of the gospel. Theologians Tim Chester and Steve Timmis express this reality powerfully in their work: “Christian community is a vital part of Christian mission. Mission takes place as people see our love for one another. We all know that the gospel is communicated both through the words that we say and the lives that we live. What Jesus says is that it is the life we live together that counts.”¹

If you want to explore this topic further, here are a few good places to start:
John 13:34-35
Acts 4:32-35
1 Corinthians 12:12-26
Ephesians 4:1-3
Colossians 3:12-14

But community is not just important to us as Christians. The past few sessions have highlighted research in the field of mental health that demonstrates the importance of relationships and social support in preventing mental health problems and promoting

mental health recovery. This research shows that communities play a critical role in helping individuals cope with stress and implement recovery plans.² The value of community support is not limited to practical assistance and resources, however. During the discussion of recovery it was noted that the ability to discover meaning in the midst of suffering, the ability to contribute to the life of a community, and the ability to develop and sustain a positive sense of identity are all important elements of flourishing mental health. As you may know from personal experience, these abilities are often nurtured by our friendships and communities.

Many people who have suffered from mental health problems emphasize the importance of relationships in recovery. Patte Randal, a rehabilitation psychiatrist who has lived through psychosis, shares that her illness made her question her own worth. It was only through relationships with others that she was able to rediscover a sense of personal value.³ Her testimony does not stand in isolation. Relationships remind all of us that we are valued for who we are, and that a diagnosis or mental health problem does not define us. Friendships affirm our worth and our humanity.

For this reason, effective mental health care requires the development of communities where individuals are supported as they engage in the process of recovering meaning, relationships, and identity.⁴ The rest of this session will be spent looking at some of the practical ways that you can offer social support to individuals facing mental health challenges.



DISCUSSION QUESTION

What are some additional gifts of friendship that you have experienced? How might these gifts promote mental health recovery?

Remember, these questions are not mandatory; they are simply invitations. Any member of the group is free to decline an invitation at any time, and the group as a whole may decide to skip over a question if it seems unhelpful.

Today you will be meeting Lisa, who lives with bipolar disorder and has experienced episodes of psychosis.



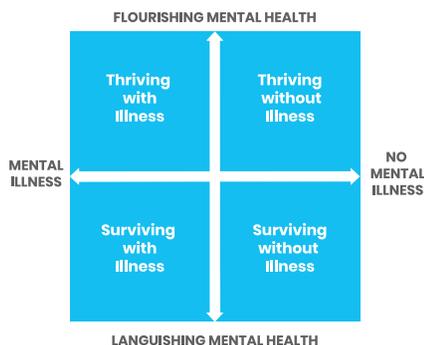
WATCH VIDEO



DISCUSSION QUESTION

How does Lisa's story relate to the session topic of friendship and companionship?

THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPANIONSHIP



Everyone needs a place to belong, peer relationships, support in moments of crisis, and a sense of personal worth. These needs are fundamental to human nature. As Session 3 mentioned, however, social isolation and diminished self-esteem are common experiences for individuals suffering from mental health problems. The presence of stigma and the appearance of symptoms can discourage relationships between people who are languishing and people who are flourishing on the mental health continuum. Given these challenges, how do we meet the fundamental needs of individuals suffering from mental health problems?

Craig Rennebohm has devoted much of his career to answering this question. As a chaplain, he spent twenty-five years ministering to the homeless and to individuals living with mental illness. He realized that the idea of equality was critical when it came to building authentic, sustainable relationships. He then developed a model based on this idea and called it “companionship.”⁵ While this model emerged from his work with the homeless, it is helpful in framing the ways we think about relating to people in general, and people with mental health problems in particular (regardless of their level of functioning). Ultimately, companionship is an alternative to relationships that perpetuate inequality, such as the professional/patient relationship or the rescuer/victim relationship. (Both of these relationships are frequently experienced by individuals with mental health problems.)

According to Rennebohm, companionship is formed around five spiritual practices. First, **companionship includes hospitality**. When you hear the word “hospitality,” you might picture a cozy home with a fire crackling in the fireplace, a delicious meal laid out on the table, and a friendly face waiting at the front door. This image effectively captures the essence of hospitality. Hospitality means offering a safe and kind environment, sharing simple things like food or conversation, and treating others with respect. These small gestures can profoundly impact individuals who have been wounded by the experience of illness and stigma.

Optional Discussion Question: What are some of the roles or identities you might need to set aside in order to practice companionship?

Second, **companionship includes neighboring**. Neighbors are people who share common ground. In the same way, companionship encourages people to develop relationships as equals, looking for things that are shared in common between them. This might mean taking the time to talk about the weather, or going on a walk in order to enjoy a beautiful spring day together. No matter how different our experiences have been, at the end of the day we are all human. Through companionship and neighboring we learn to set aside the roles and identities we often inhabit, and simply meet others in our humanness.

Third, **companionship includes adopting a side-by-side perspective.** In order to make space for the other person in the relationship, we must honor their unique experiences. The picture of two individuals standing next to one another and surveying the same landscape helpfully illustrates this practice. Neither person is in front, dominating the view or asserting that their perspective is “better” or “right.” Instead they remain side by side, taking in their own views while acknowledging the different views of the person next to them.

Remember the listening exercise from Session 1? Here are a few of the principles discussed:

1. Be aware that listening wholly and attentively is a gift you offer to others.
2. Be aware of your body language; sit in a way that communicates openness and displays your willingness to listen.
3. Listen not only to the words being spoken, but to the emotions being expressed.
4. Don't rush to come up with a response; slow down and focus on simply understanding.

Fourth, **companionship includes listening.** This is another important way that we honor the unique experiences of others. Research has shown that sharing personal stories can be empowering and liberating.⁶ When we listen to someone we are giving them the opportunity to put the pieces of their life together in a meaningful way. The manner of our listening can also support recovery. The best listeners suspend judgment and are sensitive to the “soul” of the story—the elements that reveal the identity and the spiritual experience of the storyteller. They also reflect back to the storyteller the elements of faith, hope, and love embedded in the story, and provide encouragement and affirmation.

Fifth, **companionship includes accompaniment.** This involves both practical and spiritual support. When we hold someone in our thoughts and prayers, we are accompanying them on their journey of recovery. We can also accompany individuals by going with them to important meetings and medical appointments, offering to buy them groceries, and providing other assistance as required. This is the element of companionship that reminds individuals that they are not alone. However, accompaniment should be about supporting and empowering others rather than doing things for them.

These are the five spiritual practices of companionship: providing hospitality, neighboring, adopting a side-by-side perspective, listening, and accompaniment. If you had to summarize these practices and identify how they differ from other models of relationship, you could say that companionship offers presence rather than solutions. In companionship you do not need to have all the answers, provide a diagnosis, or resolve every problem; you simply need to make space and time for another person. Rennebohm describes it in this way:

*“Our hospitality may be as simple as a nod or a smile, our neighboring the willingness to linger a moment nearby rather than pass by on the other side. We may choose to share the pew, or share the table at a meal program instead of remaining behind the serving line. We may follow up a hello with a “how is it going?” and a willingness to hear a person’s story however they may be able to tell it. We may remember the stranger in our prayers, or help an individual add to their circle of care and support. In every congregation a small group of companions can meet regularly and share with one another **this basic ministry of presence.**”⁷*

There is one final observation to be made concerning companionship. Rennebohm speaks of a group of companions, and this is not an accident. Companionship is not something that individuals should offer without the support and participation of a larger community. It takes many people to absorb and distribute the strain created by a mental health crisis or a lengthy recovery journey. When a community is filled with companions, individuals are free to step back if the demands of life increase or if they sense that a fresh presence is needed. This communal approach relieves the burden of care that often falls heavily on pastors, leaders, and family members, and it presents church members with the opportunity to come together as the body of Christ.



DISCUSSION QUESTION

Can you think of a time when you offered or received one of these spiritual practices of companionship? Reflect on this experience.



THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMPANIONSHIP

The value of equality in communities is not a new idea. In fact, it has biblical roots. Jesus frequently warned his disciples against the divisions and distinctions produced by pride, and instructed them to include the outcast and the marginalized in their gatherings (Luke 14:7-14; Luke 22:24-27). He also modeled equality, calling his disciples “friends” and sharing with them everything he heard from the Father (John 15:12-16). Paul continued this teaching theme in many of his letters, reminding those early congregations that they were part of one united body and should therefore guard against division (1 Corinthians 12:17:27; Galatians 3:26-28).

What is at the heart of this vision of equality? It is important to remember that the biblical authors did not believe in ignoring or removing the gifts, roles, and identities that make people different. In fact, they celebrated the unique gifts given to individuals and they encouraged congregations to recognize those gifts and divide the work of the church accordingly (Ephesians 4:7-13; 1 Corinthians 12:4-27). Instead of teaching us to ignore or remove our differences, the biblical vision of equality encourages us to *love people in the same way*. Differences should not be used to create relational separation or justify the distinctive treatment of individuals within the community.

One of the most powerful illustrations of this call to love is found in the Gospel of Luke. As you read the words of this familiar parable, look for the ways it may reflect the spiritual practices of companionship.

Optional Discussion Question:
What are some of the unique gifts that you can offer to your community?

Optional Discussion Question:

What spiritual practices of companionship do you see in this parable? Take a moment to share your observations as a group.

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:29-37)

The Samaritan was motivated by compassion and a sense of shared humanity, and he also demonstrated hospitality and accompaniment in his care for the wounded man. But there is another interesting detail in the story. Did you notice that the Samaritan stayed at the inn on the first night in order to care for the stranger personally? He had the financial resources to pay others for the necessary care, yet he chose to remain and to offer the gift of his presence in addition to the gift of his resources. This is perhaps the most humanizing act of all.

The value of personal presence is also deeply biblical. In fact, it reflects a profound truth about human nature. Many theologians have observed that people are created for relationships because they are made in the image of a relational God.⁸ Just as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in the mutual love of the Trinity, so we are designed to be fundamentally connected to those around us through relationships. And this connection is laden with mystery. In ways that we may struggle to express or fully comprehend, the simple presence of another person can help us release emotional burdens and receive spiritual comfort. We are able to feel with and for one another—something the New Testament describes as bearing one another's burdens and mourning with those who mourn (Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:15). As members of a single body, we receive the gift of wholeness through the simple act of gathering together and offering the gift of our presence. This beautiful reality is something we can all participate in, regardless of whether our mental health is languishing or flourishing.



DISCUSSION QUESTION

How can you offer the gift of presence in your relationships? In the context of a Sunday service?



EXERCISE: WHAT/WHERE/WHEN/ WHY/HOW

As a group, generate a list of ways that you can practice companionship individually and as a community. Use the following questions to help start your discussion:

WHAT?

What are the practical needs within our community? What are the relational and emotional needs? What are the spiritual needs?

WHERE?

Is there a place for people in our community to meet regularly and receive encouragement?

WHEN?

Does our community set aside time to provide care for vulnerable individuals? How can we incorporate companionship into the natural rhythms of our community?

WHY?

What motivates our community to practice companionship? What discourages our community from practicing companionship?

HOW?

What are the unique gifts and resources our community has to offer? How are these gifts and resources currently being used?



PRAYER

In “The Servant Song,” Richard Gillard writes beautifully about the realities of companionship. Your group may choose to listen to the song rather than read it out loud:

Will you let me be your servant
Let me be as Christ to you
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too

We are pilgrims on the journey
We are travelers on the road
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load

I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night time of your fear
I will hold my hand out to you
Speak the peace you long to hear

I will weep when you are weeping
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through

When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony

ENDNOTES:

1. Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 56.
2. Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman, "Social Ties and Mental Health," *Journal of Urban Health* 78, no. 3 (September 2001): 459-460, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11564849>.
3. Chris Cook, Andrew Powell, and Andrew Sims, eds., *Spirituality and Psychiatry* (London: RCPsych Publications, 2009), 54.
4. John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a 'Forgotten' Dimension* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001), 58.
5. The following discussion is based on the principles of companionship outlined in Craig Rennebohm's book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God: Stories of the Search for Home and Healing on the Streets* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008). Additional information can be found in "The Companionship Series," a course that guides faith communities in responding to the challenges of mental health problems.
6. If you are interested in this idea, you should start by looking at the work of psychologist Roy Schafer.
7. Craig Rennebohm, "A Call to Healing," *The Christian Citizen* 2 (2014), accessed May 1, 2018, http://www.mentalhealthministries.net/resources/articles/call_to_healing/faith-mentalhealth-essay-eeennebohm.pdf.
8. W. Ross Hastings, *Where Do Broken Hearts Go? An Integrative, Participational Theology of Grief* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 115.