

# Longing for More from Small Groups

Ruth Haley Barton explains how to experience transforming community.  
Amy Jackson

How many of us have joined a small group only to be disappointed?

Unfortunately, the experience is all too common, and it's the problem that Ruth Haley Barton seeks to fix in [Life Together in Christ](#).

We sell people on a beautiful, life-changing community where they will finally find a place to belong. But most small groups aren't like that. Some focus only on building mediocre relationships and never get to the life change. Others dive deep into Bible study, but never move to application—or getting to know the people in the group. We approach our groups as social hang outs, Bible classes, or support groups—and then we're disappointed when they don't meet all our expectations for beautiful [Acts 2 community](#). As churches, we have overpromised and underdelivered.

For so long, small-group pastors have groaned about how few people are willing to commit today. But my experience is that people *are* willing to commit—if it's challenging, life-changing, and purposeful. After all, why else would so many people [commit](#) to [CrossFit](#)?

Lately I've been sensing a shift in small-group ministry, though. More and more people that I talk to are looking for something more. They're hungry for purposeful, meaningful community that allows them to serve and helps them grow. In fact, as Barton references, "a recent Barna study found that a majority of self-identified Christians today (52 percent) believe that there is much more to the Christian life than they have experienced." While providing that kind of community may seem like a daunting task, it's the kind of community that we read about in the Bible, and Barton has some tips to help us experience it today.

Life Together in Christ is based on the Emmaus Road story in [Luke 24](#). As these two disciples return to Emmaus after Jesus' death, they don't know what to think. *What does this mean about everything we believe? What do we do now?* As they travel, a stranger joins them and begins talking with them. They enjoy his company so much that they invite him to stay with them for dinner. It isn't until this stranger breaks bread with them that they realize he's Jesus.

The story paints a beautiful picture of community, and Barton bases her entire book about living life together on this short passage. The Emmaus Road holds lessons about welcoming the stranger into our gatherings, choosing to listen rather than fix, [how men and women should gather together](#), the nature of the spiritual journey, finding our story in His story, and even discerning the presence of God among us.

Through these lessons, Barton stresses how to be hospitable to others in our community—both creating a safe physical space and a safe emotional space. Barton emphasizes the importance of basing our relationships on having Christ in common, all of us pilgrims on the spiritual journey.

This means that we must practice the spiritual disciplines of reading his Word and discerning Christ's presence.

Before you think Barton is simply painting another beautiful, unattainable picture of community, I want to assure you that she is the first to admit the mess and hard work involved. Part of which is the hard, soul-searching work of knowing ourselves. She rightfully points out that only when we're attuned to what's happening within us can we counter our unintentional actions that do great harm to community. For instance, it's only when we can quiet our inner thoughts that we can truly listen, putting the other first, and simply be there rather than fix. For anyone who's experienced the "fixer" in small groups, this is a welcome point.

She also offers helpful correctives when it comes to reading Scripture together (Are you reading just to know more, or is it transforming your heart?) and the purpose of gathering together (Is your primary purpose friendships or helping one another experience life change?).

One of my favorite parts of the book is Barton's corrective about "strangers" that feels especially poignant in light of recent news. She recommends [the discipline of inner hospitality](#)—a way to welcome "the other" and listen to his or her perspective. Whether welcoming people of different ages, ethnicities, or denominations, we could all learn to welcome others with this kind of openness. In fact, the church could lead the way in showing the world that it's possible to be unified in diversity.

This book is perfect for anyone in small-group ministry, and could even be used by a dedicated small group looking to go deeper together. Each chapter has personal reflection questions and great questions and exercises for a group to work through together. For the group that's constantly saying, "I wish we could go deeper," this book is the answer. Life Together in Christ points the way to deeper community, deeper connection with God, and deeper mission. While it's attainable for those willing to do the work, those content with mediocre small-group experiences won't have the passion to pursue it.

You can read free excerpts from Life Together in Christ on SmallGroups.com. Read "[The Case for Mixed-Gender Groups](#)," and "[The Gift of Listening](#)."

—Amy Jackson is managing editor of [SmallGroups.com](#).

*Take the 10-week [Life Together in Christ Challenge](#) to get a discount on this book. Sign up by March 31.*