

Making Family Meal *Meaningful**

**A guide for leading your community group into a rhythm of regular, sustainable, and missionally fruitful family meals*



Family meals begin with margin

Mission begins with margin. Not boldness, or zeal, or a passion for souls, but margin. Space. Labor that emerges from a place of rest. Obedience that is sustained by the experience of Jesus' easy yoke. As we begin to ruthlessly simplify our lives and weed out hurry, we will find that we have an increasing amount of energy for strategic boldness and we'll find ourselves increasingly sensitive to the Holy Spirit's still, small voice saying, *This is the way, walk in it* (Isa 30:21). Saying, *Go over and join this chariot* (Acts 8:29). Saying, *Go to a street called Straight* (Acts 9:11). What does strategic boldness look like? It looks like Paul saying, *...to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews...* (1 Cor 9:19–23). Margin means cutting things out of our calendars until there's space to invite our neighbors over for dinner. Margin means letting Christ be king not only of our words, actions, thoughts, and checkbooks, but also letting Christ be king of our calendars. In the words of Dallas Willard, we must "ruthlessly eliminate hurry."

Family meal makes for more variety in our rhythms

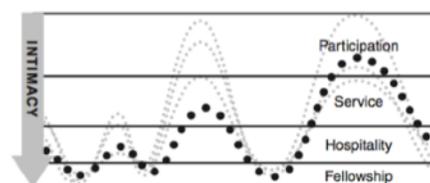
In pursuit of the Great Commission, we need other avenues for inviting people to experience the Christian community besides simply inviting them to the corporate assembly. Many people would not consider attending on a Sunday morning that would participate in a loving community. Ask yourself, *What consistent, monthly rhythms does my group have that can serve as on-ramps for people far from God?* Or can they only attend a Bible study? We need to gather for discipleship, true. We need to gather for community, true. But we also need to gather for the sake of mission. We need to gather for the sake of the lost in ways that are natural, neutral, and regular. Many churches have wrestled to the ground the biblical truth that change—discipleship—is best accomplished in the context of community.

But we also must wrestle to the ground the biblical truth that *mission* is best accomplished in the context of community. *Simply put, we don't grow or go alone.* The gospel community adorns and gives off a fragrance of the gospel message. God has not given us the overwhelming task of functioning as Lone Ranger missionaries, armed only with our short list of particular spiritual gifts. God never intended for the toe to stand in for the whole body. We need all the gifts in the change process, and we need all the gifts in the cause of the Great Commission. God's design is for non-Christians to be given the opportunity to hang out with Christians hanging out with Christians. Then the gospel community can increasingly adorn the gospel message. *We push back darkness better when we push it back together.* But that means that our community groups can't just consist of Bible studies and prayer meetings—we must not do *less* than those things or we'll be disobedient to Jesus—but if we *fail* to do *more* than those things, we may find ourselves being disobedient to Jesus in another direction.

Spaces Continuum: Traditional Small Groups



Spaces Continuum: Harmonized Lives



That doesn't necessarily mean increasing the *amount* of stuff we do in our community groups (it might), but it certainly means increasing the *variety* of stuff we do in our community groups. A community group that is being and making disciples of Jesus in the context of community on mission is more than an event that happens on Wednesday nights. Rather it is a group that gathers intentionally in a variety of ways throughout a given month. Think "spiritual family" rather than "event." Think "personal transformation" rather than "information transfer." Simply put, varied rhythms are important because they help us better obey and enjoy Jesus. Let's ask ourselves, "How can we better love God, love people, and push back darkness together?"

Family meal makes us countercultural and compelling

Gathering around a meal is a beautiful way to make "margin for mission" concrete. What does margin look like? It looks like the beautiful inefficiency and deeply personal nature of lingering over an unhurried meal. One of the chief ways in which our fruitfulness is choked out is through lack of margin. The family meal is the epitome of intentional margin-making. Author Carolyn Steel writes, "'Few acts are more expressive of companionship than the shared meal... Someone with whom we share food is likely to be our friend, or well on the way to becoming one.'" Similarly, as one Bible commentator notes, "In Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."

British pastor Tim Chester observes, "In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam reveals that there's been a 33 percent decrease in families eating together over the last three decades. And more than half of those families are watching television as they eat together. Over the same period there's been a 45 percent decline in entertaining friends. Growing up I would ask each Sunday, 'Who's coming for dinner today?' Not whether but who, because I knew my parents always would have invited someone. 'In the typical American household, the average number of dinners eaten together is three per week, with the average length of dinner being 20 minutes.'" Chester continues,

Now television shows and cookbooks sell the idea of hospitality back to us as they encourage us to remake hospitality in the image of restaurant cuisine. Sharing a family meal has been replaced by the fancy dinner party. There's nothing wrong with eating out or hosting a special meal—indeed there's a lot right with it. But somewhere along the line the commercialization of meals has cost us something precious. Hospitality has become performance art, and we've lost the creation of intimacy around a meal.

Hospitality involves welcoming, creating space, listening, paying attention, and providing. Meals slow things down. Some of us don't like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people oriented instead of task oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list. It's possible to remain at a distance from someone in public gatherings—even in a Bible study. Meals bring you close. You see people in situ, in life, as they are. You connect and communicate... Generous hospitality leads to reconciliation. It expresses forgiveness. Unresolved conflict can't be ignored when we gather round the meal table; you can't eat in silence without realizing there's an issue to address. Paul uses hospitality as a metaphor for reconciliation when he says to the Corinthians: "Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one..." (2 Cor 7:2). Hospitality can be a kind of sacrament of forgiveness.



The following is taken directly, with a few minor changes of wording, from a series of blog posts written by Todd Engstrom, which can be found at toddenstrom.com/resources.

Moving beyond small group

The small group movement laid a helpful foundation, but it isn't complete. It's a really good thing that we have cultivated a value for gathering weekly outside of Sundays. But the gathering typically was an event someone attended that focused on a felt need. Sometimes it's the Bible. Sometimes it is common crisis. Vital things like sharing everyday life and prayer for one another are pushed to the margins. When we as Christians believe the gospel, God adopts us into His family. We are in fact now brothers and sisters in Christ. We're not just transactional partners in learning. Most small groups are a far cry from resembling a family. This should prompt us to ask: *If community groups are about obedience to Jesus, what should we do when we gather?* One aspect of obedience for us is acting like a family. If obedience is acting like a family, what do families actually do? Families share life around a meal. The dinner table is a critical time for a family to connect. It takes intentionality to ensure that happens, and sometimes there is formal instruction. More often than not it's a dynamic conversation. We talk about what was good and hard in our days over dinner. So what if we asked our leaders to host a meal, rather than prepare a lesson?

The advantages of gathering this way

The best conversations often happen around the dinner table, or while we're washing the dishes. Real life conversation happens in real life situations. Also, eating a meal together will quickly reveal what kind of community you have. You'll need to learn one another's stories, vocations, and passions. Quite simply, you will *need* to become friends. Participating in a meal together—one that requires a recipe, not a microwave—is a symbol of your fellowship and relationship with one another. This can be a helpful practice for every community, because it's a regular practice of most families.

One of the great advantages in gathering this way is that it frees people up to be people. You don't have to act a certain way or have a certain knowledge set. You don't need to have listened to a sermon or have a curriculum. Anyone can join in—even an outsider who doesn't know Jesus.

Notice a key point here. This is something even better than a pot luck where everyone brings a dish. This not merely eating together, but preparing a meal together and cleaning up that meal together. These subtle differences can make all the difference. We can easily turn the family meal into either a performance, which can lead to pride, or a duty, which can lead to despair. Pride or despair tend to happen when we entertain instead of practicing hospitality. But there is a third way—a gospel way—where we help each other, we're interdependent, and we let others into our lives. Instead of seeking to impress each other, or hide from each other, we can be known by each other, and loved in all our frailty and goofiness.

What we might have to give up

Gathering like this is a big change for some people. Inevitably, if you start removing Bible study as the central event you gather around, you'll get push back. We're so glad when someone who asks the question "where can I dig deep?" because we really value the Bible too. In fact, we value studying the Bible as much as we value acting like a family, but where should we do that? The short answer is primarily in our discipleship groups (see Frontline's "d-group one sheet" for more information).



Practical suggestions for family meals

We should be immensely flexible with forms as long as they are pursuing the proper function. What one community group does, another may do completely differently, yet hopefully they are pursuing the same purpose. For the family gathering, the objective is to live out our identity as a spiritual family. The primary focus of this gathering is the meal—together as a community preparing, eating and cleaning up from a shared meal.

Many people understandably have many practical questions at this point—everything from “Should we go potluck or have one person prepare the meal?” all the way to “Do you have any recipes for large groups of people?” Or you may have the spiritual gift of grilling, and you already know which direction you are going to run with this. While there is not a single way to do this, here are some practical suggestions:

1. *How do you find the right time?* First, find a time of the week where you won’t be under a time crunch. For most families, one of the best times to gather is on Sunday evenings. Mid-week is so often crammed with activities and events that it is really difficult to pull this off. Second, it’s probably wise that you aim for an every-other week rhythm on this rather than a weekly rhythm in order to cut down on some of the stress of a larger gathering.
2. *How do you plan the meal?* For the meal itself, it might work best for one family or person in your community to do the meal planning, but to involve others in the preparation. This cuts down on a lot of the planning and communication that is often necessary to do a potluck-style meal (and also limits the number of leftovers that get left behind). If you rotate through who is taking point, then it shares the burden over time. Some meals that have worked well for others, and are relatively easy to prepare, are homemade individual pizzas, oven-roasted chicken tacos, lasagna and other pasta dishes, grilling with a variety of salad options, but there are a bunch of others that could work equally well.
3. *When do you start?* You might consider planning for the family gathering to “start” at least 30 minutes prior to meal time. This allows for people to pitch in for some preparation, as well as to have some conversation before the meal. For those of you who have small kids, you might want to aim for a 4:30pm or 5:00pm start so you’ve got enough room on the backside to get the kids bathed and ready for bed. It might also be wise to either feed the kids before the adults, or to let the kids play outside while the adults are eating, in order to give you some uninterrupted time together.

You might want to consider gathering in the kitchen to start and invite the host family to pray for the meal as well as sometimes provide a topic of discussion for dinner. You could eat for about 30 minutes, and then consider having some kind of dessert following the main course in order to appease the kids and provide a little more opportunity for conversation. At the end of the evening, consider inviting people to help with clean up after the meal before everyone heads home. In general, from start to finish, this might take about two to two and a half hours. There’s nothing really special about any of this, but then again we’re aiming at being a family together, rather than doing something special in this time.



What should you talk about?

Another common question is “What should we talk about?” Here are a few different options that have been used.

1. *Who Will Be There?* The first question to answer when thinking through discussion topics is “Who is going to be there?” One of the major aspects of being and making disciples in community on mission is allowing those who aren’t yet following Jesus the opportunity to belong before they believe, and part of that is considering what you talk about. Often, rather than having a standard Bible study, you can simply ask the question “What were your highs and lows over the past week or two?” It’s a great opportunity for those who are believers to speak about God, the Gospel, and the Word, and it’s an accessible question for anyone, regardless of their faith, to answer.
2. *Studying the Bible...* If you’re going to study the Bible together, consider doing it in such a way that anyone can meaningfully participate in the conversation. If you’re following a reading plan in your d-groups, then you could just use a chapter from that day’s reading as the passage you’re going to discuss. The following questions can be a good standard to set if you’re going to do a Bible study:
 - What did you like or not like about what we just read?
 - Was there anything you didn’t understand?
 - What did you learn about God?
 - What did you learn about humanity?
 - What did you learn about Jesus?
 - Regardless of where your faith is at right now, if you were to apply what we learned about God to something in your life this week, what would that look like?

These questions give an opportunity to consider the gospel, and reinforce obedience to the Word rather than just learning.

An evening of prayer

Many Christians have a “Bible studies equal success” mentality, and this can be a barrier to living life in community on mission. A lot of people seem to have the feeling that it doesn’t really count in community or group life if you don’t study the Bible, but there are plenty of other disciplines to pursue as we gather together. Perhaps the most neglected is extended corporate prayer, which is one of the core values of biblical community.

Therefore, in your family gathering, you might consider occasionally gathering solely for the purpose of spending an evening praying together for God to move in your neighborhoods.

1. *Do one thing well rather than many things poorly...* One of the critical things that makes a community gathering successful, in my opinion, is focusing on doing one thing, rather than trying to accomplish a whole bunch of things. Prayer is often relegated to the leftovers of a gathering, so why not take a night to do just that? Some of the most powerful experiences you will have in community life will come when your community simply seeks God together.
2. *Pray through God’s attributes...* In order to put ourselves in a posture of worship and prayer, one of the best ways to start a community prayer time is to pray through God’s attributes and character. The opening statement of the Lord’s Prayer is “Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name.” Jesus



teaches us to pray by focusing our attention on God Himself, so you can spend about ten to fifteen minutes praying one by one out loud, simply worshipping God for who He is.

This is both helpful for worship, but also for discipleship. This prayer continues to help us remember the character of our God and be specific about all His attributes—His love, justice, holiness, independence, eternity, glory, beauty, mercy, and the many more things that God is. This discipline cultivates an ongoing understanding and affection for God!

3. *Pray for repentance...* After you've considered the Lord, you can then spend time repenting of sin. This practice helps to foster honesty as well as an ongoing recognition of our imperfection. We repent of our lack of affection for God, we confess our sins of omission and commission, and we repent for the ways we have trespassed against one another. You can then conclude your time by praying in thankfulness for the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and for the power of the resurrection to be more manifest in us to overcome sin and have an understanding of, affection for and obedience to God.
4. *Pray through Scripture...* Often times someone will have a passage of Scripture that the Lord has laid on their heart or that has been impactful throughout the week, and following worship and repentance, you can reflect and ask God to conform you all to his Word. This is yet another way to keep the Word of God at the center of your community, and also moves you to specificity in what you want to ask God to do.
5. *Pray specifically...* Finally, you can pray by name for your neighbors, your city, and the nations. You can spend time interceding specifically that God would reveal Himself to those whom you are seeking to share the good news of Jesus with, and that the powers and principalities of Satan would be undone. You can pray for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done specifically in your neighborhoods.
6. *Pray prophetically...* Invite the Holy Spirit to prompt or highlight anyone in the group who he might want you all to lay hands on and minister to. Invite that person to sit in the "hot seat" and lay hands on them. Listen for God to speak through a picture, a thought spontaneously called to mind, or a passage of Scripture. Pray Scripture over them. Pray as the Lord guides you. Pray as you are moved with compassion for them. Pray for healing—both physical and spiritual/emotional. Pray for faith and joy and endurance. Pray *with* faith and expectation. Pray like people who believe that prayer changes how God acts. Invite the person who was just prayed for to share if anything that was prayed or spoken was accurate or particularly meaningful for them. If you feel prompted, continue to pray further, using any further insight that you gain after they share. Cultivate comfort with silence, and learn how to linger in prayer, rather than praying hurriedly.

Generally you might aim to pray for about an hour total (sometimes shorter, sometimes longer), and then after wrapping it up, you might stay and chat. Celebrating communion together is also an excellent way to close out this time. Lastly, it is important to transition people out of a time of reflection and worship, so make sure after you've prayed that you give a next step—whether it's inviting people to wash up the dishes, or go grab the kids, or something else as simple as inviting anyone would like to, to stick around and chat. Having a plan is helpful!

Again, all of the preceding information is taken directly, with a few minor changes of wording, from a series of blog posts written by Todd Engstrom, which can be found at toddenstrom.com/resources.



A helpful resource for planning and preparing a family meal

Jesus didn't run projects, establish ministries, create programs, or put on events. He ate meals.
Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus*

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes.

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*

Sharing a meal together regularly is an important piece to community group life. Through the meal we have an opportunity to bless each other, and during the meal we have the opportunity to encourage one another toward Jesus and His mission. In fact, Jesus himself did a large majority of His discipleship, care, and mission during meals. Meals are significant, and when they are done well, they can affect the ministry of a community group significantly. Community groups with great family meals are usually growing in healthy ways. So here is a great resource we'd like to make available to you, entitled [Family Meal: Ideas, Tips, and Plans](#), which can help you think through good meals that are affordable and easy to prepare, eat, and clean up together in realistic amount of time. Download it and share it amongst your group!

Frontline's [Missional Living/Third Place Rhythm Sheet](#) can also help your group think through how to identify, pursue, and fold your “three” into your family meals.

Ask how you can make your family meal more meaningful

Here are some great tips from Brad Watson, in an article entitled [Eating Together: Welcome to the Gospel Feast](#).

- Ask each other how the week is going—expect long, honest answers.
- Ask everyone a common question that will lead them to deeper understanding of each other: "What is your favorite summer memory from childhood?" or "How do you prepare for the Christmas holidays?"
- Ask about how each person is processing the sermon from Sunday, or about the service that was done as a group the week before, or circle back to past hardships people have shared.
- Consider simple things too, like asking "What are you thankful for today?" or "What was the hardest part of your day today?"
- You could also have a person or couple in the “spotlight” where they are able to share in more depth their story, current spot in life, and what they are going through. Then provide the community a chance to pray for them.

Watson also invites us to reflect on the following questions:

- How does your community group share meals?
- How can you eat with glad and generous hearts?
- How can the gospel become more clear as you share a meal with folks?
- How often should you get together to share a meal during the week? How does your community group remember Jesus in these meals?
- Since most people eat 21 meals a week, how could each person in your community share at least one of them with others?



Discussion Guide for Family Meal Rhythm:

1. Discuss together what feels overwhelming or unrealistic about consistent rhythms of eating and praying together in the ways described here tonight. What might have to change in your life to make this more realistic and life-giving?
2. Brainstorm some recipes ideas together—what are some dishes you each feel comfortable running point on, and including others in the preparation of?
3. Discuss days, times, and locations that would be most realistic and beneficial for your group, as well as which locations might be most missionally strategic.
4. Discuss which of your three you might most realistically invite to participate with you.

