

Hosting a Book Club to Facilitate Christian Growth

By Karen Wade Hayes | karenwadehayes.com

In the second video session of her Bible study *What Love Is*, author Kelly Minter* said, “Being together is good, but we need to be together AS Christians – mindful that Jesus is there.” She was talking about being intentional and purposeful about our time with each other as believers.

Socializing for the sole purpose of enjoying the company of others is good. But to participate in all the growth that is a possible by-product of Christian community requires deliberate gathering to pray, learn, and worship. Attending church is one obvious way to experience and contribute to communal growth. But another way is to create opportunities to gather that are centered around the purpose of pursuing knowledge of Christ together.

An easy way to intentionally foster such community is by hosting a book club. Of course, having a partner is always fun and helpful because you can share responsibilities, but it’s also pretty easy to do it by yourself. Below is a guide to get you started.

As an additional resource, I’m also including the schedule for a five-week book club I co-hosted to discuss Dane Orlund’s *Gentle and Lowly*.** Feel free to use it for your own book club! You can also read my review of *Gentle and Lowly* on my website, under the “Book Reviews” tab.

Planning Ahead

- **Keep the bar LOW** (i.e., easy). Don’t overcomplicate it – keep it simple to make it more feasible for people to attend.
- **Choose a book.** Have you read a Christian book you love? Gather a group around that. Or try *Gentle and Lowly*, which also has a companion study guide (and a short video with each session if you’d like to use that resource). It helps if the book you choose already has discussion questions (sometimes, the author includes these at the end of the book, in a companion study guide, or online). Alternatively, come up with questions and note page numbers to reference as you read the book. Or highlight passages you want to read out loud with the group and discuss. Ask group members to do the same.
- **Come up with a schedule.** Every other week is great, as it allows time to read and process. And if someone misses a session, they don’t have to wait a month to return to the group.
- **Keep food (if any) as simple as possible.** A coffee, afternoon tea, brown bag lunch, or potluck. You can even offer snack bars in a basket and bottles of water to keep it super simple. Or host it at a local coffee shop or library.

- **Issue invitations by phone or email to gather and discuss whatever book you choose.** Invitees could include fellow church members, work colleagues, neighbors, etc. Compose an email with the details (what, where, why, and when) Ask for responses so you can plan ahead. As people say yes, use your email contacts to create a “group” for the attendees, to simplify communications. It helps to keep the number of invitees at around 15-20, with the assumption that several won’t be able to participate. A good final number is no more than about 12 people. Smaller is great, too!
- **Type up a simple guide that outlines the dates and times for each session and which pages/chapters you will cover** (see my sample). If there are “homework questions” to consider between sessions (if you have more than one session), include those, or list the study guide pages to be covered at each session to keep everyone in the loop and on the same page (literally and figuratively). Make copies to pass out at the first session.

During the Study

My pastor once said that entertaining is about impressing people, but hospitality is making them feel welcome. The goal of Christ-centered community isn’t to impress, but to extend welcome.

- **Set out the food and drinks you planned.** Even if not serving food, offer water.
- **Set up extra chairs if needed.** Make sure the room is well lit, or meet outside. Don’t worry about making things perfect. People often feel more comfortable with a little mess and imperfection.
- **STAY ON SCHEDULE.** Keep it short and focused. It’s easy to socialize the entire time. Allow 15 minutes for chatting, then jump right in by sitting down and announcing that you’re going to begin. Respect everyone’s time parameters and stick to the times you set.
- **Facilitate introductions.** Once the time allotted for socializing ends, introduce yourself, why you are doing the study, and what you hope to accomplish. It’s nice to share a little information about the author and the book – what attracted you to the selection? Then, ask everyone to go around the circle and introduce themselves and share something specific (where they grew up, how long they have lived in the current place, what they do, their family, etc.). There are also a thousand little icebreakers on the internet. These may seem “cheesy,” but it’s super helpful to allow everyone to casually yet intentionally introduce themselves and warm up to being in the group.

- **Let everyone know the basics**, like the location of the bathroom and any other housekeeping items.
- **Pass out the group guide** you prepared in advance with the schedule and go over it.
- **Review the group guidelines:** ask more extroverted people to share less and more introverted people to stretch and be willing to share more. Ask everyone to allow and be comfortable with silent gaps that give everyone a chance to think and gather thoughts. Don't counsel one another. Respect differences of opinion. Leave politics and controversy at the door. Listen well. Accept that everyone is in a different place in their life and their faith and honor that. Be prepared to gently re-direct if someone dominates the conversation or to invite people in without putting them on the spot.
- **Open in a short prayer** to invite God into the gathering, or ask someone in advance if they'd be willing to do that. Doing so sets an intentional tone that the time together is about growing spiritually together.
- **Facilitate discussion.** Ask the questions you've prepared or chosen in advance. Remember, you don't have to have answers. You are just the facilitator, helping everyone have a rewarding discussion of the book and a chance to deepen relationships.
- **Watch the clock** – as time runs short, allow thorough discussion of the final question and then wrap up.
- **Close by praying** and reminding everyone of the next meeting and what you'll cover.
- **Consider making the last session a little longer** to allow time to socialize after the final discussion.

After Each Session

- **Send a short email** to thank everyone for coming and remind them what you will discuss at the next meeting. After the first meeting, attach the group guide you prepared with the schedule for anyone who wasn't present.
- **Pray for group members.**
- **Send another quick email reminder** just before the next session.

NOTE: Although this guide is for cultivating community by hosting a book club for Christians, it's also an excellent format for gathering with ANY group of friends or neighbors to talk about faith matters. Whether or not someone is a Christian, most people are willing and eager to talk about their spiritual selves, because faith is the most significant aspect of our identity and humanity. Unfortunately, however, it's often compartmentalized, separated from work, friends, community, and family. But, because our souls are eternal, what we believe about God undergirds all that we do and all that we are. So, go beyond the Christian community and invite people who aren't sure what they believe – people who are curious about God, your faith, and the church – into a club to read a Christian book and see what happens! You don't have to have all the answers – you only have to be willing to share your own faith in God through Christ.

*Minter, Kelly. What Love Is. Nashville, TN: Lifeway Press.

**Ortlund, Dane. Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.