

“honest, loving, and hopeful . . . an important book for this hour.”

—christine caine

terry crist

loving
loving
loving
loving
loving
samaritans

radical kindness in an
us vs. them world

discussion guide

chapter 0:

high rises and elevators

Missional Living in a Vulnerable World

In this introductory chapter, the contrast between living in a gated community and an urban high-rise serves as a metaphor for the Christian mission in today's diverse and challenging world. It emphasizes the need for Christians to engage authentically with their surroundings, embodying Christ's teachings not just in comfortable, familiar settings but also in the midst of vulnerability and diversity.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the contrast between gated communities and urban high-rises illustrate different approaches to Christian living and mission?
2. How can we practice missional living in our communities, regardless of their socioeconomic or cultural makeup?
3. What lessons can we draw from the chapter about the importance of presence and engagement in our ministry?

Chapter 1:

unlikely companions

Moving toward the Other

Chapter 1 explores the concept of bridging gaps between diverse individuals and groups. It focuses on the importance of moving toward understanding and empathy for those who may seem different. This chapter focuses on embracing and understanding people who are different from us, emphasizing the importance of compassion and kindness in ministering to them.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some practical ways to foster understanding and build relationships with those who differ from us?
2. How can the principles discussed in this chapter be applied in your personal and community life?
3. Share a personal experience where engaging with someone different from you led to a positive outcome.

Chapter 2:

insiders and outsiders

Seeing Self, Serving Others: A World of Difference

Chapter 2 delves into the dynamics of identity and ministry. It explores the complex interplay between self-perception and how we engage with others, particularly those considered outsiders. The chapter emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in service and the need to understand and bridge gaps between different groups and individuals.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does our self-perception affect our ability to serve and interact with those who are different from us?
2. Can you share an experience where recognizing your position as an “insider” or “outsider” changed your approach to a situation or relationship?
3. What steps can we take to bridge the gap between “insiders” and “outsiders” in our communities and foster a more inclusive environment?

Chapter 3:

separation of church and hate

Religion, Oppression, and Safe Havens

Chapter 3 addresses the complex interplay between religion and societal issues. It explores how religious institutions can both oppress and provide refuge, delving into the dual roles that religion often plays in society. The chapter challenges readers to reflect on how their faith communities respond to societal issues, including discrimination and oppression, while also considering the role of churches as safe havens for those seeking refuge and support.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways can religious institutions contribute to societal oppression, and how can they combat this tendency?
2. Reflect on a time when a faith community served as a safe haven in the face of societal challenges. What made it a refuge?
3. How can we ensure that our religious practices and community environments are inclusive and supportive rather than exclusive or oppressive?

Chapter 4:

natural-born label makers

Descriptions Don't Have to Define Us

Chapter 4 delves into the human tendency to categorize and label others. It discusses how these labels, often based on superficial assessments or societal stereotypes, can profoundly influence how we perceive and interact with others. The chapter challenges readers to look beyond these labels and recognize the individuality and worth of each person, mirroring Jesus' approach in his interactions, such as with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do labels and stereotypes affect our perception of others, and what are the dangers of relying on them in our interactions?
2. Can you recall a situation where you or someone you know was misjudged based on labels? How did that impact you or them?
3. What steps can we take to consciously avoid labeling others and instead engage with them based on their individual characteristics and stories?

Chapter 5:

truth and tone

The Art of Compassionate Conversations

Chapter 5 delves into the complex relationship between speaking truth and maintaining a compassionate tone. It explores the concept of “open commensality,” where Jesus scandalously included everyone in fellowship, simultaneously demanding repentance and offering forgiveness. This chapter emphasizes the importance of balancing truth with grace, advocating for conversations that are truthful, compassionate, and understanding.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we balance speaking the truth with maintaining a compassionate and understanding tone in our conversations?
2. In what ways does the concept of “open commensality” challenge the conventional approach to fellowship and inclusion in our communities?
3. Reflect on a personal experience where a conversation balanced truth and compassion effectively. What was the impact of this approach?

Chapter 6:

the scarlet letters

Navigating Guilt, Shame, and Acceptance

Chapter 6 addresses themes of guilt, shame, and compassion, particularly within the context of the Christian church's response to individuals with diverse sexual identities. It challenges the harsh judgment often directed toward the alternative community and contrasts this with the story of the Samaritan woman from the Bible, highlighting the discrepancy between judgmental attitudes and the compassionate approach of Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can Christian communities reconcile judgmental attitudes toward individuals with different beliefs with Jesus' compassionate approach, as demonstrated in his interaction with the Samaritan woman?
2. In what ways can Christians confront and address the hypocrisy prevalent in the church regarding sexual sins and cultivate a more faithful and grace-oriented community?
3. What practical actions can individuals and church communities undertake to foster an environment of kindness and compassion, especially for those marginalized or stigmatized due to their sexual identity or previous life choices?

Chapter 7:

politics, pandemics, and polarization

Embracing the Way of the Kingdom

Chapter 7 addresses the challenges of political divisions, global pandemics, and societal polarization. It discusses these factors' impact on community dynamics and individual relationships, urging readers to find ways to bridge divides and foster understanding. The chapter emphasizes the Christian responsibility to navigate these tumultuous times by embodying the principles of the kingdom of God, which transcends political and social divides.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can Christians navigate the complex landscape of politics and pandemics without compromising their core values?
2. How can we contribute to reducing polarization in our communities and encourage constructive dialogue?
3. What does it mean to embrace the way of the kingdom in the context of current societal challenges, and how can this be practically applied in our daily lives?

Chapter 8:

a tale of two mountains

Divided by Race, United in Love

Chapter 8 explores the profound divide caused by racial differences and how love can bridge this gap. The chapter reflects on the historical and biblical context of racial division, exemplified by the worship practices of the Jews and the Samaritans. It invites readers to contemplate the deep-seated issues of race and division and to envision a united future rooted in love and mutual respect, as guided by the teachings of Jesus.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do the historical and biblical references to the two mountains in this chapter symbolize the deep-rooted racial divides in society and faith communities?
2. What steps can individuals and churches take to bridge racial divides and foster a spirit of unity and love?
3. Reflect on a personal experience or observation where racial division was overcome by love and understanding. What were the key factors that facilitated this transformation?

Chapter 9:

the biltmore princess

Extending Dignity to Those without Place

Chapter 9 discusses the theme of recognizing and restoring dignity to the marginalized, specifically those who are homeless or displaced. The chapter narrates the story of a homeless woman, referred to as the Biltmore Princess, portraying the stark contrast between her dignified demeanor and her challenging circumstances. It emphasizes the importance of seeing past societal labels and extending compassion and dignity to all individuals, regardless of their social status or living conditions.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the story of the Biltmore Princess challenge our perceptions of homelessness and those living in displacement?
2. What are some practical ways we can extend dignity and compassion to people in similar situations within our communities?
3. Reflect on a personal encounter with someone who lacked a permanent place. How did this interaction shape your understanding of dignity and compassion?

Chapter 10:

neighborhood watch

Relational Dynamics and Conflict Resolution

Chapter 10 presents a reflective examination of community vigilance and the role of individuals in fostering a safe and caring environment. It discusses the importance of being aware of and responsive to the needs of those in our neighborhoods. This chapter encourages readers to reflect on their role in their communities and to consider ways to actively contribute to the safety, well-being, and sense of belonging of their neighbors.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the “Neighborhood Watch” concept relate to the Christian call to be vigilant and caring toward others in our community?
2. Can you share an example of how you or your community has effectively looked out for the well-being of others?
3. What practical steps can we take to enhance our awareness and responsiveness to the needs of those in our neighborhoods?

Chapter 11:

won't you be my neighbor?

Love Leads Us Forward

Chapter 11 revolves around the profound Christian calling to love our neighbors. This chapter examines the concept of neighborliness in the context of biblical teachings and current societal challenges. It explores how the definition of a neighbor transcends geographical, ethnic, and social boundaries, urging Christians to extend love and compassion to all, irrespective of differences. This chapter encourages readers to reassess their understanding of neighborliness and to adopt a more inclusive, Christ-centered approach in their interactions and community engagements.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does this chapter challenge traditional notions of who qualifies as our “neighbor” in the Christian sense?
2. Can you share an example of how you or your community extended love to someone who was not considered a traditional “neighbor”?
3. What practical steps can we take to broaden our understanding and practice of neighborly love in our daily lives and community interactions?

Epilogue:

life at longer tables

The epilogue delves into the vision of building a more inclusive and accepting community. This chapter emphasizes the idea that instead of erecting walls to separate and protect us from the perceived “other,” we should be building longer tables to invite more people in. This chapter encourages readers to reconsider their approach to community and hospitality, advocating for a more inclusive, Christ-centered model of engagement and relationship-building.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the implications of “building longer tables” in our communities and churches, and how does this approach challenge current norms?
2. Can you share a personal experience where extending hospitality or being welcomed at a “longer table” led to meaningful connections or understanding?
3. What practical steps can individuals and communities take to create more inclusive and welcoming environments that embody the concept of “longer tables”?