

**I ♥ MY
CHURCH**

**GROWING IN THE
COMMUNITY OF FAITH**

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I Love My Church Small Group Participant's Guide

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WEEKLY OVERVIEW

I ♥ MY CHURCH



WEEK 1: Introduction

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” —John 13:34-35

Jesus’ command to us as Christians is that all of our interactions must be bathed in love. This is the overarching theme of every sermon and Bible study. How do our actions project love to one another in our church, and how will the love we have for those in our church affect the way we interact with our world?

The Bible studies in this series heavily focus on exploring works of service, encouragement, unity of faith, and love. They challenge people to think about the people in the pews around them in a new way. They focus the words of Jesus into a personal love connection with the people we see every Sunday. What do I have to offer these people, and what do they have to offer me? If I don’t fully participate in my church, what will I be missing in my Christian walk with Jesus?



WEEK 2: Love in Community

“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” —Hebrews 10:22-25

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” —Romans 12:5

“The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.” —1 John 2:10

We need each other. As Christians traveling the same path and experiencing similar life challenges, why wouldn't we want to learn from those who have walked the path before us? Our relationships act as the GPS in our lives. They can show us how to successfully navigate the journey even when there is heavy traffic ahead! This week focuses on how building relationships—from the smallest of exchanges to the deepest friendships—can spur us on in the journey.



WEEK 3: Love by Serving

“Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.” —Titus 3:14

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.” —James 3:13

“For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” —Galatians 5:14

“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” —1 Peter 2:12

As Christians, we must learn how to act in good deeds. This shows others the depth of our love for Jesus and for each other. It helps us grow in wisdom and truth. It's a protection for us and serves as a witness to a world that would slander us and portray Christians in negative ways. Our behavior becomes our defense when we serve others.

Serving is more about what Jesus is doing in us rather than what we are doing for other people. We are most like our Savior when we humble ourselves and serve.



WEEK 4: Love by Giving

“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.” —Acts 4:32-35

“But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.” —1 Timothy 6:6-7

“And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” —Hebrews 13:16

Loving your church means giving to meet needs. It also means authentically making your needs known so that others can express love to you. God uses these acts of sacrifice to show the world the testimony of Jesus. Our money and possessions only hold value when they are used to build upon our riches in heaven.



WEEK 5: Love in Sharing (Love in Telling)

“Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” —Colossians 3:14

“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.” —John 17:22-23

“And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” —Acts 2:44-47

As the church grows together in unity and loves each other through good deeds and giving, the world will have a living example of Jesus’ love for them. In the early church, the Lord added newly saved Christians to their group every day. The love we have for the church will draw people into a relationship with Him. If you want to reach the world for Jesus, start by loving your church.

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION



Primary Verses for Study

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” —John 13:34-35

Guiding Thought/Central Truth

Jesus’ command to us as Christians is that all of our interactions must be bathed in love. How do our actions project love to one another in our church, and how will the love we have for those in our church affect the way we interact with our world?

Getting Started

You will need a note card and pen. As you start your time together, write down:

- Your name
- How long you have been attending the church
- The reason you decided to attend this Bible study
- What is most meaningful to you out of these choices: a special gift, time with a friend, a kind word, a big hug, or an unexpected helping hand

As you go around the group, each person should tell what’s on their card. Now everyone switch cards.

The group has shared the expressions of love that are most meaningful to them. As you pray throughout the week for the person on the card you were given, consider extending an expression of love to them. You can follow through with the small gesture that they listed as meaningful to them or ask God to show you another way to demonstrate love to them.

Introduction

Our church has never been about the building where we meet or the programs that we conduct or even how great the preaching and music are, but it's about the people who gather together there. It's about us. Over the next five weeks, we will be focusing on how we as a group of believers can love our church more. How can we meet the needs of the individuals in this small group and in this congregation? What does it look like to the community around us when we love each other the way that Jesus loves us?

Think It Through

Read John 13:34-35.

When you are telling someone good-bye, the things that you say in your last moments together are important. You want them to be remembered. Jesus spoke the words in John 13:34-35 hours before His death. He challenged the people in the church to love one another.

- Who is Jesus speaking to in these verses?
- What do you think is the significance of Jesus making this a new commandment?
- According to these verses, what is the impact of having love for one another?

- Tell about a time when someone unexpectedly extended kindness to you.
- In your opinion, what kinds of gestures show love to family members? Friends? Acquaintances? Strangers?
- In which category would you put most of the people in our church: family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers?

Sometimes it's difficult to connect with people at church. When you only see each other one or two hours a week, it can be hard to know people, much less love them. Sometimes past hurts and dissention make it difficult to love our church. Yet, Jesus still commands it. It was His intent that our love for each other be so obvious that it would be the marker that identifies us as belonging to Him.

- What do you think prevents people in the church from expressing love to each other?

- What advice would you give someone who wants to overcome these obstacles?

- What effect does a congregation's behavior have on people who do not attend that church?

Loving one another is risky. It can get personal. It can make us vulnerable. It can also give us insight into our Christian walk, provide us opportunities to serve, and open us up to irreplaceable friendships. Jesus commanded it for us. And by our love for one another, the world will know Jesus' love for them.

How Does This Apply to Me?

What is the biggest obstacle you personally need to overcome in order to show love to the people in this church?

What steps are you willing to take to overcome that obstacle?

How Does This Apply to Our Church?

If half of the people in this small group decided to extend an act of love within our church this week, how would it affect the congregation? How would it affect the congregation if they committed to an act of love every week for a month?

What steps can we take to make our church renowned for its love?

What Am I Going to Do with What I Know Now?

Take a moment to pray and ask God to bring to mind one person in your church. If you know the person's name, write it down on a piece of paper. If not, write down a few words describing the person. Now ask God to show you one way that you can love that person this week. He may give you something simple like pray for them every day, or He may give you something riskier like meeting a need they have.

WEEK 2: LOVE IN COMMUNITY



Primary Verses for Study

“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.” —Hebrews 10:22-25

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Guiding Thought/Central Truth

We need each other. As Christians traveling the same path and experiencing similar life challenges, why wouldn't we want to learn from those who have walked the path before us? They act as the GPS in our lives. They can show us how to successfully navigate the journey even when there is heavy traffic ahead! This week focuses on how building relationships—from the smallest of exchanges to the deepest friendships—can spur us on in the journey.

Getting Started

You will need a note card and pen. Mark an “x” on the card to represent the start of your journey with Jesus. Draw a line from the “x” to represent the ups and downs of your spiritual journey. The line will have hills and valleys depending on each person's story. End the line on the other side of the card to represent where you feel you are spiritually at this moment.

At each peak or valley, write the name of someone who helped you through the valley or encouraged you to reach the peak. Once this is done, spend some time sharing your journey with the group.

Focus on the people who have helped you in your spiritual journey. Try to answer some of these questions:

- Did this person know they had helped you?
- How well did you know them personally?
- Are you still in contact with this person?
- Do you think your journey would have looked different if this person had not been there for you?

Introduction

As a body of believers, we come together with a common need for salvation. Our past and our present bind us in unity with each other. Our journeys may not look the same, but our destination is common. As we strive to be more obedient to Jesus, we need those who have traveled the road before us to help show us the way.

Think It Through

Read Hebrews 10:22-25.

- How does Hebrews 10:22 remind you of your life before Christ?
- In what ways can you hold on to your faith without wavering? Can this be accomplished without the encouragement of the church?

- What significance does the church have in helping you to avoid the habits of your life before Christ?

- List the ways these verses say the church should intervene in a Christian's walk with Jesus.

- In what ways does our church exemplify these traits?

- What suggestions would you offer someone who wanted to do good deeds in our community? In our church? For you and your family?

Read Romans 12:5 and 1 John 2:10.

Becoming one body in Christ involves meeting together regularly, inspiring each other toward good deeds, and encouraging each other when things get hard. We demonstrate love as a church when we recognize that together we help each other not to stumble. We need each other.

- What are some actions that promote and cultivate love?

- Think about a moment in your life when you felt supported and encouraged. How can you reproduce that feeling for someone in our church?

- How has someone encouraged you without even knowing they did so?

- How can loving the people in our church help us to avoid stumbling in our Christian walk?

weakness, and the group helps them to overcome it. In the end, it's obvious that not one in their party would have survived without every one of the others helping along the way. Jesus has planned for our survival. We need each other to accomplish His will. The first step on the journey is learning to love our church.

How Does This Apply to Me?

What are some things you are good at doing? How can you share that skill with someone in the church?

In what ways have you personally helped someone along in their Christian journey?

What can you do to make it easier for someone to connect with you at church?

Love requires action. Jesus intended for us to come together as one body in unity to withstand the difficulties that would come our way as we follow after Him. In the book *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, nine characters are thrown together on a dangerous quest. The characters are all very different from each other. Some of the group are strong in might, and others are strong in character. Some seem useless but later show a hidden attribute. Several of them show

How Does This Apply to Our Church?

How can we as a church be more intentional about helping people in their walk with Jesus?

What can we do to make it easier for people to find connections in our church?

If we made the assumption that everyone who sits around us in church needs some kind of encouragement, how would our actions change?

What Am I Going to Do with What I Know Now?

This Sunday morning challenge yourself to assume that everyone sitting around you desperately needs encouragement. Think of one small way to show them that you sincerely care about them. It may be a hug, a kind word, a smile, or simply trying to learn their name. Allow yourself to be open to sharing someone's journey.

WEEK 3: LOVE BY SERVING



Primary Verses for Study

“Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful.” —Titus 3:14

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.” —James 3:13

“For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’” —Galatians 5:14

“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” —1 Peter 2:12

Guiding Thought/Central Truth

As Christians, we must learn how to act in good deeds. This shows others the depth of our love for Jesus and for each other. It helps us grow in wisdom and truth. It’s a protection for us and serves as a witness to a world that would slander us and portray Christians in negative ways. Our behavior becomes our defense when we serve others.

Getting Started

You will need a note card and pen. Write down a need you know of from someone within the church. Keep the person anonymous; just write down the need. If you can’t think of something, it’s okay. Once the cards are collected, someone should read them out loud. After each card is read, assess if anyone in the group—or someone you know—has the skill or ability to meet that need. Write down the solutions on the note card. Some needs may be bigger than we can easily solve. Take time to pray for God to meet these needs.

After the activity is completed, discuss these questions as a group:

- What kind of insight about our church did you gain from this activity?

- Did you learn anything new about someone else in the group from this activity?
- Is there anything about your current behavior at church that might change knowing what you know now?

Those who submitted “need” note cards will take them back. Make sure the group knows who has each card.

Introduction

When we think of service, we most often think that we should take care of the needs of those who are lost without Jesus. But today we are going to explore the impact of service within the church body and how it can be a testimony to the world of Jesus’ love for them.

Think It Through

Read Titus 3:14.

- What is your definition of a good deed?
- How would someone learn to do good deeds?
- How could not engaging in good deeds lead to having an unproductive life?

- Within our church, how can you find out who has pressing needs?

Learning to meet needs—whether they are expressed openly or not—is important to our maturity as a Christian. As we meet the needs of people in our church, love for the church grows.

Serving is more about what Jesus is doing in us rather than what we are doing for other people. We are most like our Savior when we humble ourselves and serve.

Read James 3:13 and Galatians 5:14.

- How can you use wisdom to serve people in our church?
- Think about spiritual gifts. Choose three gifts and write them down. Discuss how people with each of those gifts could use it to meet needs within the church. List your ideas under each gift.

- Name some ways that we can keep the focus on loving our neighbor.

- What are some ways that we can support Christians in our church who are under attack?

- What do you think it means to love someone the way you would love yourself?

- What role does humility play in serving and being served?

How Does This Apply to Me?

If I don't share my needs with people in my church, how does it impact their spiritual walk?

Are there people in my life with needs that I have the ability to meet currently? What is preventing me from serving them?

How Does This Apply to Our Church?

Has there ever been a time in your life when you desperately needed help but you didn't tell anyone about it? How would you suggest that our church meet the needs of people who don't tell us what they need?

Read 1 Peter 2:12.

Have you ever considered that serving each other and practicing good deeds within the church could be a protection for a Christian? The love we show to each other through service is our invisible shield against the enemy's flaming arrows. Many people, TV shows, movies, and media portray Christians as evil people who out of ignorance spread hate. God says that our acts of service and love toward one another will prove these slanderous statements false. In fact, the Bible says that these same people will not only retract their statements about Christians but they will glorify God once they realize the truth.

- When you find yourself in a situation where your character is being misrepresented, how do you react?

What can we do as a church to encourage one another to continue to serve despite the fact that our character has been misrepresented by the world?

How can we make it easier for people to recognize opportunities to serve and meet needs within our church?

What Am I Going to Do with What I Know Now?

Before you leave your small group today, make a plan to follow through with your suggestions to help the church members in need. Do everything you can to meet the needs before your small group meets again. Allow God to teach you to love through this act of service. Be ready next week to share with the group about your experience.

WEEK 4: LOVE BY GIVING



Primary Verses for Study

“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.” —Acts 4:32-35

“But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either.” —1 Timothy 6:6-7

“And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” —Hebrews 13:16

Guiding Thought/Central Truth

Loving your church means giving to meet needs. It also means authentically making your needs known so that others can express love to you. God uses these acts of sacrifice to show the world the testimony of Jesus. Our money and possessions only hold value when they are used to build upon our riches in heaven.

Getting Started

As a group, share testimonies about how you met the needs that were shared last week. Be sure to share what you learned from this experience.

If time allows, discuss these questions as a group:

- What is your most meaningful possession (sentimental)?
- What is your most valuable possession (monetary)?
- Are these two items the same?
- How easy would it be for you to part with your most valuable possession? Your most meaningful possession?

Introduction

Sometimes our love for the church prompts us to sacrifice our money and possessions. When we understand the value of our earthly goods versus the value of contentment in Christ, giving to those in need becomes much easier.

Think It Through

Read Acts 4:32-35.

The early church understood that their possessions only held value because they provided them the ability to love those with needs in the church. They were willing to sacrifice what they had so that a Christian brother or sister would not be needy. Their faith made it possible for the apostles to preach about Jesus with great power because the world had evidence that He could change lives.

- Among the people who attend our church, how many do you think may have a financial need?
- In your opinion, what prevents churches from making sure that no one among them is needy today?
- Do you think this level of sacrificial giving is relevant in the modern church? Why or why not?

- Do you think that if everyone here pooled everything we have, there would be enough money to meet the financial needs of every person in the room?

- How do you think that act of love would be perceived by the world around us?

- How could the Holy Spirit move in our neighborhood and in our city if people could see that the needs of those in our church were being met?

When you listen to people who have experienced natural disasters and have lost everything they own, they often say that they are just happy their family is safe. Suddenly, their possessions no longer matter to them. The early Christ followers held this attitude about the people in their church. Their possessions didn't matter to them if there were people in the church who were suffering. They wanted to meet needs more than they wanted their stuff. Giving sacrificially was a source of contentment for them. It helped them grow closer to God and to each other.

Read 1 Timothy 6:6-7.

- What is the source of true contentment?
- Where do most people find a sense of stability?
- What is your definition of godliness? How does a person achieve it?
- What do we gain as a church when we freely give in love for one another? What do we gain as individuals?
- What would make it easier for you to sacrifice your possessions and money?
- What kinds of spiritual growth do we deny to people in our church by not sharing our genuine needs with them?

Read Hebrews 13:16.

In our society, we honor those who risk their lives to save other people. Sacrifice attracts attention from the world. It also attracts attention from God. It pleases Him when we give to those in need and seek godliness as our contentment.

- What do you think we lose as a church when we withhold financial blessings?

The first church knew that love meant sacrifice. They used their possessions to make sure that everyone's needs were met in their congregation. They shared what they had, and because of their love, no one among them was needy. They relied on godliness to make them content. The generosity of the church in meeting all of the needs among them allowed the apostles to preach with great power. The actions of the church bore witness to the change that Jesus could bring to a life. Everyone was experiencing God's grace, and it was a compelling witness to their world.

How Does This Apply to Me?

What makes you feel the most secure in your day-to-day life?

How do you think a message of sacrifice would be received by our church?

How much trust do you put in your financial security and possessions?

What would it take for our church to be known as a people who love each other through sacrificial giving?

If you lost everything tomorrow, how content would you be with godliness as your only possession?

How willing are you to honestly share your financial needs with our church? Are you humble enough to be a receiver of benevolence?

What Am I Going to Do with What I Know Now?

Do you have a possession that you hold on to more tightly than you hold on to God? Pray that God would help you to reorient that possession to promote and glorify Him. Consider how you can use that possession to meet needs in your church. Be open to sacrifice. Seek contentment in God.

Do you have an overwhelming need right now? Share that need with someone in our church. Be willing to accept benevolence, service, or prayer from the church.

How Does This Apply to Our Church?

As a church, what can we do to emphasize godliness and sacrifice?

WEEK 5: LOVE IN SHARING (LOVE IN TELLING)



Primary Verses for Study

“Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.” —Colossians 3:14

*“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”
—John 17:22-23*

“And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” —Acts 2:44-47

Guiding Thought/Central Truth

As the church grows together in unity and loves each other through good deeds and giving, the world will have a living example of Jesus’ love for them. In the early church, the Lord added newly saved Christians to their group every day. The love we have for the church will draw people into a relationship with Him. If you want to reach the world for Jesus, start by loving your church.

Getting Started

As a group, take time sharing testimonies about the giving activities you were challenged with during last week’s group time.

If time allows, discuss these questions as a group:

- What made you decide to come to church for the first time?
- What made you decide to continue coming to church?

Introduction

In the past weeks we have discussed how being in community with each other is an important step to loving each other through serving and giving. Today we are going to discuss how loving our church affects our ability to tell the world about Jesus.

Think It Through

Read Colossians 3:14.

- When you think about unity, what does it mean to you?
- How does the Bible say that we achieve a bond of unity in the church?
- What do you think holds people back from practicing unity?
- How does a person's spiritual maturity affect the unity of their church?

Read John 17:22-23.

This passage comes from a prayer that Jesus spoke just before He was arrested. In His final moments, Jesus was thinking about us and our unity as believers. He directly tied our unity as believers to the world accepting that He loved them and that He had come from the Father.

- What relationship does our unity as Christians have to our witness in the world?
- Why do you think Jesus was concerned with our unity?
- How do you think it would appear to the world around us if our church acted in perfect unity? Do you think it would make any difference at all?
- How does our love for one another in the church impact our personal witness of Jesus to our friends and neighbors?

The first Christians literally came together from all over the world. While in Jerusalem, they heard the message of Jesus being spoken in their own languages and they believed. Among this group were about 3,000 people from different backgrounds and cultures. Yet the Bible describes them as people who generously had all things in common and met together with one common mind. Despite their differences, they were impacting their world in such a powerful way that daily people were coming to know Jesus because of them.

Read Acts 2:44-47.

- According to these verses, how did the early church express love for each other?
- How can love in our church grow if we don't personally know everyone who attends?
- From your own experience, what do you think brings people into a relationship with Jesus?
- What is our responsibility as individuals to reach out and share Jesus with people? What is our responsibility as a church?

- What prevents us from sharing Jesus with the people we know?
- If our church was so loving toward one another that people in the community were talking about us, do you think it would make it easier to share the message of Jesus with people? Why or why not?

When a desperate world sees our godly behavior and unity of faith, it can't deny that there is something different about us. The greater the love we have for our church, the more attractive the message of Jesus is to those who see our behavior.

How Does This Apply to Me?

Think about your personal spiritual growth. How much effort do you put into becoming more like Jesus each day?

How does your personal desire to grow spiritually affect the way you love the church? How do you think it affects your witness for Jesus to the people who don't know Him yet?

Do your actions promote, stunt, or destroy unity in the church? List some ways that you can personally encourage more unity within our church.

What can we do as a church to let the community know they are welcome to be a part of the love that we share with each other in Jesus?

How Does This Apply to Our Church?

How does our church provide opportunities for us to practice the kinds of activities the early church was involved in? What motivates people to be an active part of these activities in our church? What keeps them from getting involved?

What would it take for our church to be known as a place where people love each other? What steps can we take to start?

What Am I Going to Do with What I Know Now?

Before you leave today, decide what activity or group through our church you are going to join next. Commit to becoming more involved in the lives of the people who attend church with you. Practice loving your church by intentionally serving and giving in your next group or activity.

Reflect on the people you know who do not attend church. What do you think keeps these specific people from coming to our church? Pick one person from the list and one person from this small group and invite them to go out together with you this week. Make it a casual time for you all to get to know each other in a comfortable atmosphere.

