



CLOSER
Than a
SISTER

*How Union with Christ
helps friendships to flourish*

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Closer Than a Sister:
How Union with Christ
Helps Friendship to Flourish

{Discussion Guide}

By Christina Fox

How to Use This Guide

Who is the guide for?

This guide is for use with my book, *Closer Than a Sister: How Union with Christ Helps Friendships to Flourish*. Use this guide to help facilitate discussion in your small groups and studies.

For example:

*Host a book club and after everyone reads *Closer Than a Sister*, get together and use the discussion guide to talk about the book with the group.

*Read *Closer Than a Sister* in a Titus 2 Discipleship group and during your monthly meetings use this guide to discuss the book.

*Read *Closer Than a Sister* with a friend or accountability group partner and use the guide to talk about what you have learned.

*Read *Closer Than a Sister* as a book study for busy women who work during the day, moms with young children, etc. Use this study guide during your weekly meetings to facilitate discussion.

How do I use the guide?

This guide includes questions for each chapter of *Closer Than a Sister*. You'll see questions listed under the section, "Pause and Ponder." Use these questions first and if you have additional time, move on to the "Additional Questions" list. You'll also find a suggested prayer where you can pray specifically as a group for what you have learned in the chapter. Lastly, there is a section titled "Plan." This section provides practical ways you can implement and practice what you have learned from the book in your local church.

How should I begin?

If you are meeting weekly, have each person read chapter 1 in *Closer Than a Sister* before attending the first week's lesson. If you are using the book for a one time book club meeting, your group should read the entire book first.

In keeping with the theme of sisterhood, plan some get-to-know-you activities for the first meeting to help the women begin talking with one another and learning more about each other. For example, you could have people go around the room and find another

person who was born in the same state they were born in. Or have people sit down at tables and provide several questions they need to ask of one another such as: What is your favorite passage in Scripture? What two things are you thankful for? Who in your life do you look up to the most and why?

Begin your meeting with prayer and then move into the "Pause and Ponder" questions. Be sure to save time at the end for planning ways to implement what you are learning from the book.

You might want to consider printing out the questions each week for the members of your group because there is space for jotting notes, thoughts, and prayer requests.

May your church grow in love and unity with one another as you pursue the topic of sisterhood in the church.

Your sister in Christ,

Christina Fox

Chapter 1: Made for Community

Pause and Ponder:

What thoughts and images come to mind when you think about church community? How about friendships with other women in the church?

What are some of your experiences with church community? Positive and negative.

Do you ever try to do life on your own? What is it like to be an island, disconnected from others?

Read *Genesis 1:26*. What does it mean to you that you were created for community, to image and reflect the three-in-one *God*? How does this impact the way you interact with other Christians? In your local church Body?

Additional Questions:

What do you think of the image Jonathan Edwards paints of our Triune *God* in heaven?

Read *1 Peter 2:9-10*. What stands out to you from what we have learned in this chapter? What common characteristics do we share with one another?

Pray:

Pray together that you would not live as individual islands but as a community. Pray for your covenant community, that it would grow and flourish.

Plan:

At the end of your meeting, plan to do a brief activity that requires involvement from a group of people. Use the activity to remind them that they are not islands but united together as one body in Christ. They need each other.

A few ideas for activities include: 1) Have one person in the group empty their purse. Using the items in the purse, have the group come up with a brief skit using each item from the purse. 2) Tell each group that they are to pretend they are on a deserted island. They have two minutes to gather 10 items from around the room they would want to have with them on the island. Then have them explain why they chose those items. 3) Provide a box of toothpicks or craft sticks and a bag of mini marshmallows. Challenge them to work together to create a structure of some kind.

The best recipes often come from friends. This one comes from my friend, Marilyn. She often brought it to my house when we hosted a gathering of some kind. Consider having an appetizer event and invite a group of women to your house. Ask each woman to bring an appetizer and copies of the recipe to share.

Recipe for Greek Layer Dip

Layer the following ingredients in a casserole dish:

Chive and onion cream cheese

Hummus

Chopped cucumber

Feta cheese

Chopped tomatoes

Kalamata olives

Green onions

Pita chips for dipping

Chapter 2: United to Christ and One Another

Pause and Ponder:

What does our union with Christ have to do with our relationships with other believers? How does this make our relationships with non-believers different than our relationships with believers?

Read Ephesians 2:11-22. What were we like before Christ? What are we now that we are "in Christ?" What do we share as believers? (vs.18). What is Christ creating through us? (vv. 21-22).

Read John 15:1-6. What does it look like to abide in Christ? How do you think abiding in Christ might have an impact on our relationships? What can we expect if we are not united to Christ?

Additional Questions:

What do you think about Schaeffer's assertion that the love Christians have for one another is the final apologetic? Do you see this apologetic in your Christian circles? In the world? How about in your own life? How does your love for other believers tell others about Jesus?

Read 1 John 4:7-21. What does John say about God's love and the love we have for others?

Pray:

Pray together that as a Body, you would abide in Christ. Pray that your church would tell others about Christ through your love for one another.

Plan:

As humans, we often need routines to help us develop habits of living. What are some habits of love your church can develop to encourage and grow in your love and unity with one another? Are there regular opportunities for fellowship? Do you ever have times of retreat together?

Chapter 3: Sisterhood of Faith

Pause and Ponder:

How would you define friendship?

Read Acts 2:42-47. How does the Biblical description of fellowship differ from what you think of? How does it differ from the relationships we might have with others in social media?

What do you think of J.I. Packer's definition of fellowship on page 56? Of mutual giving and taking? Have you ever had a relationship like this where you both learned about God from another and also shared with another what you have learned from God?

Additional Questions:

What do you think of using the term 'sisterhood' to describe the relationship among women in the church? Do you think it is fitting? Why or why not?

Have you ever craved something more than superficial talk with other believers? Have you ever wanted to be known and encouraged by others in the faith? What do you think keeps this from happening?

Read Romans 1:7-15. What is Paul's relationship with the Roman church? Do you see a desire to mutually give and receive? Do you see his longing to be with them in person, to engage in face to face fellowship?

Pray:

Pray together for growth in sisterhood. Pray that your community would be one of mutually giving and receiving what *God* has given.

Plan: Plan a women's ministry event with the intention of fostering and cultivating sisterhood in the church. I've included some ideas to get you started on the next page.

Planning a Sisterhood Event

I think it is safe to say that most churches have some sort of fellowship event or gathering at least once during the year. Such events are fun, don't you think? In keeping with the definition of fellowship and sisterhood, consider planning a couple of events during the year that are not only enjoyable, but help foster rich and meaningful fellowship.

Consider having a theme for each event. Recruit volunteers with varying skills and gifts and divide the volunteers into groups to work on the various tasks required to plan and prepare for the events. Be intentional to make the groups working together varied in ages and stages of life. If possible, have the leaders of the groups be made up of an older and a younger woman.

For example, let's say you are planning a brunch for your women's ministry, perhaps a kick-off for the fall season. You might have a group of women working on the food and table decorations. Perhaps another group will work on the talk or lesson, music, and presentation aspect of the event. Maybe another group is charged with getting the word out about it. Ask people to join the groups based on their specific giftings. By having a mixture of older and younger women working together, it will help foster and promote discipleship relationships.

During your events, consider ways to encourage discussion. Perhaps have discussion questions provided at each table that get people talking and sharing about themselves. After a teaching time, have people gather into groups to talk about what they learned.

Chapter 4: Sisters Help Each Other

Pause and Ponder:

Read Matthew 25:31-46. What does the parable teach about who we are serving when we help someone else who is in need?

What excuses might we give for not helping someone in need?

Who in your church community is struggling right now with a physical need? How could you reach out to them and offer help?

What skills do you have that you can share with someone else? Can you sew, do household repairs, cook a meal, do yard work, tutor a child in math? We all have skills we can offer a friend in need. Consider some practical ways you can do so today.

Additional Questions:

Read James 2:14-26. What is the relationship between faith and works? How do our works, in this case our service for others, reflect our faith?

Read 1 John 3:16-18. How is God's love reflected in our actions toward others?

What keeps you from telling others in your church about your physical needs? How does knowing that God is loving and helping you through other people change your hesitation?

Pray:

Pray together that you would have a heart that desires to help and be of service to others in your church. Pray for opportunities to serve.

Plan:

Plan together as a group specific people you can serve. Consider the widows, single moms, families with special needs children. Set aside a time to work together as a group to help those you have identified. Think of ways you can do this on a regular basis. In addition, consider small ways you can regularly encourage your sisters in Christ such as sending handwritten notes in the mail to the homebound or baking a batch of cookies for those who are lonely.

Chapter 5: Sister Mourn Together

Pause and Ponder:

Read Job 2:11-13. Think back to a time when you were mourning a loss or heartache of some kind. Who sat in the dust and ashes with you? What helped you the most? Think also of a time when someone was not helpful. What specific thing did that person do, not do, say, or not say that was not helpful? What can you learn from those experiences that can help you when you mourn with another sister-friend who is mourning or suffering in some way?

Why is it hard to know what to say or do when someone is in mourning?

Though friends we have through online connections in social media can write comforting things to us when we are suffering, what are some specific ways these 'friendships' cannot mourn with us the way a sister in our church can?

Read John 11: 1-44. How did Jesus respond to the loss of his friend? What does it mean to you that Jesus grieved? What is the Christian response to pain, heartache, and sorrow in this world? Do you think we have to have all the answers to effectively weep with someone?

Additional Questions:

Read Isaiah 61. Jesus read this passage in the synagogue and applied it to himself. What does it say about our Savior?

What would it look like if your church was a lamenting church?

One of the reasons I wanted to write this book was to encourage us as believers to develop deep sister-friendships in the Lord so that we would have people to turn to when

life gets hard. We are all walking the same journey and we can't walk it alone. Consider, who are those people? Who can you turn to when you are weeping? Who can you call to come and pray with you?

Pray:

Pray together that you would be a lamenting community. Pray that the Spirit would open your eyes to see the heartache and grief around you and give you the courage to enter into the grief of others.

Plan:

Consider those in your church who have recently experienced a loss and plan a way to encourage them. Have a sign up to bring them meals or find out their needs so you can serve them.

Are there older women in your church who know the pain of miscarriage? Perhaps they can reach out to a young woman who has experienced such a loss.

Chapter 6: Sisters Rejoice Together

Pause and Ponder:

Why is it hard to rejoice with another sister in the Lord? How can our sister's joy sometimes pierce our own heart and remind us of our own losses? What are some ways we might begrudge another sister?

What is the relationship between envy and failing to rejoice with another? How does remembering our unity in Christ change our envy?

Read James 4:7-10. What does James say to do when we envy or covet?

Additional Questions:

What does it mean to you that Jesus was tempted in all things, yet never sinned?

Read Philippians 4:10-13. How does contentment in Christ impact our envy of others?

Read Romans 12:10. Consider specific ways you could rejoice for and honor another sister-friend.

Pray:

Pray together that you would find contentment in Christ. Pray for opportunities and a heart to rejoice with one another over the goodness of God.

Plan:

Who can you rejoice over in your congregation? Discuss together and plan a way to rejoice with others in the church. Consider: Who has a big anniversary coming up? Who is expecting a child through birth or adoption? Who has completed and reached a big goal in their life? Who has served the church in some capacity for a length of time to whom you can show your gratitude?

Chapter 7: Sisters Exhort One Another

Pause and Ponder:

What is your first thought when you hear the word "accountability" or "exhorting one another"? Is it positive? Negative?

Why do you think God calls us to have exhorting relationships where we sharpen one another in the faith?

How is an exhorting relationship different than a judgmental relationship? Should all relationships in the church be exhorting relationships? Why or why not?

Do you currently have relationships where people can exhort you and spur you on in the faith? Why or why not?

How do we speak the truth in love and gentleness? Give a practical example.

Additional Questions:

What are some characteristics of a trustworthy friend? Read Proverbs 25:11, Proverbs 20:19, Proverbs 27:9, Proverbs 16:32, James 1:19.

How do you think the age of social media contributes to the challenges we have in being honest with others?

Pray:

Pray together that you would be a trustworthy friend. Pray for a humble heart to accept exhortation. Pray for deeper friendships that "spur one another on" in the faith.

Plan:

Consider developing prayer groups among the women in your ministry for those who are interested. Groups of 2-4 is sufficient. Have them commit for a certain length of time and to meet on a regular basis for prayer and encouragement in their walk of faith. Have them just focus on prayer for one another and for the needs of the church. Over time, as they get to know and trust each other, their group may develop into more of an accountability/exhortation relationship. Consider suggesting the book *Praying Together* by Megan Hill.

Chapter 8: Sisters Learn from One Another

Pause and Ponder:

Read the Titus 2 mandate (vv.3-5). Have you ever had such a relationship with an older woman in the faith? How did she encourage and equip you?

What is Biblical encouragement? Read 1 Timothy 4. How does Paul encourage and equip Timothy?

These days, we get much of our information online. How would a flesh and blood discipleship relationship differ from what we can learn from reading blogs or engaging in online forums/discussions?

What is the difference between discipleship and instructing/lecturing, like in a classroom setting?

Additional Questions:

How does our culture tend to view those who are older? Do you tend to turn to older women for their wisdom or to people your own age? Read Proverbs 16:31. What does it say about older people? What older women in your church radiate Christ?

Are there younger women in your life whom you can disciple?

Pray:

Pray together for discipleship/Titus 2 relationships to grow and flourish in your church.

Plan:

Consider practical ways your women's ministry can encourage and foster discipleship relationships among the women in your church. I've provided some ideas to get you started on the next page.

Starting a Discipleship Group

As we learned, discipleship is an expected component to the church. The Great Commission calls us to go and make disciples and to teach them about Christ. How this looks in each church will vary. Some will have an organized discipleship ministry where older and younger women are paired together. In other churches, discipleship is encouraged and often grows organically out of relationships between women. If you are interested in encouraging Titus 2 relationships in your church, here are a few suggestions.

1. Talk about Titus 2 relationships. Perhaps during an event or Bible study, go through the passage and discuss Paul's instruction for older women to disciple younger women. If it's something the church and your women's ministry values, the women will want it as well.
2. Consider having a book club or doing a book study on *Spiritual Mothering* by Susan Hunt or *Adorned: Living out the Beauty of the Gospel Together* by Nancy Wolgemuth. Both books unpack Titus 2 discipleship.
3. Talk to older women in the church and ask them to be in prayer about how God can use them to disciple younger women. When you have a group of women who are interested, provide a training for them in discipleship. Susan Hunt has a leader's guide for her book, *Spiritual Mothering*, available at the PCA bookstore which helps train discipleship leaders. You can find that book here:
<http://www.cepbookstore.com/p-12478-titus-2-tools.aspx>
4. For churches that are interested in developing a Titus 2 discipleship program, consider using the materials available at CDM. You can download the resource here:
<http://www.pcacep.org/titus-2-small-group-ministry-model/>

Chapter 9: Sisters Grow Together

Pause and Ponder:

Read Ephesians 4:1-16. How many "ones" does Paul mention in verses 4-6? This unity is the theological foundation for how we serve and work together in the Body.

Learn more about the spiritual gifts God gives us: Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12.

Why do we often look at certain gifts in the church as better than others?

Additional Questions:

In what specific ways can women in your church use their gifts? Brainstorm together.

Have you ever seen the diversity of gifts among the women in your church used together in unity?

Pray:

Pray together that your church would work together, using your individual gifts, to grow the Body.

Plan:

Take a spiritual gifts inventory together as a group. Discuss the results. What surprises you? What doesn't surprise you? Encourage one another in each other's gifts.

Consider together how the women in your church can use their gifts for the building up of the Body. Plan a specific event or ongoing way women can be utilized in the church. Think of ways to include those whose gifts are not noticeable, those women who tend to work behind the scenes.

I've often found it helpful to have certain pantry items always on hand for an impromptu get together. That way, you can invite someone over and know you have something to offer them to eat. Because, after all, relationships are nourished over food! This recipe is one I learned from my friend, Misha, and is easy to make with pantry ingredients.

Easy Fruit Crisp

Preheat oven to 350

Coat a baking dish with spray

Pour two cans of pie filling in the pan (blueberry, peach, apple—whatever your favorite is)

Sprinkle a box of yellow cake mix all over the top

Melt a stick of butter in the microwave and pour over the top

Bake for 30-40 minutes, until bubbly and golden on top.

Serve with ice cream

Chapter 10: Cultivating Community

Pause and Ponder:

Read 1 Peter 1 and then focus on 1 Peter 1:22-23. How does the gospel impact how we live out the command to “love one another earnestly from a pure heart?”

1 Peter 4:9 says, “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.” Does this instruction challenge you? Why or why not? Who could you reach out to in hospitality today?

God created community but we have to cultivate and nurture it. He made us a family but we have to do the work of loving and serving one another. Why do we often expect community to be ready made for us? Why do we resist the work involved in cultivating it?

Additional Questions:

What kinds of disappointments have you experienced in friendship in the past? How have these disappointments shaped the way you view friendship today?

How does the age of social media impact how we view community? Have you ever thought that the friendships you have online are better than the ones in real life? Do you think that's really true? Why or why not?

What are some practical things you and your church can do to cultivate community?

Pray:

Pray together that your church would be united in loving and serving one another. Pray for a culture of hospitality among your members.

Plan:

Have you ever done a progressive fellowship dinner where you start at one person's house and move on to another house for each part of the meal? It's a great way to get to know other people in the church. You would need at least three volunteer homes to host and provide the appetizer, the main meal, and the dessert.

Friendship Scones

Here's another recipe from my friend, Amy. They are great to serve with tea or coffee. You can also wrap them up and add a jar of jam and bring them to a new visitor to the church.

Ingredients:

2 cups all-purpose flour

1tbsp baking powder

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup sugar

1/3 stick of butter, cut up into pieces

1 cup whipping cream

Directions:

Combine the first four ingredients, cut in the butter with a pastry blender until crumbly.

Add whipping cream to the flour mixture, stirring until moistened.

Turn dough onto a lightly floured surface and knead 5-6 times. Roll to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thickness. Cut with a 2-inch round cutter and place onto lightly greased baking sheet.

Bake 375 degrees for 15 minutes or until golden. Serve with fruit preserves and whipped cream. Makes one dozen.

Chapter 11: Challenges to Community

Pause and Ponder:

I only listed a few challenges to community in this chapter. Did any of them resonate with you? Why? How have these challenges kept you from engaging in community?

Read Psalm 55. What was David's hope in the midst of his rejection?

Have you ever lost a friend due to a move or they simply left the church? What impact does this have on community?

Additional Questions:

Have you ever felt lonely in church? What did you do with that loneliness? Did it cause you to withdraw from community?

How can the church reach to the lonely in our churches? To those on the fringes?

Do you ever use social media as a replacement for community? Do you see why this is problematic?

Pray:

Pray together that your church would be a haven for the lonely.

Plan:

Challenge each other in your group to meet at least one new person next Sunday in church.

Chapter 12: Barriers to Community

Pause and Ponder:

What kind of struggles or conflicts have you experienced in Christian friendship? How did you resolve them?

Have you ever been in a church embroiled in a conflict? What was the outcome?

Read Philippians 2:1-7. What role does humility play in Christian unity?

Read Proverbs 16:28. How does gossip break unity?

Additional Questions:

Are you currently involved in a conflict with someone? What might God be doing in your heart?

Respond to this quote from the chapter: "All conflict in the church breaks our unity with one another, and all such conflict is caused by sin."

Read 1 Corinthians 3. What does Paul say their divisions signify? (vs. 3).

Pray:

Pray together for unity in the church. Pray for humility in your interactions with others in the church.

Plan:

Women play a significant role in maintaining the peace of the church. Plan together specific ways you can maintain peace and unity in your church. Also discuss and consider practical ways you can encourage the leadership in your church over the next month.

If your church is dealing with any kind of conflict, consider reading *Peacemaking Women: Biblical Hope for Resolving Conflict* by Tara Barthel.

Chapter 13: The Perfect Friend

Pause and Ponder:

As you've come to the end of the book, what do you think of the portrait of friendship I have painted for you? How has your view of friendship with other women in the church changed?

Do you see your need for community in the local Body? What specific steps are you taking to cultivate deeper relationships in the church?

Read the passages in this chapter together which describe Christ's perfect love for us. How is Christ your perfect friend? How does friendship with Christ shape your friendship with others?

How does Christ's love for you encourage you as you go forward in pursuing and living in community with your church?

Additional Questions:

What aspect of *Closer Than a Sister* spoke to you the most?

How would you like to see community change in your church?

Pray:

Pray together that Christ would be your first and perfect friend and that out of that friendship you would love and serve your sisters in Christ.

Plan: Plan a special evening of fellowship for those who attended your study/group.