



*Life Together in Christ:
Experiencing Transformation in
Community*

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Transforming community does not come primarily from listening to inspiring preaching or adding another church program. It emerges as we embrace a shared commitment to the attitudes, practices and behaviors that open us to Christ in our midst. And that's where Life Together in Christ comes in. Reflecting on the story of the two disciples who meet Christ on the Emmaus Road, Ruth Haley Barton offers this interactive guide for small groups of spiritual companions who are ready to encounter Christ in transforming ways.

Finding Ourselves on the Road

I am intrigued by the fact that the second disciple on the Emmaus Road is not named. Even though it's fun to speculate (some think the unnamed disciple was Cleopas's wife; others think it was Luke, who is attempting not to draw attention to himself), I prefer to leave it alone. The fact that we don't know who the second disciple was means it is easier for us to find ourselves on this familiar road. For you see, all of us are on our own Emmaus Road—somewhere between the now and the not-yet—in some area of our lives.

The disrupting event could be something as traumatic as the loss of a job, the breakup of a marriage or some other close relationship, the death of a loved one, a betrayal of some sort where something has been taken from us forcibly and the new has not yet come. Or it could be something a little more subtle—like a sense that it is time to let go of one thing in order to be open to something new, or an awareness of a stuck place in our spiritual life where we don't know how to get unstuck. There is a sense that we, too, are waiting for something that has not yet been fully revealed.

While it may feel that whatever precipitated our Emmaus Road experience is beyond our control, we do have control over one thing: whether we will walk the road alone or choose to walk it with others. I don't know about you, but when I am in the throes of loss and disillusionment, profound emotions and dangerous questions, I usually want to keep to myself. Some things feel entirely too personal to share with others, and at such moments I am convinced that no one could possibly understand what I'm going through. The idea of trying to put the unspeakable into words feels completely exhausting, and the thought of subjecting my soul to inane questions and trite answers during such tender times is almost too much to bear.

The disciples' choice to walk together and to talk about all the things that had happened to them was, in some ways, fairly radical. They could have decided that what they had been through was so personal, so traumatic and so confounding that they didn't want to talk about it until they had gotten a handle on it. Or they could have chosen to walk together but avoid talking about what was really going on, chatting away about anything else but *that*. But no. While the experiences of the weekend were still fresh and raw, unvarnished and unresolved, they chose to walk together and talk with each other about *all these things that had happened*.

The reason this was such a crucial choice was that there is something about the willingness to walk together and speak honestly about the fundamental issues of our lives that caused Jesus himself to come near.

The disciples on the Emmaus Road weren't praying in any formal way. They were not

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"In Life Together in Christ, Barton taps into our desperate longing for community in an age of isolation, loneliness and individualism. She understands that whole life formation happens best in solidarity with one another. Rather than fixating on styles and structures for belonging (which happens so often), Barton focuses on the substance of what a transforming community can be – exploring the practices and relational disciplines that might help us experience life together in the kingdom of love."

– **Mark Scandrette**, author of *Free and Practicing the Way of Jesus*

having a Bible study or worshipping in the synagogue. They were not having a formal quiet time. They were discussing the stuff of their lives—all the things that had happened that were having such an impact on them spiritually and in every other way—and something about the nature and quality of their conversation opened up space for Jesus to draw near. And the encounter that took place among them was completely reorienting and life changing.

That is the essence of Christian community. Before Jesus draws near, a group of people journeying together is merely a human community. Once Jesus joins us on the road, it becomes a Christian community. As we discover ways to open to Jesus' transforming presence on the road between the now and the not-yet, it becomes a transforming community.

For Personal Reflection: In what area of your life do you experience *yourself* as being on the road between "the now and the not-yet"?

— Taken from chapter one, *"Between the Now and the Not Yet: Choosing to Walk Together"*



Ruth Haley Barton

Ruth Haley Barton is the founder of the Transforming Center, a ministry dedicated to strengthening the souls of pastors and Christian leaders and the congregations and organizations they serve. She has been a student, practitioner, teacher and leader in the area of Christian spirituality and spiritual formation for twenty years. A trained spiritual director and retreat leader, she is the author of numerous books and resources on the spiritual life, including *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, *Sacred Rhythms*, *Longing for More*, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence* and *Pursuing God's Will Together*.

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"A new book by Ruth Haley Barton never disappoints and this one is no exception. This book will help you walk with others on the way of Christ. It has the potential to change individuals and communities. I enthusiastically recommend it."

— **David G. Benner**, author of *The Gift of Being Yourself*

Ruth holds a doctor of divinity degree from Northern Theological Seminary along with a bachelor of arts from Wheaton College. She's also done master's studies at Loyola University Chicago's Institute for Pastoral Studies. She received her training in spiritual direction through the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. She is also a student of family systems theory as it relates to congregational life through the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center and has studied the Enneagram with Russ Hudson of the Enneagram Institute.

Ruth travels widely, teaching and doing consulting with leadership teams in the areas of leadership transformation, corporate discernment and spiritual community. She has served on the pastoral staff of several churches, including Willow Creek Community Church. Ruth has taught at Wheaton College Graduate School, Denver Seminary, Northeastern Seminary and Mars Hill Graduate School and is a senior teaching fellow for the Renovaré Institute. She is also an adjunct professor of spiritual transformation at Northern Seminary.

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