## Peacemakers Session 1: What is Toxic Polarization? SESSION GOALS Every session has specific goals—things you want your group to walk away knowing, feeling, and committing to do. Main Idea: A polarized country needs a peacemaking church. Head Change: To discern how normal polarization turns toxic. Heart Change: To embody a peace-filled mindset that reflects Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Life Change: To view and treat people as individuals rather than a single group identity. OPEN We all hold different opinions. Describe an opinion you hold that is much different than an opinion that someone close to you holds. Whether it's about the greatest quarterback, the best brownie recipe, which way the toilet paper should go, whom to vote for, or whether the moon landings happened, we live in a world filled with polarizing opinions! $In most cases, differing opinions simply reflect the variety and creativity of a people made in God's image. \\ In a fallen$ world, these polarizing differences can turn toxic. In this session, Brandon Cleaver, Matthew 5:9 Program Director at One America Movement, examines the factors that contribute to toxic polarity, reminding the church how to become a people of peace, through Christ. READ Read Matthew 5:9. WATCH Before viewing the session, here are a few important things to look for in Brandon Cleaver's teaching. As you watch, pay attention to how he answers the following questions: When do normal differences turn to toxic polarization? How does the shift from the term "wrong" to "evil" deepen toxic polarization? Show Session 1: What is Toxic Polarization? (9 minutes).



|   | DISCUSS  |  |
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|   | Brandon used magnets to illustrate polarization, explaining that several forces act to attract or repel magnets, based on  |  |
|   | their opposing poles.  Where have you observed people who might otherwise agree being attracted to or repelled from one another?   |  |
|   | PEACEMAKING PLEASES GOD.   |  |
|   | Read Matthew 5:9.  |  |
|   | Brandon describes this peacemaking as a call from Jesus. Indeed, we are to strive to model the traits found in the Beatitudes. Being a peacemaker, Brandon explains, is an "ethical mandate" that requires "active intentionality."  What practices can help a person adopt a peacemaking mindset?   |  |
|   | When does the pursuit of peace give way to more divisive polarity?   |  |
|   | Brandon made a bold claim in this session: "a polarized country needs a peacemaking church." Why are Christians  |  |
|   | uniquely situated to bring the peace that a polarized society needs?   |  |
|   | In the video, we heard, "Discussing our differences is healthy for our society." <b>What benefits come from discussing our differences?</b>  |  |
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|   | A PEACEFUL APPROACH DEEPENS OUR APPRECIATION FOR OTHERS. Read Ephesians 4:2-3.   |  |
|   | Paul describes the value of pursuing unity among believers, describing peace as a means to express the unity of the Spirit. Why do you think Christians struggle to prioritize their unity above secondary matters?  |  |
|   | Read 1 Peter 2:12.   |  |
|   | Peter explains how Christians can navigate conflict with a world that often opposes them. They are admonished to   |  |
|   | maintain honorable conduct. How can peaceable and honorable conduct prove winsome and avoid conflict?  |  |
|   | Instead of seeking peace and understanding, our pluralistic society often tends toward extremes. Brandon notes that language even shifts, so that people do not simply label another person's position as "wrong" but instead call it "evil." This   |  |
|   | shift decreases people's ability to hear and learn from one another. The session also described a mistake people make,   |  |
|   | when they apply a person's ideas to that person's identity, believing wrong ideas makes someone a bad person.  |  |
|   | How can talking with someone who holds a different viewpoint increase one's understanding of and appreciation for that person?   |  |
|   | Why is it helpful to separate a person's ideas from a person's identity?   |  |
|   | Brandon also mentioned that such conversations with others are like holding up a mirror that reveals areas where we  |  |
|   | could change. When have you understood yourself better through a conversation with someone who is different than you?  |  |
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|   | JESUS ENABLES A HEART OF PEACE.  |  |
|   | Read Colossians 3:15.  |  |
|   | Christians have God's Spirit dwelling in them, and they can let this peace-filled Spirit of Christ fill their hearts. Paul even mentions allowing it to rule. This reminds Christians that there is a daily – even moment-by-moment – decision that can be made to let Christ's peace shine through them. <b>How does a Christian let the peace of Christ rule in the heart?</b> |  |
|   | Brandon explained that treating people as individuals rather than as a group helps promote understanding rather than   |  |
|   | division. He states, "How we see one another directly impacts how we treat one another." Jesus practiced this with the woman at the well in John 4. What helps you treat people as individuals?  |  |
|   | <b>Note:</b> To consider how to appreciate the differences in individuals rather than characterizing an entire group, go to the  |  |
|   | Go Deeper Section at the end of this study.  |  |
|   | Borrowing C. S. Lewis's term, Brandon reminds us to "see each other as God created us, as 'everlasting splendors." <b>How does viewing people in this way lessen the impact of our differences?</b>  |  |
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|   | Who has unexpectedly become a cherished part of your life simply because you took the time to get to know him or her?  |  |
|   | LAST WORD  |  |
|   | The difference we face in againty company year propagated and relatining but treating people or individuals first below up   |  |
|   | The differences we face in society seem very pronounced and polarizing, but treating people as individuals first helps us become a people of peace. Living out Christ's peace is a calling that God has placed on Christians' lives.   |  |
|   | The only way to minimize our differences is to be peacemakers who let Christ's peace rule in our hearts. It allows us to   |  |
|   | see people with God's love and recognize that our differences matter little when it comes to showing love to each other.   |  |
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## GO DEEPER

The Go Deeper section has two potential functions. It can supplement your small group discussion by providing extra discussion material. We've highlighted a place where each of the following segments could fit in the Discuss section of

But you can also use these sections as short devotionals to carry you through the week until your next group meeting.

## The Woman at the Well

Jesus famously surprised His disciples when he took the time to treat an unlikely person as an individual. His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well cut across the divisions of the day. Jews and Samaritans detested one another, and women were looked down upon by men. For centuries, this encounter has spurred Christians to avoid cultural divisions and see individuals as God sees them.

Read John 4:1-42 and answer these questions:

- Although the Samaritan woman had come to draw water, there was a deeper, spiritual thirst in her soul. The Jews of the day likely downplayed any spiritually focused thinking by Samaritans, but the woman at the well demonstrated the opposite was true. What comments did the woman at the well make that demonstrated her thoughts about spiritual matters?

  What signs do you find in our culture that show people's spiritual thirst?
- In verse 7, the Samaritan woman registers her surprise that Jesus would break with cultural norms by speaking to her. How does God use our loving, countercultural acts to create openness toward faith in Jesus?
- Jesus' act of speaking got the woman's attention, but His words drew her toward spiritual discussion. How do you or how can you – use your words with others to build spiritual discussion?
- Jesus could have walked into the town of Sychar with His disciples and began to teach a crowd. The Gospels record  $several\ accounts\ when\ He\ taught\ large\ crowds.\ \textbf{Why\ do\ you\ think\ Jesus\ focused\ on\ one\ person\ instead\ of\ on\ a}$ crowd of people?
- The toxic polarization discussed in this session is destroyed when we are willing to see people as individuals and have conversations with them. Others are simply on the fringes and need special attention. Whom can you view as an individual and try to have a conversation with this week?

