

FOR WHOEVER SETS THE TABLE

The Host's Guide

*Everything you need to launch a table and
keep it alive for a year.*



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Before anything else

Somewhere near you is a person who thinks they're the only one. Still wants Jesus. Can't do what church became. Convinced nobody else feels this way.

You're about to set the table where they find out they're not.

That's the job. Not teaching — there's no lesson to deliver. Not pastoring — nobody's asking you to carry souls. Not hosting a Bible study — this will feel different, and the difference is the point. You're making a home: a meal, a story, honest conversation, and people who keep showing up for each other.

If you're thinking *I'm not qualified for this* — good. You're exactly who does this. The table doesn't need an expert; experts make people feel like they're back in class. It needs somebody willing to cook something simple, tell one story, ask four questions, and let people be honest. If you can have friends over for dinner, you have every skill this requires.

And you don't have to have your own faith sorted out. Hosts with questions make tables where questions are safe. Some of the best tables are set by people who are still finding their own way home.

Here's everything, in order. Part One gets your table launched — the first invitation through the first few months. Part Two keeps it healthy for a year. Read Part One now. Read Part Two slowly, as the year happens.

ONE

Launching

The first invitation

You don't need a group. You need one or two people. A table starts with two or three, including you — that's not a compromise while you wait for more people. That's the design. Jesus started with a handful, and the small start is what makes honesty possible later.

So: who?

Don't start by asking *who's spiritual*. Ask *who's hungry*. Think about the people already in your life — the friend who dropped a hard question about God once and then laughed it off. The coworker who mentioned they used to go to church, in the past tense, with something in their voice. The neighbor who's lonely and doesn't say so. Somebody came to mind while you read this paragraph. Probably start there.

What do you actually say? Something like this, in your own words:

"I'm starting something small at my place — dinner, once a week, a few people. We eat, somebody tells one of the stories about Jesus, and we talk about it honestly. No lectures, nobody has to believe anything, nobody's signing up for anything. I thought of you. Want to come eat?"

Notice what that invitation doesn't do. It doesn't hide what this is — the Jesus part is right there, said plainly, because an invitation that buries it is bait, and bait breaks trust the moment it's discovered. And it doesn't oversell — no "this will change your life." It's dinner, and it's honest about being dinner.

A few things not to say: don't call it church, because it isn't one and the word slams doors you want open. Don't promise what the group will become — you don't know yet. And don't recruit for a cause. You're inviting someone to a meal, not enlisting them.

When somebody says no, the answer is: "No problem. *The invitation doesn't expire.*" Then mean it. No follow-up campaign, no checking in about it. Some of the best people at a table said no the first time, and they came back because the no was allowed to be a real no.

And if the invitation scares you — that's normal, and worth saying out loud to yourself: the fear is usually about your reputation. What will they think of me? That fear shrinks the first time somebody says, "honestly, I've been looking for something like this." They're out there. You only need two.

The first gathering

The meal is not the warm-up. The meal is half the point. Something happens to people around shared food that doesn't happen in rows of chairs — guards drop, small talk turns into real talk, and strangers become people who pass each other dishes. Jesus did most of his best work at dinner tables, and that wasn't an accident of the culture. It was the method.

So cook simple, or don't cook at all. Soup and bread. A pot of chili. Takeout pizza on the actual table with actual plates. The food should say *relax*, not look *what I made* — a meal that's too impressive tells people this is a performance, and they'll perform back. If people offer to bring something next time, always say yes. The table gets healthier the moment it stops being one person's show.

The room matters less than you think. A kitchen table, a living room floor, a patio, a break room. What matters: everybody can see everybody, and phones get set somewhere else — you can just say it plainly the first night: "I'm putting my phone in the other room so I'm actually here. Do whatever you want with yours." Most people will follow. Nobody has to.

The first night has one job: people leave wanting to come back. That's it. That's the whole agenda. Not covering material, not explaining the vision, not getting through a story if it doesn't fit. Eat, talk, let people tell pieces of their stories. A question as simple as "how did you two meet?" or "what was your week actually like?" does more first-night work than anything printed.

Say one thing about what this is, near the end, short: "So this is *basically* it. We eat, and starting next time somebody will tell one of the stories about Jesus and we'll talk about it — *four questions, no wrong answers. Same time next week?*" Thirty seconds. Then stop. The vision speech you're tempted to give — the one about community and what this could become — don't. It puts weight on a seedling.

About silence: it will happen, and your job is to lose the staring contest. When you ask a question and nobody speaks, count slowly to ten before you say anything. Somebody almost always breaks first, and what they say after a real silence is usually more honest than what they'd have said instantly. If you rush in to rescue every quiet moment, the table learns that silence is a problem — and then nobody ever thinks before they talk.

End on time. Whatever you said — ninety minutes, two hours — land it. People trust a table that respects their Tuesday. The conversations that keep going at the door after, those are free; the meeting itself ends when you said it would.

The story and the four questions

Starting with the second gathering, the rhythm is the same every week: **Meet, Share, Grow, Act**. Meet is the meal you've already got. Share is people telling how the week actually went — including how last week's act went. Grow is the story and the conversation. Act is deciding what you're going to do about it before you meet again. That rhythm is the whole model. Everything else is furniture.

The story is told, never read. This is the part new hosts want to skip, and it's the part you can't. Reading aloud makes a classroom — heads down, one voice performing at people. Telling makes a table — eyes up, a story passing from one person to others the way these stories traveled for decades before anyone wrote them down. The first time you tell a story from memory and see people actually watching you, you'll understand why this is non-negotiable.

Nobody's asking you to memorize a script. You prepare a story with the **5 Cs** — walk through its **Context** (what's happening as it opens), its **Characters** (who's there and what they want), its **Conflict** (what's wrong or at stake), its **Climax** (the moment it turns), and its **Change** (who's different at the end, and how). Know those five things

and you know the story well enough to tell it in your own words — which is the only version anyone needs.

The way in is **Recite, Retell, Recall**. Read the story out loud to yourself several times during the week — that's recite. Tell it in your own words with the text nearby to check yourself — that's retell. Then tell it without the text — recall. Twenty minutes across a week. The Canon of Fifty does the heavy lifting for you: every story comes fully prepped — the 5 Cs worked out, a sample telling to learn from, and the discussion already framed. You're not building this from scratch. You're practicing a story somebody already prepared.

If you can't get there, read it first. Open the Bible, read the story out loud, close it, and then tell it. You have lost nothing. Everyone has heard it once, accurately, and now they hear it again in your own words — which is the version they will remember on Thursday.

There is a second thing this does, and it might be the better reason. Tell the table plainly: *I just read it, now I am going to tell it, and if I drop something you caught, say so.* Suddenly six people are holding the story instead of one. Somebody will jump in with the detail you skipped, and that person has just done what you are doing — which is very often how a table finds its next host.

Aim at telling it cold, because a told story lands differently than a read one; the room leans in, people look up, and it stops being a lesson. Some weeks you will get there and some weeks you will not. A story read and then told beats a story not told at all.

After the story, four questions, always the same four, in order:

1. What stood out to you? 2. What does this show us about Jesus? 3. Where are you in this story? 4. So what are we going to do about it?

Why these four, and not others. You will ask them every week for years, and they look almost too simple. Each one is doing a specific job.

What stood out to you? has no wrong answer, so everybody can speak. A twelve-year-old and a seminary graduate answer this one as equals, and the table finds out early that it is safe to talk.

What does this show us about Jesus? is the one that keeps him at the center. Without it a table drifts into a discussion group about being a better person, which is not the same thing and nobody notices it happening.

Where are you in this story? is personal without anybody being told what to do. People find themselves in it and say so out loud. This is where the silences get holy.

So what are we going to do about it? turns an evening into a life. A table that talks and never acts is a book club, and there is nothing wrong with book clubs, but this is not one.

Don't improve them and don't add a fifth. The moment you write better questions, you have made yourself the teacher again and the table stops being a table.

Don't improve them. Don't add a fifth. The questions look almost too simple, and that's their power — everyone at the table already knows them, nobody needs a study guide, and a twelve-year-old and a seminary graduate answer the same questions as equals. Question one has no wrong answer, which teaches people it's safe to talk. Question two keeps Jesus at the center without anyone lecturing. (If your table has people early enough in the journey that "Jesus" lands wrong, it flexes to "about God" — that's the built-in give.) Question three is where it gets personal, and where the silences get holy. And question four turns the whole evening from a discussion into a life.

Which is the point of **Act**: before anyone leaves, the table decides what to do about what it heard — something concrete, before next week. Sometimes it's one shared thing; sometimes each person names their own. Small counts. *Check on the neighbor. Forgive the brother. Have the conversation.* Next week, Share opens with how it went — and that loop, story to action to honesty about the action, is where people actually change. A table that talks and never acts is a book club. Nothing wrong with book clubs. This isn't one.

TWO

The year

The middle, which is quieter than you'll like

Around month three or four, the novelty wears off. This needs saying plainly because almost every host mistakes it for failure: the first weeks run on newness, and newness is fuel that runs out. What's supposed to replace it is rhythm — the table becoming just what Tuesday is. The handoff between those two fuels is the quietest stretch of the whole year, and tables that make it through this stretch usually make it, period.

Expect the attendance wobble. Somewhere in there, people will miss — travel, kids' sports, life. Don't panic and don't chase. The question was never perfect attendance; it's whether people come *back*. Someone who misses three weeks and walks in the fourth like they never left — that's not a table failing. That's a table that people return to, which is the whole thing working.

Watch yourself for **content creep**. This is the most common way good hosts quietly wreck good tables: the week feels flat, so you supplement — a podcast clip, a devotional, a printed worksheet, a theme for the month. It's always well-intentioned, and it's always the first step back toward the classroom. The story and the four questions are the content. When a week falls flat, the fix is never more material — it's usually more honesty, and sometimes it's just a flat week, which tables are allowed to have.

How do you know if the table is actually healthy, underneath the wobble? Three signs, none of which involve counting anything:

People show up without being chased. Not perfectly — freely. Nobody's guilt-tripping anyone into the room.

The stories travel. Someone mentions retelling Tuesday's story to their kid, their coworker, their mother. When the stories start leaving the table on their own, something has taken root.

The acts actually happen. Not every week, not heroically — but the table does what it says it's going to do, and Share keeps catching the follow-through.

Two of three and you're healthy. Fewer, and something needs attention — usually one honest conversation, not a program.

Last thing for the middle: learn the difference between a **wobble** and a **wound**. A wobble is a flat month, a thin week, an awkward stretch — wobbles fix themselves if you don't smother them, and a table that self-corrects once trusts itself forever after. A wound is different — a crisis, a conflict, something involving safety. Wounds get action now. The next section is about wounds, because by this point in the year, real life has usually found your table. That's not the model failing. That's what the table was for.

The first hard moment

Sometime this year — usually between months six and nine — real life arrives at your table. A diagnosis. A job loss. A marriage coming apart at the seams. A grief. Somebody finally says the thing they've been carrying, out loud, at your table, because your table became the one place they could.

First: this is not the model breaking. This is the model *working*. The table caught something that would otherwise have been carried alone — that's what it's for. But it's also the moment hosts feel most out of their depth, so here's the job, exactly:

Your job is to love, not to fix. You are not this person's counselor, doctor, or pastor, and — hear this — *nobody asked you to be*. What the table gives someone in crisis is what professionals can't: people who show up with food, sit in the hard silence, remember to ask two weeks later, and treat them like a person instead of a case. Do not underestimate that. For a lot of people it's the first time anyone has stayed.

Know where your limits are — they're built in on purpose. Anything beyond a living room's skill goes to people trained for it: doctors, licensed counselors, crisis lines. Making that handoff isn't failing someone — it's loving them with your eyes open. The failure mode is the opposite one: the host who tries to carry a mental health crisis or an unraveling marriage alone because handing it off felt like

abandonment. It isn't. You stay their friend while the professionals do their work; those were never competing jobs.

Build your bench before you need it. During your first month — while nothing is wrong — write down your table's short list: a counselor or two somebody at the table can vouch for, the local crisis line (988 in the US, or your country's crisis line), and any trusted pastor or elder if your table has a relationship with one. Ten minutes of work. The night somebody's world caves in is the wrong night to start googling therapists, and every table that skips this step regrets it at the worst possible moment.

That local list is your first bench — local is always first, because crises are local. But behind it there's a second one: the project keeps a small team of real people you can reach when your list isn't enough or you don't know where to start. And for hosting questions — story prep, table dynamics, what-do-I-do-when — there's help in the Workshop any hour of the day. One line that never moves: anything involving safety, harm, or a person in real trouble goes to people. Always people.

Say the confidentiality rule out loud at the first gathering, so it's never a surprise later: what's shared at the table stays at the table — with exactly two exceptions, harm to self and harm to others. Those don't stay in the room, because love doesn't keep that kind of secret. A table that states this on night one never has to improvise it in a crisis.

If someone discloses abuse — theirs or a child's — the path is short and it isn't optional: Listen. Believe them. Don't investigate — no pressing for details, no confronting anyone; you're the safe person, not the detective. Never promise secrecy you can't keep — say honestly, "thank you for telling me; here's what has to happen next." If a child is involved or anyone's in immediate danger, emergency services come first, and know that reporting suspected child abuse is, in most places, a legal obligation, not a judgment call. Write down what was said, in their words, dated. And then stay their friend — the table's job doesn't end when the professionals arrive.

If your table includes kids at all, the safeguarding guide isn't optional reading — it's the one part of this whole model with no flexibility in it, and it's short. Read it before the first gathering that includes a minor.

Hand the story around

You tell the first few. A new table needs a steady voice while people work out whether this is safe, and that's your job for three or four weeks.

Then start handing it over. Ask somebody at the table to take next week's story. Give them the prep a week early, tell them Recite, Retell, Recall, and let them do it badly if that's how it goes — a story told badly by a nervous friend does more for a table than a story told well by the same person every week.

The reason is not the workload. It's that the person who tells a story is the person who could host a table. Nobody becomes ready by watching someone else be ready. By the time your table is big enough to send people out, you want three or four people who have already stood in front of the room with the text closed — and the only way to get them is to have handed them the story months earlier.

A table where one person always tells has an audience. A table where five people have each told has five people who could start the next one.

Two things that make it work. Ask privately, not in front of everyone, so nobody is cornered. And when they're done, don't correct them — thank them, and ask the four questions like you always do.

The send, and why ready never feels ready

Somewhere in the back half of the year, if the table is healthy, you'll notice two things at once: the table is getting full, and somebody at it has quietly become the kind of person others turn toward.

Take the second one first, because it starts earlier than you think. **Around month five, start watching for your future host.** Not recruiting — watching. You're looking for the person people already trust with their real answers, the one who

remembers what somebody said three weeks ago and asks about it. Hosting was never a skill; it's a way of being with people, and by month five it's visible at your table if it's there. When you spot them, start handing them pieces — have them tell the story one week, ask the questions another. Don't announce anything. Let them discover what they are while doing it.

Now the first thing. **The table's numbers are part of the design: it starts at two or three, lives best at six to eight, and at eight to ten it's time.** Not because bigger is bad — because honesty has a headcount. Past ten people, the quiet ones go silent, question three stops getting real answers, and the table becomes an audience with food. The size limit isn't a rule about growth. It's a rule about truth.

And when it's time: **send — don't split.** Splitting is what programs do: divide the roster, redistribute the people, grieve quietly. Sending is different. The person you've been developing goes out — maybe with one or two others — to set a new table for people who don't have one yet. Nobody is reassigned. The original table stays itself, minus the sent ones, plus the open chairs they left behind. And the send is celebrated the way you'd send family to do something that matters: a meal, words said out loud over them, hands on shoulders if that's natural — and prayer of some kind. Nobody's going to tell your table how to pray. But don't skip praying over people you're sending; it's the oldest part of the ceremony, and the part they'll remember. It should feel like a commissioning, because that's what it is.

Two warnings, both from watching tables die of the opposite errors:

Sending is triggered by readiness, never by the calendar. No table multiplies because a document said month ten. A table of six with no host ready doesn't send; a table of nine with a ready host doesn't wait for an anniversary.

But hear the other side, because it's the more common death: "they're not quite ready" in month ten becomes "we don't do that" by year two. Readiness was never going to feel ready — you didn't feel ready either, remember. If the person is watching people the way you watched people, and the table trusts them, that's what ready looks like. The feeling arrives afterward.

Once there are two tables, don't drift apart — **stay family.** Eat together once a quarter, both tables, one big meal, stories out loud from each. This is what keeps

sending from feeling like loss: nobody said goodbye, the family just got a bigger table. And it quietly becomes the answer to a question the new host will carry all year — *is anyone behind me?* — because you are, the way somebody was behind you.

Which is the last thing: **when you send a host, you become to them what this guide has been to you.** The call they make on a bad Tuesday, the coffee every couple of weeks, the person who asks "tell me about someone at your table" and listens. It's not a title. It's just the next size of the same love. That's the whole model, all the way up: tables sending tables, people staying family, nobody doing any of it alone.

Is this a church?

Somebody will ask, usually in the first few months, and usually because they are trying to work out whether they can stop going somewhere else.

The honest answer is that it is not our call to make. A table is people gathering around Jesus, eating together, hearing the stories, and acting on them. Whether that adds up to a church is a question your tradition answers, not one we answer for you.

What we will say: don't use the ambiguity to pull people out of a congregation. If somebody at your table is part of a church, the table should make them a better member of it, not a quieter one. And if somebody at your table has no church and no plans to find one, they are still fully welcome here, for as long as they want to come.

When the harder version arrives — somebody wants to be baptized, somebody wants communion at the table, somebody asks who is in charge — that is the moment to bring in the people on your list. Those questions have real answers in every tradition, and none of them should be improvised by a host at nine on a Tuesday.

Week two, when it's awkward

The first night usually goes well. Week two is where hosts quit.

The novelty is gone, two people can't make it, the story lands flat, somebody checks their phone, and the silence after question three lasts long enough that you start

talking just to end it. You will drive to work the next morning wondering if you have wasted everybody's time.

You haven't. This is what week two is. Almost every table has one, and the ones that survive it are the ones where the host did nothing clever — just showed up the next week and did the same four movements again.

Three things that help, none of them impressive. Cook something easier than you did the first week, so you are not exhausted before anyone arrives. Ask about last week's acts by name, even if only one person did theirs, because that is the moment people learn this is real. And let the silence be long. Count to ten. What somebody says after a real silence is almost always the truest thing said that night.

If it is still flat at week five, that is information rather than failure — ask at comehungry.org/ask and somebody who has been there will talk it through with you.

When a table ends

Tables end. People move, jobs change, a season closes. Some tables run for eight years and some run for five months, and the short ones are not failures.

Let it end cleanly rather than letting it fade. Say out loud that it is finishing, do one last night, and ask the same four questions about the whole run of it: what stood out, what did this show us about Jesus, where are you now, what are we going to do. People need the ending marked or they carry it as a loss instead of a season.

Then tell them plainly that any one of them can set a table themselves, and that everything they would need is free and already in their hands. More tables have started from an ending than from a launch.

When it gets heavy

A word about you, because hosts burn quietly. You'll notice it in small ways first: relief when somebody cancels, dread on the afternoon of table night, the feeling that the evening is something you produce instead of something you're part of. None of

that means you're failing or that the table is dying. It usually means one thing: you've been carrying too much of it alone, which — you may notice — is the exact disease this whole thing exists to cure. Hosts are not exempt from the cure.

And you can ask for help from outside the table. Ask at **comehungry.org/ask** and say what you need, and somebody who has hosted one will write back — it can take a week; there are only a few of us. Not a form letter and not a sales call — that's the entire reason we ask who you are.

The fix is almost always the same: give pieces away. The meal rotates. The gathering moves to somebody else's house for a month. Somebody else tells the story — which you were doing anyway if you've been developing your future host. A table where the host does everything isn't a healthier table; it's a fragile one with a tired person at the center. The table gets stronger every time you hand something over, and so do you.

And answer the questions yourself. Every week, all four, like everyone else. The host who only asks becomes staff; the host who answers stays a person. If you notice you've stopped being honest at your own table — giving the smooth version at question three, skipping your own act — that's the earliest warning light there is. Say so, out loud, at the table. Watch what it does for everyone else's honesty.

Some tables also just get heavy for a season — a flat couple of months where the conversation stays shallow and you wonder if it's dying. Usually it isn't. Usually somebody's carrying something they haven't said yet, and the table is idling until it comes out. Keep setting the table. Keep asking the questions. Shallow seasons break the same way silences do — somebody goes first.

And some tables end. Say that plainly, because nobody writes it down and every host who lives it thinks they failed: people move, lives change, and sometimes a table's season is genuinely over. A table that met for two years, held somebody through a divorce, sent one host out, and then wound down — that table didn't fail. It was a home for the time it stood, and the people it changed stay changed. If it's ending, end it well: one last meal, stories told out loud about what happened around that table, gratitude said to each person by name. Homes deserve goodbyes. Then rest — and don't be surprised if, some months later, somebody who sat at that table asks you to help them start another one.

If your table is part of a church

Everything above is your model too — nothing about the rhythm, the stories, the questions, or the year changes. A few things get simpler, and one or two get specific:

Your bench has a name on it. Instead of building your own routing list, your church gives you a contact — a pastor or staff member whose actual name and number go in the front of this guide. Crises, conflicts, and anything beyond the living room go to them, same day. Use them; that's the deal, and it's a good one.

Safeguarding runs under your church's policy — screening, two-adult rules, reporting paths. The safeguarding guide still applies; your church's policy tells you how it's implemented in your house.

Your church's teaching is your table's teaching. The stories and the four questions don't change, but the doctrine that shapes answers and leadership is your church's — that was the arrangement from the start, and it's why your pastor can bless this without a committee.

The welcome stays wide anyway. Anyone can sit at your table without believing what your church believes — the same way anyone can walk into a Sunday service. Doctrine shapes the teaching and the leaders. It never shapes the guest list.

And you're not the only table. Your church's tables gather together sometimes — that celebration rhythm belongs to the whole family. Stories from your table (with permission, always) may find their way to Sunday. That's not promotion. That's a church hearing that something is alive in its living rooms.

The last word

A year from now, if it goes the way it usually goes, there will be a Tuesday like this: food that's nothing special, people who came without being reminded, a story told from memory, an honest silence after question three, and somebody at your table who — a year ago — thought they were the only one.

They weren't. Because you set a table.

THE LAST WORD

Somebody, someday, will sit down at it and start finding their way home. They'll probably never tell you the whole of what it meant. That's fine. Set the table anyway.

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