

The Society We Deserve — A Six-Session Study Guide

For congregations, book groups, service clubs, and community organizations

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www.pathstounderstanding.org

How to Use This Guide

This guide walks your group through *The Society We Deserve* in six gatherings — one for each movement of the book, plus a final session for deciding what your group will do next. It is deliberately simple. Every session fits on one page and follows the same rhythm, so any member of your group can facilitate with no preparation beyond reading the chapters.

A few notes before you begin:

Practice the book while you discuss it. This book argues that belonging comes first — that trust grows through shared experience, not argument. So each session opens heart-to-heart before it goes head-to-head: a simple human question everyone answers before any discussion begins. Don't skip it. It is not a warm-up; it is the point. If you can meet over food — even simple snacks, even a rotating potluck — the book would tell you that dinner is the real work.

The rhythm of every session (75–90 minutes):

- **Gather** (15 min) — everyone answers the human question. No crosstalk; just listening.
- **Discuss** (45–60 min) — four or five questions. You do not need to get through all of them. Depth beats coverage.
- **Do** (10 min) — review one action step to try before you meet again, and hear briefly how last session's step went.
- **Close** (2 min) — one person reads the closing line aloud.

Shared agreements. At your first session, read these aloud and ask everyone to nod: We speak from our own experience ("I" statements). We listen to understand, not to answer. We share the air — everyone speaks, no one dominates. What is shared here stays here; what is learned here leaves here. It is okay to disagree; it is not okay to dismiss.

If you want to go deeper, a page of optional chapter-by-chapter prompts and further resources is included at the back. It is entirely optional — the six sessions stand on their own.

Session One — Cooperation Is Our Superpower

Read: Introduction and Section One (Chapters 1–4)

Gather — the human question: Tell about a time someone showed up for you, or your family, when you needed it. Who set that in motion?

Discuss:

1. The book opens with a harvest bee: thirty families finishing an injured farmer's harvest in a day. Terry notes the help was "spontaneous in spirit but organized in its doing" — someone made the first call. Have you seen something like this? Who made the first call?
2. The book claims our anxiety about polarization and loneliness is actually evidence that we still know we need one another — the way hunger proves food matters. Does that reframe ring true to you?
3. Which of the traditions in Chapter Three — the kingdom of God, Beloved Community, Indigenous reciprocity, mutual aid, the American civic story — is closest to your own inheritance? What does your tradition teach about the shape of a good society: pyramid, or circle?
4. Chapter Four says we love both kinds of stories — the individual who overcomes and the community that shows up — but our politics treats them as rivals. Where do you feel that tension in your own life?
5. What would it look like for your community to be a potluck — "distinct gifts, shared table — neither melting pot nor food court"?

Do before next time: Notice the invisible infrastructure in your week — every moment that runs on trust and cooperation you normally don't see (the water, the traffic, the volunteers, the casseroles). Jot down two or three. Bring one to share.

Close, read aloud: *"We survive and thrive through cooperation — within our groups, and between them."*

Session Two — Why It Feels So Fragile

Read: Section Two (Chapters 5–9)

Gather — the human question: Who is someone you trust — a person, not an institution? How did they earn it?

Discuss:

1. From your “invisible infrastructure” noticing this week: what did you see that you’d never noticed before?
2. The book’s diagnosis: nearly every group in America believes the *other* groups have abandoned the basic moral agreements — and nearly every group is wrong. Where have you seen this fear in your own community, or felt it yourself?
3. Chapter Eight describes a “360-degree dehumanization machine” — attention economics, algorithms, and political incentive amplifying the worst one percent of every group. Where do you encounter the machine in an ordinary day? Has it shaped how you imagine any group?
4. “Alone together”: the book mourns the third places — diners, granges, union halls, front porches — that once mixed people who didn’t choose one another. What were those places in your town? What happened to them?
5. The book insists: “Our differences are not the problem. Our distance is.” Do you agree? What’s the distance in your community that most needs closing?

Do before next time: A one-week noticing practice: each time you see a story (news or social media) portraying a group at its worst, pause and ask, “Have I ever actually spent time with people from this group?” Keep a simple tally: stories seen vs. firsthand experiences had. Bring your tally.

Close, read aloud: *“You cannot argue someone into trust. But you can invite them to dinner.”*

Session Three — Belonging Comes First

Read: Part Three (Chapters 10–14)

Gather — the human question: Tell about a time you walked into a room as a stranger and someone made you feel you belonged. What exactly did they do?

Discuss:

1. What did your noticing tally reveal? Were you surprised by the gap between stories consumed and experiences had?
2. The book names the “duty-first mistake”: leading with *you should care* and calling people apathetic when they don’t respond. “The people we call apathetic are not apathetic. They are unattached.” Where has your congregation or organization made the duty-first mistake? What would belonging-first look like instead?
3. Chapter Eleven tells of ninety public gatherings where Muslim neighbors told their own stories and took any question — and fear dissolved at close range. Why do you think story succeeds where argument fails?
4. The book claims one friendship can’t cure a group’s fear of another group — the friend gets filed as “one of the good ones.” Evidence about groups must come from experience with groups. Does this match your experience? What group-level fear persists in your community despite individual friendships?
5. Chapter Fourteen describes two lenses: threat (their gain is my loss) and partner (their gain is my gain). Think of a group your community regards through the threat lens. What experience might begin to change the lens?

Do before next time: Practice one human question outside this group. Over coffee or a meal with someone you’d like to know better, ask: “What experiences have been life-giving for you lately?” — and just listen.

Close, read aloud: “*Evidence about groups must come from experience with groups.*”

Session Four — How It Spreads

Read: Part Four (Chapters 15–19)

Gather — the human question: What's a story someone told you — not something you witnessed — that changed how you saw a group of people, for better or worse?

Discuss:

1. How did the human-question practice go? What happened when you asked and just listened?
2. Chapter Fifteen argues stories of surprising encounters travel through trust networks — “the machine can buy every screen but cannot own your sister-in-law.” Whose testimony do you actually trust more than the news? Who trusts yours?
3. The book says to gather *carriers, not crowds* — the quilting ministry leader, the youth coach, the crew foreman. Who are the trusted mid-level leaders in your congregation or organization? (Name actual names.)
4. Chapter Seventeen insists conveners are “leaders, not outliers” — a retired schoolteacher, a feed store manager, an anxious pastor. What lets you off the hook when you tell yourself someone else should do this work? What would put you on it?
5. Chapter Eighteen claims public cooperation changes what a whole town believes is normal — the banner over Main Street “cannot be dismissed.” What public act of cooperation between groups would most surprise your town, in the best way?

Do before next time: As a group, map your “fleet in the harbor”: list the congregations, clubs, schools, businesses, and organizations in your community. Mark the ones where anyone in your group has a relationship — a thread that already exists. Bring the list; you'll need it in Session Six.

Close, read aloud: “*You do not scale a forest. You grow one.*”

Session Five — From Belonging to Thriving

Read: Part Five (Chapters 20–24)

Gather — the human question: When has your community — town, congregation, neighborhood — been at its best? What made that possible?

Discuss:

1. Chapter Twenty maps seven stages: Relationship → Trust → Belonging → Shared Responsibility → Civic Engagement → Community Problem Solving → Thriving. Where would you honestly place your community on this path? Which stage has been skipped when things fell apart?
2. “You cannot skip stages.” The book says duty-first appeals and problem-solving summits between distrustful factions fail at the stage they bypassed. Have you watched a well-meaning community effort fail this way?
3. The vital conditions framework puts belonging and civic muscle at the center of the wheel — the keystone condition that produces a community’s capacity to secure everything else. What problem in your community have you been trying to “ambulance your way” out of?
4. The closing chapter insists the vision is not utopia, not nostalgia, and not guaranteed — “arguments continue, inside a family of neighbors rather than wars between strangers.” What would a normal Tuesday look like in your town if this vision took hold?
5. The title cuts two ways: “deserve” as gift, and as verdict. What does your community deserve — on both readings?

Do before next time: Come to the final session having answered, for yourself: *What are my dreams for our shared community?* One paragraph, or three sentences. You’ll share it.

Close, read aloud: *“It could be you. It is you. It is us.”*

Session Six — Setting the Table (Capstone)

No new reading. This session turns your group from readers into partners.

Gather — the human question: Share what you wrote: *What are your dreams for our shared community?* Take your time. This is the session’s heart — let it fill half the meeting if it wants to.

Discern together:

1. Listening to one another’s dreams — what did you hear more than once? Name the two or three shared threads aloud, and have someone write them down.
2. Bring out the “fleet in the harbor” map from Session Four. Where does a thread already exist — a group one of you already knows, eats with, works alongside?
3. Which of the book’s eight doors fits your group right now? (Host a potluck; launch the eat-serve-celebrate arc; join or start a Civic Hub; share the book with another group; a shared service project; a public celebration; support a convener; simply keep meeting.) Choose one. Small is fine. The book is clear: humble dates beat heroic plans.

Do — the five first moves:

1. Name your companions — who from this group is in? (Never start alone.)
2. Choose the first partner group — where a thread already exists.
3. Decide who makes the call. (The most common answer to that call: “We have been hoping someone would call.”)
4. Set a humble date.
5. Download the free Potluck Project toolkit at [link] — it walks you through everything else.

Before you close: Tell Paths to Understanding what you decided at [contact link] — the book ends by asking readers to report back, and it means it. If your group wants help, ask.

Close, read aloud, together: *“The table is waiting. Someone has to set it. It is us.”*

Going Deeper (Optional)

For groups that want more than six sessions, or facilitators who want extra material. None of this is required.

Splitting sessions. Any session can become two: Section Two (Session 2) divides naturally after Chapter Seven; Part Three (Session 3) after Chapter Twelve; Part Five (Session 5) after Chapter Twenty-Two. A twelve-week version simply takes two weeks per session, using the chapter prompts below.

Chapter prompts. One question per chapter, for groups moving slowly: [To be drafted with Terry — one line per chapter, 24 total.]

Key resources:

- The Potluck Project toolkit (free): [\[link\]](#)
- Let's Go Together — the eat-serve-celebrate arc: [\[link\]](#)
- Paths to Understanding videos and blog: pathstounderstanding.org
- The national ecosystem: Better Together America, the Bridge Alliance, Braver Angels, Living Room Conversations, Thriving Together US — start at [\[link\]](#)

For facilitators: The Table Facilitator Guide from the Potluck Project covers guiding conversation, handling hard moments, and the “with, not for” checklist for service projects: [\[link\]](#)

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