



Aspiring to Be a No-Drop Church

The commitments and challenges of building community

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My friend Dave is an avid cyclist. He has repeatedly invited me to join him and his fellow aficionados for one of their Saturday sunrise rides through the streets of Detroit. A few weeks ago I finally accepted the challenge to join the crew for their thirty-mile trek. As Dave and I unloaded our bikes in the pre-dawn chill, I realized I had entered a different world. The other sixteen guys and one woman could all have been REI catalog models with their finely tuned bikes, sleek helmets with mounted head lamps, matching cycling

tights, and reflective jackets. And then there was me—with an old windbreaker I had dug out of the basement and my running shorts.

I told Dave I was more than a little bit nervous. “I don’t know if I’m going to be able to hang with you guys,” I confessed.

“Don’t worry,” he responded reassuringly. “It’s a no-drop ride.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means nobody gets dropped, or left behind. Everybody we start with, we finish with. The whole crew is great about helping

people out with mechanical failures or waiting for others to catch up.”

My fears of being lost in an abandoned industrial district by the waterfront laid to rest, for the next three hours and through the post-ride breakfast I had the immense privilege of being part of a no-drop community. At every preplanned stop along the way, our leader Andy paused to count the riders, making sure all seventeen of us were accounted for and enjoying the communal urban exercise.

That morning I felt a greater sense of connection and safety with a group of perfect strangers for a few hours than I’ve felt in many of my church circle experiences over the years. Isn’t the no-drop community what many of our churches advertise, or at least aspire to? Just scroll through your average evangelical church website and count the number of times words like “family,” “connection,” “life together,” “small groups,” “home groups,” “group life,” and “life groups” appear.

To be sure, such an emphasis on biblical community is theologically sound and historically valid. Authors from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Life Together*) to Richard Foster (*Celebration of Discipline*) recognize the importance of Christ-followers coming together to break bread, engage in mutual confession and encouragement, and unite in moments of celebration and worship.

And yet. While I readily concede the value of biblical community, part of me still struggles to define it. Everybody seems to both celebrate and demand the existence of community. Yet few of us are able to articulate what it is supposed to look like and how it can be achieved. I have heard people in megachurches complain about the lack of community in their space, and I have heard similar sentiments from people in smaller, more intimate churches. The default argument in megachurches seems to be that the quality of true community is inversely proportionate to the size of a church’s membership, but in my experience that’s a stereotype. While I might know more people’s names in a smaller congregation, it doesn’t always mean I know more about them or vice versa. Being on staff at a large church myself, I often hear people say, “You can find community here, you just have to work for it.” Maybe a better way to phrase it

would be: “You can create community wherever you choose to work for it.” Community is a home we must build on purpose, not something we happen to stumble across.

To be honest, though, I’m not always sure I want to work for it. It is tempting to romanticize potluck dinners in fellowship halls and the idea of “authentic” relationships between four couples meeting weekly in a living room. Both scenarios paint Rockwell-esque pictures of joy, honesty, and support.

I think we cling to those images because many of us, including me, expect a plug-and-play community. I want community to pre-exist at the church I attend, and I want it to automatically accommodate my quirks, my life stage, my family dynamics, and my scheduling demands. In my ideal community I easily and readily identify with everyone there, and we all share the

same interests and views. It’s really a “just add me” sort of dynamic. In short, our pursuit of community tends to be oddly individualistic. It must exist on our terms and serve our pleasure. Perhaps our definition of community is so obscure that it allows us to continue our quixotic pursuit of it without doing the work to create true covenant relationships with others.

The Inconvenience of Community

The challenge then, is to move from being consumers of community into genuine covenant relationships, with an eye toward long-term engagement. I’m often tempted to settle for low-risk interactions with church acquaintances I’ve discovered through incidental contact—a local service project, a volunteer team, or a retreat. These are often great beginnings that I don’t always develop into stronger relationships. It could be that I’m overly guarded with my private life and my discretionary time. It’s also possible that I’m too results-oriented—and because quality relationships take

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time and effort, it's difficult for me to tell if they're "working." Regardless, I've always been the worst pastor I know at fostering relationships at this interpersonal level. Truth be told, it's much safer to share vulnerable details of my life standing behind a pulpit than sitting in someone's living room. But I am having a kind of awakening in regard to body life as it's outlined in the Scriptures.

In fact, it's far easier to be utilitarian when it comes to church friendships. Those people who encourage me, sharpen me, and like me are easy for me to serve and like in return. Those who do not—those who are opinionated or annoying or negative—are easier to ignore. I confess, I'm far too quick to jettison relationships that aren't working for me at the moment.

Recently I was working through 1 Corinthians, and this passage began to haunt me: "But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" (12:18-21, TNIV).

When I'm prone to hard-heartedness, I reserve the right to abandon connections I don't desire. If, however, I want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, I must recognize that isn't an option God offers me. Not only has God ordained my proximity to people I don't particularly like, but God also declares that I need them and they need me too. In true biblical community, to sever ties with another person is to dismember the body of Christ.

So there it is. If I don't get to choose my community—if God chooses it for me—how should I seek to engage the people who can't leave me and whom I am not to leave?

The Challenge of Rejoicing

A few verses that capture the ethos of covenant relationships come to mind. In Romans Paul calls us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior" (12:15-16, TNIV).

Most of us probably fare pretty well when it comes to mourning with others. Those with any empathy at all are able to rally around friends and acquaintances in a time of loss. When you experience tangible expressions of support from others in the midst of your grief, you know its power and you are able to do the same for others when their time comes.

It's in the rejoicing that I struggle. I might be fine at graduations, baseball victories, and birthday parties—the socially acceptable formats for cheering others on. But, perhaps due to my failure to consistently nurture gratitude in my life, I often choke on words that echo another's cheer.

Just this week my neighbor informed me he was in the process of moving to his brand-new dream house. Due to the abysmal housing market in Detroit (and the recognition that it may be a good decade before my family of six will be able to relocate from our humble abode), I feigned mild enthusiasm. There's no hiding that I stopped well short of rejoicing with him, which is tragic given the fact that his family has faced all sorts of heartache in the last five years. The fact that one of their dreams is coming true in the wake of all their nightmares warrants honest, unbridled support.

Maybe it's because for me of all the spiritual qualities Paul lists in Galatians 5, joy can be the hardest to cultivate. And yet, when I'm asking God for joy—or combating its assail-

ants (fear, anger, greed)—I find myself running a surplus. When I'm walking in joy myself, I tend to have cheer to spare, and share.

So my covenant challenge to myself is to look for reasons to celebrate with the people God has put into my life.

Choosing Restoration over Condemnation

"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Galatians 5:25-26, TNIV).

Empathy, or the ability to enter into another's pain or exuberance, is a noble value. For many, it's instinctive, and such recognition of our shared humanity comes naturally. The next value of covenant relationship, however, does not. Listen to the exhortation in Galatians 6:1-3: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If any of you think you are something when you are nothing, you deceive yourselves" (TNIV).

Tragically, religious institutions throughout history have put a greater value on the first part of verse 1 ("someone...caught in a sin"), than on the latter ("restore that person gently"). Well-meaning believers, in their effort to maintain the purity of the church, have sought to publicly expose the misdeeds of others in their midst. So the pattern often becomes catch, expose, and expel, when the true thrust of the passage is identify missteps and gently restore the individual to the community, actions initiated by those who are "living by the Spirit."

Paul's intent here is clearly not to

establish covenant communities as police states, where we constantly examine each other's lives for mistakes. Rather, the hope is that we would learn to "live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit together." When a community is regularly modeling the attributes of love and joy, loyalty and gentleness, peace and goodness, it would seem that someone living at odds with these values wouldn't want, or be able, to do so for very long. If the covenant community ethos is pursuing humility, service, and encouragement, an environment is created in which people are free to struggle and to be candid about their temptations and their failures.

Nobody has shown me this kind of community quite like my friends who are in recovery. They teach me a lot about restoration. For many, the battle for sobriety goes in fits and starts—weeks and months of victories, a devastating relapse, and the slow start toward health again. Yet when "sin" occurs in this context, sponsors know that gently restoring a person to the process is key for a sustained recovery. Therefore, it's the job of the covenant partner to initiate the restoration of someone who has wandered away. In so doing, we shoulder the burden that another cannot carry alone.

Only those who are in touch with their own brokenness can effectively invite one discovered in sin back to the table. It's as if Paul links the healing of others to our own humility. Only when I'm attuned to my own shortcomings can I assist another in reassembling the shattered pieces of life in the wake of moral failure. The covenant networks that nurse spiritual rebels back to health can do so because each member recognizes his or her "nothingness." *Somebodies*—people of stature and influ-

ence—like to power up on the failing. A group committed to truth telling and gentle, but firm, restoration could be described as a team of excellent nobodies.

Protecting with Love

While empathy and restoration are critical components of covenant relationship, we can never overlook the simplicity of the protective love Peter mentions: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:8-10, TNIV).

A love that covers another's weakness allows those who feel shame or inadequacy to melt into the group, which defends them at their vulnerable moments. I was recently captivated by National Geographic's *Great Migrations* special. The narrator noted that one of the zebra's defensive mechanisms is its stripes—when it stands amongst the pack, predators cannot distinguish one animal from another, but rather they are confronted by a blur of vertical lines. Hungry lions are so confused by the jumble of stripes that they move on to simpler quarry.

Is there any greater love than a group leveraging their collective compassion to cover over an individual member's flaw? Several years ago some friends of mine and I (all single and in our early twenties at the time) were planning an evening out. The first stop of the evening was to pick up a part of the group at their apartment. As a few of us were waiting in the driveway by the car, some flirting ensued between Josh and Eileen. I'll

never forget Eileen running around the back of the car, without seeing that the driver's side door was open. Sure enough, the top corner of the steel door caught her square in the forehead, and a small trickle of blood came down the center of her face. In more embarrassment than actual physical pain, she retreated to the apartment, inconsolable.

The wound was covered with a small Band-Aid, but Eileen was mortified by the idea of wearing it so prominently in public. After a moment Josh commandeered the box of Band-Aids and distributed one to every person in the group. When

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Eileen emerged, she witnessed his ingenious solution: every single one of us was sporting a Band-Aid on the center of our foreheads. While none of us was able to heal her wound, we were able to "cover over" her embarrassment by collectively absorbing it. It was a night filled with joy, laughter, and silliness.

I didn't realize it at the time, but that night—like my recent bike excursion—was an excellent example of a "no-drop" community. The commitment to start together, journey together, and finish together means no one gets left behind. True, it's not always easy. It can take a lot longer to get things done and you may end up wasting a whole box of Band-Aids on insignificant wounds, but these are small prices to pay for the deep joy of traveling the road of life with the people to whom you are committed and connected. ■