

The Problem of Community

Acts 29 Bootcamp | Jonathan Dodson | 9/15/09

The State of American Community

Community is something we all long for, but rarely find. Not too long ago I was talking to a woman in her 50s about her life. She shared that had lived in her city for about 20 years and that she owned a pub. Cheers came to mind. Where everybody knows your name, right? Curious about her experience of community from being a pub owner and living in one spot for 20 years, I asked her what her community was like. She looked back at me with a blank stare. You know, after living there so long, do you have a sense of community, a network of friendships, people you can turn to. Sadly, she could only name a few friends, and even those weren't loyal. After 20 years in a city, as a pub owner, she had no sense of community, but she longed for it. She was considering moving to find it. **Community is easily idealized but difficult to cultivate.** So what is community? Sociologists have debated the definition of community for decades, but at its core ***community is a group of interacting people living in a common location.*** Sociologist Robert Putnam traces the decline of community in the United States in his book *Bowling Alone*. Here's what he discovered.

- Over the past 25 years, attendance at *club meetings* has fallen 58 percent
- *Family dinners* are down 33 percent
- Having *friends visit* has fallen 45 percent.

If you are finding community difficult or not finding it all, you are not alone! But what about all the coffee shops, bars, and social networking sites? Starbucks, The Gingerman, and Facebook? My kids create more community in 15 minutes in the Chickfila Playground than these places. Perhaps you've noticed that, more often than not, these social "third places" are not hopping with social interaction. Customers typically hang out by themselves, with their iPods, or sometimes in a pair—far cry from "**groups of interacting people.**" Because we are inherently relational creatures cut from the cloth of a relational God—Father, Son, and Spirit. Augustine referred to Them as the Lover, Beloved, and Love. A Divine Community. Genesis 1 tells us we were made in the image of the Divine Community, but it also reminds us that we have distorted that image. Jesus died to restore that image. So the Church, of all people, should get community. But do we? Are we known for community, for being loving groups of interacting people? Few are. Some churches have awful community. In others it is wonderful. What makes the difference? The way we approach community.

Austin City Life Approach to Community

Our Way Isn't Everyone's Way; Describe Austin Context

Core Team: CP Shift

- Traditional Launch Team vs. Organic Core Team
 - Timeline vs. Health
 - Vision Casts vs. Missional Community – Homecooked to Potluck
 - Strategy Meetings vs. Missional Community – Brinkley joined us on mission

- Temporary Covenant vs. Missional Community
- Core Team Objection: Geoff Whitmore
- Launch Dissolves, Organic Core Remains

City Groups – describe, numbers, percentages

- Steady State Community vs. Two Events
- Technology and Community
- Training CG leaders
 - Community Focused Gospel
 - Community is Best Context for Change
- Unbelievers Join CGs: Converted to Community
 - 1 CG half nonXns
 - Lance and Nate
 - Patrick and Mary
 - Wheels and Melissa
 - Almost all CGs have had this
- Steady State Community w. NonXns

Sundays

- City Group Spotlight
- Preaching
- Church Calendar
- Impervious Membrane of Love

Fight Clubs – deep community and personal transformation.

- Haydn

Solution to Community: Gospel or Mission?

What we need is a new ecclesiology. I argue that from experience and from **Sociology**. We need something more than “groups of interacting people.” Well, interestingly, Putnam agrees. After publishing *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam came back and wrote [Better Together](#) a follow-up study of successful communities, communities with high social capital, where community flourished. And in his study he identified 6 Common Factors among communities with strong social ties. Here’s a key one: *have a goal besides community*. Putnam says that in order to develop strong community, the community must develop: “*the pursuit of a goal other than the sake (goal) of community*.” In other words, you can’t fix community with community. The small group movement is witness to this. What happens with small groups? They become ingrown and don’t grow out. They reinforce the Us/Them mentality, ostracizing people who are new to the church and new to the faith. Community will not fix community! What we do with “community church” is raise the problem of the community, and try to solve it with the solution of community. We’ve made community the problem *and* the solution. But you see, the problem isn’t really community. Putnam comes along and tells us that wherever there is strong community, that community exists for something other than itself. And his study includes

churches. What could that something be? What is the goal, other than community, that the church could have? Mission? **Mission attracted nonXns into ACL, and continues to.** I can't tell you how many times people say they visited a Sunday gathering or City Group because we had a reputation for caring about our city. And the stick...until something goes south. When people are hurt, MISSION doesn't keep them around. The Gospel does.

What if we existed not for ourselves (community) but for others (mission)? Missional Church! Missional Church folk argue that community is created in the wake of mission. If we will all just get on mission, relationships will strengthen. Social capital will go up. If we get out of the living room, out of the church building, and serve our cities, our neighborhoods *together*, then we will get community. Community is created around mission. Missional Church people say, see you've been raising the wrong problem all along. You've been raising the problem of Community when you should have been raising the Problem of Mission. So what do we do? We get on Mission. How do we get on Mission? Let's get practical. We plant "missional" "churches". What's a church? A community. What's a missional church? A community on mission. We start creating them. How do we create them? We plant churches not services, communities not events.

The goal isn't to launch a service/church. It is to cultivate a missional community. To birth a new community. Takes 9 months for real babies. It's slow, organic but intentional and missional. You don't abort the baby once you have the service! You don't dissolve the people of God from their responsibilities of being the church just because you have a service. The mission isn't over its just begun! You continue to be a community (on mission), sharing life, truth, and mission with Christians and nonChristians. As your church grows on mission, it becomes a community that is unified around the common goal of mission, social and spiritual renewal in your city or town. Christians and non-Christians share a common purpose other than making one another feel good, welcome, and connected. Instead, you exist for the good of the city. This becomes a great apologetic for the gospel. People are drawn to it, to a community that exists for the good of others. A loving, self-denying, city-serving community. And you end up with a church that is filled with both Christians and nonChristians, which keeps the Christians honest in their mission and moves nonChristians toward conversion and mission. Most of the nonChristians in our church are a part, not because of our great Sunday service, our location in a bar on 6th street, our culture-engaging preaching. Most of them are part of ACL because they met someone, some people in a missional community. So, have we found the solution to the problem of community in Missional Church? Is the solution to the problem of community to actually replace community with mission, to raise the problem of mission? Is missional church the silver bullet, the cure-all for community? Should we all just repent of our small groups and form missional communities? While I think mission is incredibly important, I do not think it is the solution to the problem of community. Missional community is not the solution. *We need to raise the problem of mission, and solve it with the solution of **the gospel** in the context of community. Why? Because without the gospel, mission and community become the new idol.*

Gospel-centered Church

Mission Idol: When we plant missional churches, one of two things happens. People idolize or become indifferent to mission. The people who idolize mission begin to measure their worth by

how missional they are. Their knowledge of non-profits, their activism in their neighborhood, their number of non-Christian friends.

Community Idol: When we plant community churches, people idolize community begin to measure their security based on how connected they are to others. But what happens when their community fails them? When the small group, launch team sins against them? Cynicism. Bitterness. Gossip. When community is your god it will either beat you or exile you. When the acceptance and love of others is uppermost, we are destined for a downward spiral. When community is our god, it offers very little resources to work through the problems of a sinful, immoral community. The Community God is worshipped for what it can give, not because it forgives. See, community is a bad master; it kicks you when you are down. But Jesus doesn't kick you when you're down; he dies for you. He forgives you. He gives you grace. He reminds you of the gospel, leading communities to repentances from sin and trust in their Savior. Gospel-centered churches lift Jesus up, and when they do, community rises with Him.

Gospel Central: What we need, is not missional churches, community churches, but a gospel-centered churches! Churches gathered around Jesus, not mission or one another. We need to orbit around the supremacy and beauty of Jesus Christ, not the strength of our mission and community. We need to idolize King Jesus, not social action or relationships. Only a church with the gospel at its center, not community or mission, has the resources to address our idolatries. The gospel comes into our hearts and exposes our idols. It shows us that our idealization and cynicism of community are a direct result of worshipping at the feet of people, relationships, community. The gospel comes to us and exposes our idolatry of mission, of worshipping at the altar of missional church. It exposes our new legalism, our proclivity to measure our worth by our witness. Our significance by our social action. Our coolness by our willingness to hang out in worldly places. When we make mission central; we make it an idol. The solution to community is not mission; it is the gospel. We need to raise the problem of mission, solve it with the solution of the gospel, in the context of community.

- Imperfect people clinging to a perfect Christ
- Gospel Repentance
- Train our CGs to apply the gospel to everyday life.