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COMMUNITY
TAKING YOUR SMALL GROUP OFF LIFE SUPPORT

BRAD HOUSE
FOREWORD BY MARK DRISCOLL

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WHEATON, ILLINOIS

As you begin to pray about how your group can be more effective in reaching your neighborhood, consider what barriers exist and how existing in different spaces can help bridge those barriers. In the next chapter we will look at how that changes the day-to-day rhythms of community.



7

RHYTHMS

NEW WINESKINS

We have all been there. Six o'clock on Tuesday evening, sitting in an awkward circle in the living room, trying to think of something clever but not too revealing to say. Jane starts in with an icebreaker: "If you were a piece of fruit, what fruit would you be?" You can't wait for this to end. Thankfully your group leader turns the group's attention to some question from last Sunday's sermon. "Do you agree with what Pastor Jim said about Jesus?" Crickets. As you try to avoid eye contact, your mind wanders to the work you could be catching up on. When the evening finally ends, you feel a sense of relief and accomplishment that you have carried your cross another week. You are excited that you won't have to do that for another seven days, although you do feel a twinge of guilt that you won't fulfill your promise to the leader that you will invite a friend because, truth be told, you would be embarrassed to bring a nonbeliever into this community.

This is not transformational community. Somewhere along the way we equated this with what it means to be a small group and have adopted these rhythms without any thought. We have passively sucked the joy, life, and sanctification out of community. We can experience more.

By now you have probably picked up on the idea that I am not a huge fan of awkward small groups. Community should be a source of life, as we discussed in chapter 4, and we want to breathe life

back into community groups. We have spent some time discussing how understanding the gospel and its implications for community can address heart issues. Having our minds renewed by the Word of God with regard to community is the first step to reviving it in our churches. Now it is time for some new wineskins.

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed."¹ In the same way, if we try to cram the ideas we have talked about in the previous chapters into our traditional view of doing community, then something is going to break. In this chapter we need to break through some of the basic assumptions that define a community group. If we are going to pour the new wine of the gospel lived out in community—expressed in worship to God, community to one another, and mission to the lost—then we need new wineskins.

Rhythms are the wineskin of community. An event once a week cannot contain gospel-centered community on mission with God. If we are going to breathe life into community, we must rethink how we practically live life together.

CULTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

During a recent conference a leader asked me how his group would ever reach the people in their neighborhood when they didn't have enough time each week to address the struggles in their group. This question is excellent. It reveals the common distortion that community should be inward focused and the struggle of a group to look up from their own navels. The picture was becoming clear to this leader. Gospel-centered community would take more than a two-hour event once a week.

This type of community requires a complete rethinking of how we see our participation in a community group. What if your community group was a people rather than an event? When I think of the people I love and enjoy being around, I start to dream of opportunities to be with them. The body of Christ should be like that. This doesn't mean that we don't have events within a community group.



It simply means that we define our group by the people and relationships in it rather than the events themselves.

An event-based community is one that predominantly sees the event once a week as their community group. It defines a community as a time and place. Opportunity-based community is the idea that we are always a community group whether we are together or apart. Each morning I have breakfast with my family, and we read the Bible and pray. Afterward, I kiss my wife and kids and go to work for the next nine hours or so. I come home after work, and we eat dinner and spend the evening together. At what point am I a part of the family and at what point am I not? Being a part of my family is part of my identity and affects the way I live when we are together or apart. I think about them when we are not together, and I can't wait to be with them again. I think about ways to bless them and how I can share my experiences with them throughout my day. That is how a community group with a lifestyle perspective of community functions. When we are part of such a community, we are always on the lookout for opportunities to include one another in common moments of life. If we can create a culture of opportunity, then we can change the way we think about community within the church.

One of the keys to developing opportunity-based community is shepherding your group to be self-organizing. One mistake that leaders often make is that they feel obligated to attend or plan every event. Not only will this fry a leader, but it also makes it difficult for members of the group to develop any sense of ownership. A leader may have to get the ball rolling, but once a group experiences authentic community, it can begin a perpetual rhythm of natural community.

When a community group becomes opportunity based, countless possibilities open up. Everything becomes an opportunity to worship, serve one another, or share the gospel. Taking my family out for pancakes on a Saturday morning becomes an opportunity to invite another family that we want to get to know and encourage. Garage sales become a time for fellowship. When going to the store, we think of one another and pick up an extra gallon of milk. We help build fences and paint houses. We live as a community.



A NEW RHYTHM

Breaking free from an event-focused view of community is not that easy. Most of our small group experiences have been event-based Bible studies or something similar. In order to break such patterns, we must begin by reimagining the basic rhythms of community.

Rhythms can be defined as the when, where, and what of the community. For our discussion we will call them the *time*, *scene*, and *substance* of a community group. For example, the canonical event-based community group meets at 7:00 p.m. every Tuesday night (when/time), in the leader's living room (where/scene), for a Bible study (what/substance). This becomes the rhythm of the group. On Tuesdays we are a community, and the rest of the week we are living our lives individually.

When these rhythms are rigid and finite, a community group will remain event based. Rigid group rhythms often produce inauthentic and labored groups. Challenging these rhythms is the beginning of reinventing your community group.

I want leaders to constantly ask questions about why they do things. Why do we meet at this time? Why do we meet in this place? Why do we do this when we get together? Does this give life? As we ask these questions and realize that community can be more than once a week, we are on our way to living, breathing community groups.

As we answer these questions, however, the goal is not simply to live life together more. The goal is to be inspired by the death and resurrection of Jesus to live differently. We want to offer more opportunities because we love our brothers and sisters and we have an urgency to share the love of Christ with our neighbors. Don't settle for a new system. If we want to effect change in the lives of our neighbors, we must be willing to be destroyed and rebuilt by the gospel. The questions of time, scene, and substance are questions about how we can be the gospel to one another in community.

TIME

Time may be the most valuable commodity in our culture today. With the speed of information and the demands of work and home,



we are running out of time. There is competition for every minute of our days. Yet, contrary to popular sentiment, we are not victims of time. The majority of time-oriented barriers to community are self-imposed. We do have a choice in how we spend our time. We are enslaved to obligations that are only enforced by our own expectations and choices.

These choices are a reflection of our priorities. If we took the average household and assessed their priorities by the use of their time, most of us would be embarrassed. Where would God rank in relationship to entertainment or recreation? Where does community rank on your list of priorities? A transformational community is one that puts a premium on people. It is a community that has been laid bare by the penetrating truths of God's Word and his lavish grace, and its members are desperate to share that grace with others.

As we think about the rhythm of time within our community groups, we need to shepherd one another to a redeemed view of time and our priorities while understanding the cultural barriers regarding time. In other words, we need to be able to find a balance between considering our demands on time and providing opportunities to align our use of time with our gospel-centered priorities.

In terms of considering the demands of time, we need to be intentional about the when, how long, and how often we gather as a community. We must understand how our choices create barriers or build bridges. Traditional small groups are one-dimensional in their use of time, often meeting once a week for two to three hours. This can be a burden for the host of the group and exhausting for its members week after week. Could we achieve the same objectives—and be more life giving—by meeting for less time more frequently? Providing multiple opportunities that are optional rather than obligatory gives each member of the community, as well as potential guests, a chance to make decisions regarding their time.

So, think about the current barriers your group faces regarding time, and don't be afraid to make changes to your group's rhythms. Take children, for example. If a community group is in a neighborhood with lots of families, then the times when it meets should

reflect the natural rhythms of families. Having groups who begin at 7:00 p.m. on a weekday and get done at 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. is going to be a barrier for families. Weekends, however, may be much more attractive to families for group gatherings than they would be to single folks.

Another consideration related to time is the duration of gatherings. Again, traditional groups generally meet once a week for two to three hours. That may be a burden for some folks in your group or those who have never been part of a church small group. If you want a helpful perspective on this, ask the hosts of your group. They should have a good vantage point on the demands of long groups on themselves and guests. It may be more natural and more inviting to have more opportunities of shorter duration than one long meeting a week.

After all, if community is truly a lifestyle, then it will not be relegated to one night a week. This does not mean that every opportunity is mandatory or obligatory. Rather, you use your time intentionally to be a part of the community. For example, attending a church service together is an opportunity for a rhythm that takes no additional time but provides a chance to worship together as a community. I am always surprised at how many community groups don't take advantage of this opportunity. It costs nothing in terms of time, yet is a great way to reinforce a sense of belonging to one another. But we will talk more about this later.

As we consider the idea of new wineskins, we can begin to open our eyes to the new possibilities with regard to time. Groups do not always have to meet on Tuesday nights. They could gather in the morning, during the day, or even on weekends. You have the freedom to build your group rhythms in any way that facilitates the making of disciples and accomplishing the mission of God.

As a community group pastor, I have heard every excuse for why people just can't commit to being in community. By far the most often repeated excuse is that they just don't have the time. Every time I hear that excuse, I think of a conversation that had a profound effect on me and stirred me to a holy discontent for the church.

Last year a colleague of mine, who was overseeing the youth ministry at the time, came to me with an exciting opportunity for engaging culture near our campus. While scouting a location at a local park for a picnic event, he was approached by some young men. They were eager to find out if my friend and his companions were at the park to play Ultimate Frisbee. After discovering that they were not, they invited them to join anyway. Having an agenda for the day, my colleague gracefully declined, and the young men continued to walk the park to find more players and gather any newcomers to their game. After a few minutes of scouting, the guys returned to my friend to make sure they knew they were welcome to play. After all, just because they didn't come intending to play, they were at the park now, and the group had plenty of room for some new players. As they talked, the Frisbee players explained how their group meets at the park twice a week, every week, to play Ultimate and hang out afterwards. They had been doing this for several years and are always meeting new people to draw into their community from stragglers in the park.

I found this fascinating. I was excited that the youth leader understood the concept of participating in these types of events instead of creating our own "church version." This is precisely what it means to engage the culture and build relationships so that we can show the love of Christ in our community. This was a perfect opportunity to put these ideas into practice.

But something hung with me from the description of his encounter that I couldn't shake—it was the zeal of those Frisbee guys. They had real passion and commitment. I mean, this was just a plastic Frisbee, yet these guys were willing to proselytize complete strangers proclaiming the glory of their game and the joy of their community built around it. Are you kidding me? In his book *The Shape of Faith to Come*, Brad Waggoner asked 2,500 churchgoers if they had shared the gospel with someone in the last six months, and 1,425 had not. Only 725 had done so more than once.² I was floored. It brought me to tears to think that these young men had more passion and excitement for a Frisbee than we do for the Savior of the world.

Common wisdom among church leaders is that in today's world you cannot expect your people to participate more than twice a week in church activities. That is to say that if you have a Sunday service, you should only expect participation in one more event, such as mid-week programming or a small group. People won't give more time in today's busy world. Yet here was a group of people willing to come together in community around a plastic disc twice a week for years. It put me to shame. It put the church to shame.

I am often confronted with the claim that a person is not active in the church community because of a lack of time. "I just don't have time right now. . . . Maybe in the next season of life." What a crock. The issue is not, and never will be, time. The issue is our desire. When our community gives us life, we will always find time for it. We will change our schedules to accommodate it, and we will want others to experience it. We must find out what is strangling the life out of our communities and begin to live in community in such a way that it brings glory to Jesus and transforms lives. When the glory of Jesus inspires passion and zeal, we will be surprised at how much time we find.

SCENE

In terms of community rhythms, the scene is simply the location and atmosphere of where you gather as a community. Considerations of scene are very important. The aesthetics of a space can have a significant impact on the dynamics of a group. In an article in *Scientific American Mind*, Emily Anthes explored the importance of space and creativity. Below is an excerpt:

In the 1950s prizewinning biologist and doctor Jonas Salk was working on a cure for polio in a dark basement laboratory in Pittsburgh. Progress was slow, so to clear his head, Salk traveled to Assisi, Italy, where he spent time in a 13th-century monastery, ambling amid its columns and cloistered courtyards. Suddenly, Salk found himself awash in new insights, including the one that would lead to his successful polio vaccine. Salk was convinced he had drawn his inspiration from the contemplative setting. He came to believe so strongly in architecture's ability to influence the

mind that he teamed up with renowned architect Louis Kahn to build the Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., as a scientific facility that would stimulate breakthroughs and encourage creativity.³

This should not be a surprise. As image bearers of God, we are naturally inclined to recognize beauty around us, emanating from the Creator, that inspires us to our own creativity. Thus, we should be intentional about where we meet. Not only should we consider the aesthetics of a space that make it warm and inviting, we also need to consider whether the location is a bridge builder or a barrier.

The majority of community groups that I run across meet exclusively in homes. It may come as a surprise to most church people who are conditioned to this experience, but someone's home is a very intimate location. Going into the home of someone you don't know can be very intimidating for the average person. Add to that the fact that they are going into a group of people who know each other well, and that creates a tremendous energy barrier for someone to overcome.

Building rhythms that take us into different locations with lower energy barriers will transform a community group from a navel-gazing community to one that is engaging the neighborhood around it. When community is a people and not an event, you can gather in parks, pubs, baseball games, yards, coffee shops, apartment courtyards, and so on. You can alter the scene of your group to better encourage worship, community, and mission. Take the time to think about how you could adjust your rhythms to expand the scene where you gather as a community.

SUBSTANCE

The idea of substance is tied closely with the spaces that we talked about in the previous chapter. Substance is the content of a particular discussion or gathering. Some leaders feel as though every time a group gathers it must be a soul-exposing hunt for idols in our hearts. These leaders often have the spiritual gift of rebuke. Confession and repentance are hallmarks of a Christ-centered community, but that doesn't mean that every gathering is the appropriate time for a throw

down. Groups who always swim in the deep end make it hard to integrate new people into the group, especially nonbelievers.

On the other hand, some leaders are all about hanging out and small talk. They define fellowship as having fun and ignore the need to be confronted by the gospel. Most of us have experienced this type of group. We call these “nacho groups” because they just sit around eating nachos for an hour and never open their hearts to one another. Groups who spend all their time in the shallow end never experience transformation. Many people in our churches have given up on community because our promise of transformation elevated their expectations and they were met with nachos.

As we lead our groups, we need to understand what content is appropriate for a particular time and place. Leaders should be shepherding their groups to comprehend the importance of understanding the right substance for a particular gathering. If we look at the spaces in which our groups exist, we can see how substance works.

PARTICIPATION

In the space of participation, our goal is to build relationships with our neighbors. We want to genuinely hear their stories and get to know them as individuals. This is not the right time for *The Four Spiritual Laws*.⁴ Pursuing relationships will provide opportunities for sharing the gospel, but this is usually not the right time or place. Relationships are fledgling at this point. Without a real relationship, you have no voice to speak into someone’s life. Keep the substance of this space light until the relationship warrants a deeper conversation.

SERVICE

This space is about serving and blessing our neighbors. Rolling out a gospel presentation in the middle will feel like a bait and switch. Allow this space to be a physical presentation of the gospel as you share the love of Christ through service. Like participation, this space allows us to build relationships and grow in our genuine love for our lost neighbors. Questions about why we are serving the neighborhood will provide ample opportunity to develop deeper conversations.

HOSPITALITY

Intimacy is increasing as we get to the hospitality space. You know that relationships are growing if someone accepts an invitation into your space that allows for deeper questions about one’s story and yours. Hospitality events should be considered light affairs, but they provide more opportunities to go deeper through smaller conversations.

FELLOWSHIP

Because fellowship is our deepest and most intimate space, it opens the door for deeper substance and discussion. Our relationships allow us to be vulnerable and transparent with one another. Because we have built relationships over increasing levels and depths of intimacy, we can feel safe sharing even the dark areas of our lives. When we pay attention to the appropriate levels of intimacy, opportunities arise for nonbelievers to share their lives openly, which in turn allows you to share the hope of the gospel. This doesn’t mean that every fellowship gathering requires Kleenex tissue, but it does mean that this is the space for deeper conversation. The point of each of the spaces is that there are varied degrees of depth, and a healthy group should experience a variety of depth and substance. Scripture tells us that we are to “rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”⁵ Some times of deep fellowship will be fun and occasions to party. Others will be times of trial and sorrow as we walk with one another through the consequences of sin and the fall. Healthy communities must be willing to walk through both times together.

One mistake that some groups fall into is the belief that one is better than the other. Some groups are so concerned with appearing as though they have it all together that they are unwilling to dive deeply into each other’s lives for fear that they may get dirty. These groups ignore the reality of life under the curse. By doing this, they provide no opportunity for redemption in people’s lives. If we cannot expose our sin to the light, then we have no way of letting brothers and sisters speak the gospel into our lives where it counts.

The other extreme is the community that never comes up for air.

We cannot assume that we have not had a spiritual experience just because no one broke down weeping. These groups ignore the reality of *Christus Victor*, that Jesus has conquered Satan, sin, and death. These groups need to celebrate the resurrection and Christ's victory.⁶

As a leader, you will need to think about the tendencies of your group to traffic in particular levels of substance and shepherd them toward different experiences that are still saturated with the gospel. This will broaden their understanding of the gospel and God's grace, and will lead to a healthier, more missional community.

HEARING THE BEAT

Now that we understand a little more about the rhythms of community and are ready to try something new, we have to ask what new rhythms we ought to try. Part of owning the mission as a community group leader is becoming a student of our neighborhood. When we do this, we start to observe the natural rhythms of the culture. We can then incorporate some of those rhythms into the rhythms of our community group in order to reduce barriers and build bridges to our neighbors.

Seattle is home to the Boeing Company. Boeing is a significant employer for several neighborhoods in the north and south ends of Seattle. One of the rhythms that a community group in those neighborhoods must contend with is the work schedule for Boeing employees. To offset their schedule with traffic patterns, the typical manufacturing shift is from 6:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. rather than from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. A typical 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. group would effectively eliminate the majority of families in that neighborhood. They are on a different rhythm and need to be in bed by nine to get up the next day for work. A group that observes this rhythm, however, can adjust the times when they gather to match the rhythms of that neighborhood.

As we discussed before, the idea is to be intentional and ask why we do the things we do. What are the natural rhythms in your neighborhood, and how can you begin to harmonize with them? Can you hear the beat of your neighborhood?

Everyone has a story about why it is hard to hear the neighbor-

hood rhythms, but the reality is that very few are actually looking and listening. We are not accustomed to paying attention. The motivation to do so must again come from our love of Jesus and recognition of his grace to us. When we are aware of this, we can get pretty excited about paying attention.

Practically, to hear the beat of your community you need be in it, walking it and talking to people. Baristas, mailmen, bartenders, and store clerks are all observers of life in your neighborhood whom you see every day and probably never ask more than an obligatory, "How are you?" If you want to get to know the vibe and the rhythms of your group, ask more questions of these folks. They have a wealth of social knowledge.

If you want to build a community group that leaves a lasting gospel effect on your neighborhood, you need to make it your goal to know as much about your neighborhood as you can. If community is happening, then you should be a part of it. Join neighborhood associations and community centers. Spend twenty minutes in front of the community bulletin board and take note of the types of activities that are happening in the community. Subscribe to community newsletters and blogs. Walk your neighborhood and pray that the Holy Spirit would help you see the rhythms of your community and the opportunities to build bridges. The best leaders become students of their mission field. As you become better at observing culture and rhythms, you will be more effective in reaching people for Jesus, and you will become better at shepherding your group to become healthier disciples of Christ.

PLAYING JAZZ

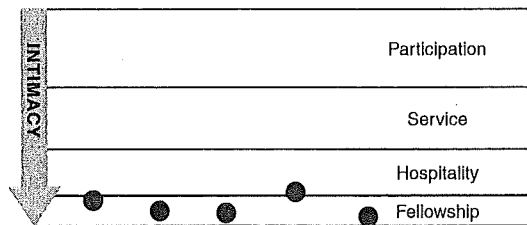
Once we have a good understanding of our community rhythms, barriers, and opportunities, we can start to put these ideas together. Spaces and rhythms work together to create a new way of experiencing community. As we move away from event-centered community, we don't want to create just a different set of rigid rhythms. Rather, we want to use these concepts to inform and teach us how to live more fluid and authentic lives together.

When we are living life together, walking in the Spirit, and dedicating our daily lives to the glory of Jesus, being a part of a community group feels like playing music. It is like playing jazz. Jazz has a good deal of structure that a musician works within, but it allows for amazing creativity and freedom. Once you understand the structure and the spaces you can play in, the music can flow naturally through the instrument.

In this metaphor, traditional event-based small groups are like a series of notes. The same note is played every week at the same time. It develops a pattern but it is by no means a song. We can hit the note every time and not make music.

To help illustrate this, let's take the diagram of spaces that we looked at in chapter 6 and stretch it into a continuum. We have the same spaces but they are on a timeline.

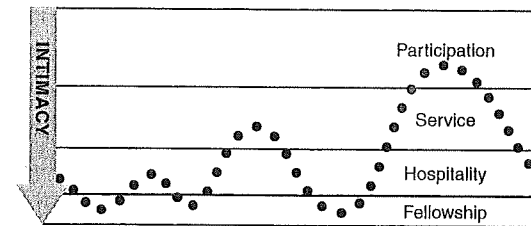
Spaces Continuum: Traditional Small Groups



A traditional group looks like a series of separate events. Without intentionality, they exist in a small span of space and never engage the culture around them. Not only are these groups not effective in advancing the kingdom to the lost, but also they are not effective at making disciples because they are never challenged in their faith and they never participate in mission. In such a community, people live separate lives that come together only for an event once a week.

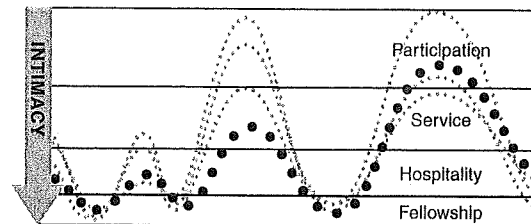
In the image below we see a picture of a group that has been intentional about providing opportunities to experience community in multiple spaces. Intentionality and a commitment to one another and the mission of God connect individual events into a rhythm of living life together. This is the goal of a gospel-saturated community group on mission.

Spaces Continuum: Community Groups



Using alternative rhythms with a gospel intentionality to reach their neighborhood, this community has begun to live life as a community rather than as individuals. Additionally, more opportunities increase the time we spend together as a group and encourage neighborhood involvement and relationships from every member.

Spaces Continuum: Harmonized Lives



As we begin to live life intentionally around us, as Tim Chester and Steve Timmis suggest in *Total Church*, our lives begin to harmonize.⁷ We begin to live in sync with our neighbors and each other.

WAFFLES FOR JESUS

Bill was convicted that although he had been a Christian for the past six years, the only way people knew that fact was by him telling them. Although his community group was dedicated to the Word and each other, it was not making an impact in their neighborhood. If they were to disappear, the only impact to the community would be the freed-up parking spaces on Tuesday nights.

Bill longed for something different, so he began to dream about how he could engage his neighbors. He thought about hosting a community barbeque, but after studying the neighborhood, that wasn't a

great idea. Bill lived in a culturally diverse neighborhood where several people ran eating establishments. A barbeque would compete against their livelihoods and most would be working at that time anyway.

Few people, however, worked on Sunday, and there was not an established breakfast location nearby. Bill got an idea. He and his wife began to make waffles on Sunday mornings for their neighbors. Not your "Leggo my Eggo" waffles but gourmet waffles. Imported ingredients made these waffles a must-have. And the only place you could get them was in Bill's kitchen.

The waffles were a hit. At first a few neighbors dropped by. As the rumors about these famous waffles began to spread, Bill and his wife began to see over a hundred neighbors come through their kitchen on Sunday mornings. Bill did not require people to listen to a gospel presentation to eat a waffle; he simply loved them as Jesus loved him, with no strings attached.

As this became a rhythm of Bill's community group, they began to develop relationships that opened doors to tell people how Jesus could change their lives as he had for them. This not only changed the lives of the neighbors who ate waffles, it changed the lives of the community group itself. As they served others and became concerned about their lives and stories, they began to see the mission through the eyes of Christ. They became missionaries in their own backyards. For some it was the first time that they had participated in the Great Commission, and it was life changing.

STARTING A NEW BEAT

Introducing new rhythms into a community group that has grooved some deep ruts will take conviction and patience. The best way to start is by redeeming wasted moments that can be opportunities for community. Take the Sunday service example that I mentioned earlier. Our cultural default is to attend church as an individual or with our families. At our church, we offer multiples services, and people from a community group can choose from several times to attend services on Sunday. What a group has in common, however, is that the majority of them will attend a service on Sunday. What if we redeemed this time for community? Worship, communion, and the hearing of the Word



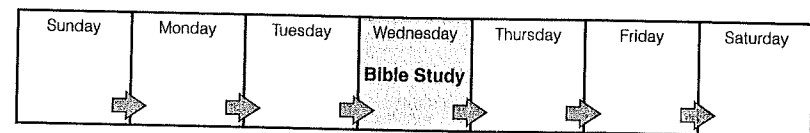
are not experiences for individuals. These are experiences for a community of believers. This is the picture we see in Acts 2.

Additionally, as we take communion, we are called to address sin within our community before we partake. Many or most of those offenses are going to occur within our community group. How then can we address these offenses if our community is spread out through four services during the day? Making Sunday an opportunity to gather as a community for worship addresses these concerns and doubles the amount of time we spend as a community without requiring any additional time from our schedule.

Another opportunity can be found in our eating habits. Studies show that the average American goes out to eat over four times a week.⁸ That's pretty amazing. How could you use that pattern to develop community? Establishing a standing reservation at a local eatery every Friday night can provide an opportunity to gather as a community at a social event that will fit into most people's natural rhythm of eating out. This not only allows us to gather as a community, but also provides a low energy barrier opportunity to invite neighbors to experience our community. It becomes a consistent hospitality event. Adding both of these opportunities can transform a community group from a collection of individuals into a community just by increasing the frequency of interaction.

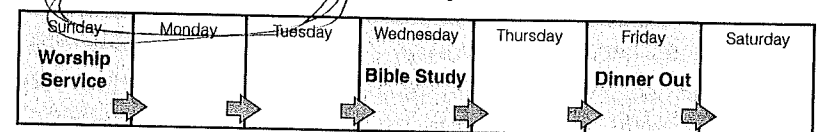
If a traditional small group rhythm looks like this:

Example Week: Bible Study



Then combining Sunday and dinner out would give us the following rhythm:

Example Week: Intentional Community



Through this rhythm we have tripled the opportunities for community and added an opportunity to invite nonbelievers into our community. This is a simple way to try out a new rhythm within your community group without demanding any more time from the people in your community.

Darrin was a community group leader who wanted to change the culture in his community group. They were used to traditional patterns of community meeting once a week and were frustrated that they were not experiencing transformation. It was life sucking and a burden, and they saw little to no growth. They were not seeing anyone meet Jesus. Embracing the ideas from this chapter, Darrin and his wife encouraged the group to start meeting before the 11:00 a.m. service to sit together, and they invited everyone in the group to come eat at a local pub on Friday night.

Some folks showed up on Sunday, but Friday night was a bomb. Not "the bomb," but a complete dud. After three weeks of little involvement, the leaders were getting discouraged. A few folks were coming, though, so they stuck with it. As that handful of people spent more time together, they began to open up and experience community with one another. Things that competed for their time seemed less important, and they began to prefer to spend Friday nights together. This feeling was contagious and began to change their community group. People opened up more during their typical community group gathering, and subsequently lives began to be transformed by the gospel.

Friday night took off and people started inviting neighbors and coworkers. Because the experience in community became life changing, they wanted others to experience it. They were no longer embarrassed to invite nonbelievers. Over the course of three months, they saw several people make commitments to Christ.

Once a group experiences this type of transformation, the work for the leader becomes fairly easy. The group begins to self-organize and the leader does not need to, nor should he, attend every group event. The group begins to develop a community orientation

and opportunities multiply. It becomes life giving and life breathing as the entire community wants to replicate and share their experience.

MY COMMUNITY'S RHYTHM

At this point, you should start taking the concepts from this section to develop your own community group. As an example, let me walk you through the rhythm of my community. This is a typical week in the life of our community group. It doesn't always look like this, but this will give you a practical example of what a community group can look like.

SUNDAY

Sunday is a workday for me, but I make it a point to spend one of the four services at our campus with my family and community. We intentionally connect before the service and sit together for the worship and preaching. We generally get a chance to connect for fifteen minutes before and after the service. We usually have casual discussions, but we are ready to pray for one another if it is warranted.

TUESDAY

Tuesday is our standard gathering night. Because we have several children in our group, we have the moms come early and feed the kids at 5:00 p.m. before the dads and the rest of the group arrive at 6:00 p.m. This works well for us because it reduces the chaos of trying to feed the kids at the same time as the rest of the group. At 6:00 p.m. the kids do an activity or play while the adults eat dinner. (Having the kids play quietly near the dining room gives them a chance to hear the conversation and participate if they want.) Tonight the weather was great, so the kids played in the yard as we ate, and one of the couples in the group took a rotation of keeping an eye on them.

During dinner we try to start the discussion on the Scripture that was preached the previous week. This week the sermon was on

Luke 10:38-42, when Jesus visited Mary and Martha. The weekly curriculum had a discussion question about what typically distracts us, and Pastor Mark challenged us during the sermon to consider if we tend to be more contemplative like Mary or more active like Martha. While we started discussing the Mary/Martha question, Jen and Anne picked up on a conversation they had begun during the week. Anne had been having a hard time responding with grace to her kids and needed Jen to speak the gospel into her situation.

As we finished dinner, we moved into the living room. Jen and Anne stayed at the table to continue their conversation. The rest of us began to dig deeper into the community questions provided for Luke. As we discussed the idea of being distracted by life and neglecting our relationships with Jesus, we began to confess specific areas where this was happening in our lives. For Alison, it was the need to have the house in order and to take care of the kids. For Tim, it was the pressure of success at work. As we confessed these areas in our lives, we began to consider what it would look like to receive God's grace and spend time in his Word and prayer before letting the troubles of the day swallow our time. For some, this opened their eyes to areas of repentance they had never thought of before; for others it was a reminder of what God was already teaching them. Next week we will check in with each other to see how God met us in those moments and how it changed our hearts' inclinations throughout the day. Follow-up is important as repentance is about action, not just confession.

This is typical of our Tuesday dinners. The goal is to be flexible but gospel focused as we let conversations run their courses naturally. Each night as those conversations wind down, we spend significant time in prayer. Tonight as we moved toward this time, Jen and Anne rejoined us, and we thanked God for pursuing us in relationship and asked for his forgiveness for neglecting such a wonderful gift. Occasionally, we will use this time to sing songs together or meditate on a psalm as an act of worship. As well, we like to include

the kids in this prayer time. (With young kids this may be distracting, but it is a blessing for the kids to be a part of the community.) Tonight the younger kids were a little talkative during prayer, but we saw that as an opportunity to practice our repentance of being prone to distraction. The rest of the night was casual chaos as families and individuals made their ways home.

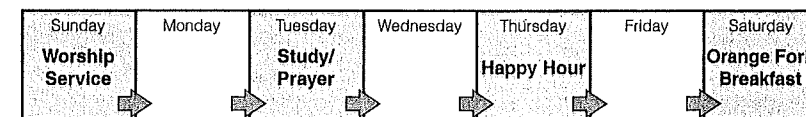
THURSDAY

Every other Thursday we have a standing reservation at a local restaurant for happy hour. This is a completely optional time to hang out as a community. My wife and I get a babysitter for the evening and eat appetizers with the community before we head out for a date night together. This reduces the number of times we need to get a babysitter and gives us some time with friends when our attention is not divided. This provides a low energy barrier opportunity to invite friends and neighbors into our community group and get to know them personally.

SATURDAY

Inspired by the waffle idea, every other Saturday from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. we cook breakfast for the neighborhood. We make homemade cinnamon rolls and freshly cooked crepes and have coffee donated by a local coffee shop. We put out a three-foot-tall orange fork in the yard to alert the neighbors that we will be making breakfast that Saturday and let the news spread by word of mouth. This is a way that we provide hospitality to the neighbors and serve them as well. We also look for opportunities once a month to serve the neighborhood or participate in a neighborhood event. When you put it together, our rhythm looks like this:

Example Week: Orange Fork



Over a month, it might look like this:

Example Month

Sunday Worship Service	Monday	Tuesday Study/ Prayer	Wednesday	Thursday Happy Hour	Friday	Saturday
Sunday Worship Service	Monday	Tuesday Study/ Prayer	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Orange Fork Breakfast
Sunday Worship Service	Monday	Tuesday Study/ Prayer	Wednesday	Thursday Happy Hour	Friday	Saturday Hood Event
Sunday Worship Service	Monday	Tuesday Study/ Prayer	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Orange Fork Breakfast

Within this rhythm are countless opportunities to be community for one another as we watch each other's kids and help with projects or spend time together outside group-organized activities. Every "event" is an optional opportunity rather than an obligation and leads us to *be* rather than to *do* community.

Other potential rhythms that you might consider could look like this:

Example Week: Midweek Dinner

Sunday Worship/ Lunch/ Study	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday Dinner	Thursday	Friday	Saturday Service
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In this rhythm, the group focuses Sunday on the Word, worship, and prayer. Most of Sunday is spent in community as the group Sabbaths together. This frees up the week for hospitality and service.

Example Week: Kids

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Sunday Service		Dinner with Kids		Men Bible AM Women Bible PM		Monthly Service or Participation

This is a great rhythm for groups with lots of kids. The advantage is that the standard meeting is more social in nature and includes children in the community. The dinner can be scheduled for two hours rather than a four-hour marathon. The men get a morning to dig deep into Scripture and prayer. Then the dads watch the kids for the wives to gather in the evening for Bible study and prayer.

Note that all the rhythms suggested here are descriptive rather than prescriptive. As we discussed, you need to consider the natural rhythms of your life and the lives of your neighbors. Then you can develop rhythms that incorporate the elements of community in multiple spaces that are unique to your neighborhood. Reproduce these types of community groups, and you will change your city.

CATALYST

We want to be very intentional in the way that we experience community. The goal, however, is for these rhythms to be a natural and outward expression of the gospel. We want to open people's eyes to a different way of experiencing life and community because of the reconciling work of Jesus. At the beginning, making changes may start out a bit controlled, but as we experience transformational community, they will become second nature. Regimenting a new set of rhythms won't change people's hearts. Be a catalyst for change, and inspire people to a greater vision of proclaiming and advancing the kingdom. Use these ideas to equip your people with new categories of community. Point them to the glory of our amazing Savior to stir the inherent call to mission within every image bearer of God to join the fight to advance the kingdom of God.