

CREATING

FIVE
KEYS TO
BUILDING
A THRIVING
SMALL
GROUP
CULTURE

**SNEAK
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**UPDATED &
EXPANDED
EDITION**

COMMUNITY

ANDY STANLEY & BILL WILLITS

CREATING COMMUNITY

REVISED & UPDATED



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Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

Originally published in hardcover and in significantly different form in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, in 2004.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stanley, Andy, author. | Willits, Bill, author.

Title: Creating community : five keys to building a thriving small-group culture / Andy Stanley & Bill Willits.

Description: Revised edition and updated edition. | Colorado Springs : Multnomah, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021003525 | ISBN 9780735291256 (tradepaper ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780307563637 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Group ministry—Baptists. | Small groups—Religious aspects—Baptists.

Classification: LCC BV675 .S74 2021 | DDC 253/.7—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021003525>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Revised Edition

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This book is dedicated to all the incredible group leaders that call one of our churches home. Your faithfulness to love and lead like Jesus has influenced many lives and changed many communities. We are so grateful for you and to be on this journey with you.

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PREFACE

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RE: GROUPS

Twenty-plus years ago, Sandra and I joined Bill and Terry Willits and three other couples to form a small group. A first for all of us. We were a handful of couples who sensed a need for more meaningful community. We didn't use the term *community* back then. But that's exactly what we were looking for. We felt a need to do life with other couples in our same season.

That first group experience marked us. Sandra and I have been in a small group ever since. Small group—or *community group*, as we refer to it—is a nonnegotiable for us. And it's important to note, we formed that first group three years before we launched North Point Community Church.

Why is that important?

Our group experience had been so formative for us spiritually, emotionally, and relationally that when we had an opportunity to create a church from the ground up, we determined that small groups would be foundational.

A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY

You don't have to attend any of our churches for long before you recognize that groups are not an appendage; they are not a program we tacked on to an existing structure. They are part of our DNA. *We think* groups. In many ways, group life drives what we do—and do not do—as an organization.

The only numeric goal we have ever set for our ministry is in the area of small-group participation. Why? Because we honestly believe that real growth happens within the context of authentic, intentional relationships. And that's what a small group can provide.

Whenever I talk to senior pastors about their small-group ministries, I always ask about their personal small-group experiences. The majority of the time—and I mean the *vast* majority of the time—it turns out that the pastor is not participating in a group. As a pastor, I understand the unique complexities of participating in a small group with church members. But at the same time, it seems a bit hypocritical for a pastor to champion something in which he or she isn't willing to participate. Groups don't have an impact on a local church until they become part of the church's culture. And that begins with senior leadership.

MEET YOUR GUIDE

Bill Willits is one of North Point's six founding staff members. Bill has done the lion's share of the writing for this book. Our shared small-group experience ignited a passion in him to lead the way in creating a small-group culture in our churches.

As our organization has grown, Bill has continued to work with our campus teams to champion our vision of involving every

attendee in a small group. You will see some of their freshest work on the pages that follow.

Many fine books have been written on the topic of small groups, but I believe the updated and expanded edition of *Creating Community* has the potential to change you and revolutionize your small-group ministry, as well as your small-group experience.

—Andy Stanley

CONTENTS



PREFACE: RE: GROUPS	ix
INTRODUCTION: A SEASON OF CHANGE	xv

KEY I: PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY

1 See the Lonely People	3
2 Admit It's Not All Good	11
3 Live the Dream	27

KEY II: LEADERS NEED CLARITY

4 Clarify the Goal	37
5 Define Growth	45
6 Identify Roles	56
7 Determine Where They Go	63

KEY III: CHURCHES NEED A STRATEGY

8 Find Your Word	73
9 Know Your Assumptions	79
10 Answer "Why Groups?" . . . for You	92

11	Prepare Your Plan and Guides	101
12	Close the Door	111
13	Consider These Guardrails	119

KEY IV: CONNECTION NEEDS SIMPLICITY

14	Know Your Audience	127
15	Create Steps	133
16	Make Your Steps Easy	145

KEY V: PROCESSES NEED REALITY

17	Deal in Reality	155
18	Train on What Matters Most	167
19	Include Everyone	178

BONUS SECTION: CHALLENGES NEED HONESTY

20	Manage Tensions	191
21	Promise Confidently	201

CONCLUSION: ONE FINAL THOUGHT	213
-------------------------------	-----

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	217
-----------------	-----

NOTES	219
-------	-----

INTRODUCTION



A SEASON OF CHANGE

It's hard to believe it's been sixteen years since we wrote the original manuscript for *Creating Community*. Much happened for us during that time. I bet much happened for you. Organizationally and culturally, life has definitely changed.

At North Point, our good God has opened many hearts and unlocked many doors since 2004. Back then, we were meeting in two locations and were one year away from celebrating our tenth anniversary. Today we are about to celebrate twenty-six years of ministry with eight campuses in the Atlanta area; scores of partner churches throughout the US; and partner networks in Latin America, the Republic of Ireland and the UK, and Australia. Group life at North Point Ministries has grown immensely as well. In 2004, we had 7,200 adults involved in groups through our two Atlanta campuses. Last year, by God's grace and through the efforts of many amazing people, we had over 31,000 involved in groups through our Atlanta campuses and thousands more through our partner churches.

But without a doubt, some of the biggest changes that have

occurred over the past sixteen years have been cultural. Here's a sampling of some of the differences between 2004 and today:

1. **GIG ECONOMY:** Since the launch of companies like Airbnb, Etsy, and Fiverr, temporary employment, freelancing, and single-contract gigs have all grown immensely. Today, 36 percent of US workers do some kind of gig work.¹
2. **EATING OUT:** With quick-service options like food trucks, carryout, and delivery, Americans now spend less on groceries than on eating out.² And when we want to eat at home, let's not forget that grocery delivery services like Instacart and Amazon Fresh and food-prep companies like Blue Apron, HelloFresh, and Sunbasket have made eating in even easier.
3. **WORKING FROM HOME:** Working from home became the new normal with over 80 percent of US workplaces either currently offering flexible options or planning to offer them, according to one study.³ And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.
4. **MUSIC INDUSTRY:** Music subscription services like Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, and Amazon Music have taken over the music landscape with physical CD sales disappearing.⁴
5. **MENTAL ILLNESS:** According to a study published by the American Psychological Association, teens and young adults have experienced a dramatic increase in mental health disorders. Teen depression grew by 52 percent, and young adult depression grew by a staggering 63 percent.⁵
6. **ONLINE EDUCATION:** The pre-pandemic years found online education already growing significantly. That trend will certainly continue because of online education's greater flexibility, lower financial cost, and customizable courses.⁶

7. **RIDE-SHARING SERVICES:** Companies like Lyft and Uber changed the way Americans commute.⁷
8. **SMARTPHONES:** Sixteen years ago, almost no one had a smartphone. Today, over 80 percent of Americans have one. And not only have smartphones changed the way people work; they have also changed the way people play by providing access to video games and replacing traditional cameras.⁸
9. **AMAZON PRIME:** Amazon Prime was introduced in 2005 to little fanfare even with two-day shipping. Today, much to the dismay of many retailers, *Amazon* and *shopping* have become synonymous.⁹ And what was already becoming true became indisputable during the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. **SOCIAL MEDIA:** In 2004, Facebook was being launched at Harvard. Today it boasts 2.8 billion monthly users, and it is only one of many social media sites.¹⁰ A recent report suggests that adult Americans spend over two hours a day on social media.¹¹ And that number is climbing.

Yes, in the past sixteen years, much has changed. All our lives have changed. On top of all the cultural changes, we have gone through a major recession, a major recovery, and a major pandemic that caused another economic downturn in the midst of social unrest. Yet one thing hasn't changed—people. People like you and me. People like those you work with. People like those you live around. People inside the faith. People outside the faith. Young people. Old people. Everyone in between. All people. Everywhere. People still have the same needs they have always had. And one of those needs has become only more acute.

KEY



PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY

The need for connection and community is primal, as fundamental as the need for air, water, and food.

—DEAN ORNISH

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CHAPTER 1



SEE THE LONELY PEOPLE

**WE ARE ALL SO MUCH TOGETHER, BUT WE ARE
ALL DYING OF LONELINESS.**

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Connecting well is critical in order for us to experience life. Or at least life as God intended it to be lived. And I assume connecting well is important to you. But why is it so significant? Why should you want to create a small-group culture in your church anyway? Though much has changed over the past several years, people still need community. People need community for reasons we'll talk about in great length later. But one thing is for sure: people need it because there are still a lot of lonely people in the world. People like Sallie.

Some time ago, I was on a flight on my way to speak to a group of pastors and other church leaders on the topic of community and small groups. I took my aisle seat next to a pleasant woman and began to settle in. Having planned to do some work on the way up, I put my AirPods in, took out my computer, and

immediately withdrew, hoping for a couple of hours of peace and quiet. That is, until *she* walked in. The she I am referring to was a rather well-dressed lady who frantically came on board right before the forward cabin door was closed. With an open seat in front of us, my hunch was that was where she would end up sitting. She came back to our row, looked at the lady sitting next to me, and said, “You’re in my seat.” Apparently, the lady sitting next to me had overshot her seat by one row. No big deal to most people. Just take the open seat, and we will be on our way. But our late-arriving addition would have no part of that. She was bound and determined to sit in “her seat.” So the pleasant lady next to me graciously acquiesced, gathered her things, and moved to the seat in front of us. That’s when I got to know Sallie.

Soon into the flight, I had this odd feeling that someone was peering over my shoulder. Sure enough, my peripheral vision confirmed that my new plane mate was looking at what I was reading. After a little time passed, she leaned over and asked, “Are you a pastor or something?” Wanting to enjoy a quiet flight, I was tempted to say no or just ignore her. But having already seen her tenacity, I nodded. At that point, she felt invited to start pouring out her life story. So much for a quiet flight. I mumbled a quick prayer for an attitude adjustment and a dose of wisdom, and Sallie began to unpack her journey. And what a life it had been.

She was estranged from her siblings over family money. She had grown kids but had divorced her unstable husband eight years ago when she couldn’t take living with him anymore. He apparently suffered from PTSD from his time as a first responder and was unwilling to get help. And then the clincher. She was dating a guy in another city, someone her kids and friends did not like. At all. As in, “He’s bad news, Mom.” When I asked her why she thought they felt that way, she told me that they thought he

was unhealthy for her. And, oh yeah, she had forgotten to mention one little detail. The man she was dating was married. He very much liked being with Sallie but was in no place to make any kind of commitment.

Sallie said she was tired of a one-way relationship, and when she shared more of the specifics, I could understand why. He was using her, plain and simple, and then sending her home. She was tired of being treated like a commodity and an afterthought. And for good reason. So, with tears in her eyes, she asked me, “What should I do?” A woman I had met one hour earlier was asking me what she should do at one of the most important junctures in her life. What a great opportunity. And then she added, “I just want to be loved.” I affirmed her need and gave her some simple counsel. After the plane landed and our conversation ended, my sense was that she was really saying she was afraid to be alone. Yes, there are a lot of lonely people.

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

George Gallup Jr. described American culture with these poignant words: “Americans are . . . the loneliest people in the world.”¹ That was thirty years ago. Sadly, it has gotten worse.

Cigna, a global health service company, recently released results from a nationwide survey of more than twenty thousand people aged eighteen and older. It reveals some alarming statistics:

- Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone.
- Only half of Americans have meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis.
- Over 40 percent of Americans sometimes or always feel

6 PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY

that their relationships are not meaningful and that they are isolated from others.

- Generation Z (adults aged eighteen to twenty-four) is the loneliest generation and claims to be in worse health than older generations.²

To address this reality, especially among Gen Zers, the University of Southern California hired a director of belonging. University leadership realized that students on campus were experiencing a loneliness crisis. Many mental health problems and instances of students dropping out were tied to this issue of loneliness. The director of belonging now teaches a popular class for the university on how to create meaningful relationships.³

As another way to address the issue, researchers are working on a pill to combat the effects of loneliness—a condition, studies suggest, that is worse than obesity.

The volunteers at the University of Chicago's Brain Dynamics Laboratory, all otherwise young and healthy, were tied together by really only one thing: nearly off-the-chart scores on the most widely used scale measuring loneliness.

Asked how often they felt they had no one they could turn to, . . . how often they felt alone, left out, isolated or no longer close to anyone, the answer, almost always, was “always.”

The volunteers agreed to be randomly dosed over eight weeks with either pregnenolone, a hormone naturally produced by the body's adrenal gland, or a placebo. Two hours after swallowing the assigned tablet, the university's researchers captured and recorded their brain activity while the participants looked at pictures of emotional faces or neutral scenes.

Studies in animals suggest that a single injection of preg-

nenolone can reduce or “normalize” an exaggerated threat response in socially isolated lab mice. . . .

The researchers have every hope the drug will work in lonely human brains, too, although they insist the goal is not an attempt to cure loneliness with a pill.⁴

If you think this is just an American issue, think again. In 2017, a report recommended that the United Kingdom take serious action to address the issue, including the nomination of a minister of loneliness. The report not only encouraged leaders to find a way to measure loneliness and provide funding to alleviate it but also called on public-sector leaders, private-sector leaders, and everyday citizens to help address this nationwide problem.⁵

And this was before the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown of 2020. Not surprisingly, rising cases of COVID-19 during that time dramatically affected our mental health. A look at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey data shows that depression and anxiety were three to four times more prevalent from April to June 2020 than during the same months of 2019. Rates of suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and alcohol consumption resulting from the uncertainty and isolation of the pandemic rose steadily with the increase of COVID-19 cases.⁶

Welcome to small-group leadership in the twenty-first century. Those statistics represent some of the people in your church.

They may represent you.

During uncertain times, people become even more anxious and depressed. Living isolated only makes it worse. And loneliness was on the scale of an epidemic even before we faced a worldwide pandemic.

Even though most of us live around more people than ever,

we're lonely. We're experiencing what has been referred to as "crowded loneliness," where people feel all alone, even in a crowd.

And social media has only made things worse. It promised to make those who were far away feel near. But it has actually made those who are near feel far away.

FROM PORCH TO DECK

Several years ago, my wife, Terry, an interior designer, read something about home construction that caught her eye. The article she was reading noted that most architects currently design homes to promote privacy and solitude, not connection. Not so when life was simpler and commute times were nonexistent. Back then homes were constructed with front porches, so when you took evening walks or afternoon drives, it was commonplace to bump into your neighbor sitting on his or her porch. After a brief chat, your neighbor would invite you to sit down to enjoy casual conversation and a beverage. People actually took time for one another and saw value in this spontaneous interaction. Talk time on the porch was a way of life. As one writer has observed, "The American front porch further represented the ideal of community in America. For the front porch existed as a zone between the public and private, an area that could be shared between the sanctity of the home and the community outside. It was an area where interaction with the community could take place."⁷

Welcome to the twenty-first century. Retreating from the busyness and intensity of work life, we come home, put the garage door down, and escape. Not outside to the openness of our front porches, but inside to the televisions in our dens. And if we go outside, it's not to the porches on the fronts of our houses.

It's to the decks on the backs of our houses. The harsh truth is that, after a long, hard day and perhaps a crowded commute, we don't want to see people. We want to get away from them! The last thing we want to do at the end of a day is to have one more conversation, hear one more problem, or fulfill one more request. So we shun unplanned interactions by sheltering in place. Our goal is to avoid people—and what they potentially want from us—at all costs. And cost us it does.

.....
Though we are a culture craving relationship, we are some of the loneliest people who have ever lived.
.....

Though we are a culture craving relationship, we are some of the loneliest people who have ever lived. In the midst of crowded highways and crowded communities, many of us are living very lonely lives. We live, work, and play around people but are known by few. We try to educate our loneliness away. We try to medicate it away. We try to legislate it away. But we're still lonely and getting lonelier. And that wasn't what God intended. To be separated and alone was never what he envisioned for his most prized creation.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY
.....

- 1. Describe a meaningful relationship you've had. What made it so significant?
- 2. Share the last time you had an important conversation with that person or another close friend. What made it so significant?
- 3. Why are people today so lonely? What do you think people are really looking for?

10 PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY

4. Have you ever experienced “crowded loneliness,” where you have felt all alone, even in a crowd? If so, why did you feel that way?
5. Describe the last time you had a meaningful conversation with a neighbor.
6. Do you think people actually value community or just the idea of community? Explain.

CHAPTER 2



ADMIT IT'S NOT ALL GOOD

IT IS NOT GOOD FOR THE MAN TO BE ALONE.

—GENESIS 2:18

When I served on staff at a previous church, we had a director of facilities who was really good at what he did but was a salty soul to say the least. He was an ex-chief petty officer in the Coast Guard who had a heart of gold and a tough exterior. I learned early on the importance of staying in good relationship with him because he could make or break my day. And our ministry. So to keep our relational account in the black, I would take him out to lunch a few times a year just to make sure that everything between us was fine and that he knew how much I appreciated him. Speaking of fine, if you ever asked him how his day was going, he would say just that—“Fine.” If you asked him about his family, he would say they were “fine.” If you asked him about a project, he would say it was going “fine.” Come to think of it, if you asked him about almost anything, his answer was usually the same. It

was “fine.” Bob was a man of few words, but he had a big heart and undying loyalty to our church.

People who know me well would say that I am generally a positive person. While I don’t consider myself naive by any stretch, it’s in my nature to look at the bright side of life. I believe the best about situations and people unless I have an obvious reason to believe otherwise. I look for silver linings in the midst of dark clouds, confident there is something important to be learned in any situation. I wake up most days happy and hopeful. Yet I learned something about that optimistic side of my personality some years ago while talking to a counselor. My optimism isn’t always optimism; at times, it’s a coping mechanism. It can be a learned way to minimize emotions. You see—don’t tell anyone—I’m actually a recovering minimizer. I naturally want to avoid appearing needy or broken, so I would use my optimism to reduce any negative feelings I might be having. But as I came to discover, sharing emotions honestly and openly is part of what it means to be fully human. Because everything is not always fine.

We were created to be relational beings.

As pointed out in the last chapter, it’s not “all good” when it comes to the way many of us are living. That’s because we were never meant to live in isolation. We were created to be relational beings. It’s true that we all have varying relational needs based on our wirings and temperaments, but none of us was meant to live alone, away from deep human connection. As one writer put it, “I have never known anyone . . . who was isolated, lonely, unconnected, had no deep friendships—yet had a meaningful and joy-filled life.”¹ Yet, as we discussed, that’s the way many of us live, unfortunately. Though we live around many people, we may not experience life deeply with anyone. It’s no wonder so many of us feel alone, but that was never the original plan.

GOD'S PLAN A

In Genesis 1–2, we read the creation account and how God planned for us to do life. If you haven't read it in a while, take a fresh look. It's an amazing reminder of God's endless capacities. With little effort but amazing creativity, God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. The breadth and depth of what he was able to get done in six days is sobering for any results-oriented, type-A personality. Talk about getting stuff done! But then again, he's God. There is no one like him.

In the midst of his creative bonanza, a recurring statement appears. In fact, six times after God created something, the text says, "God saw that it was good."² From light to livestock, the assessment of his efforts was the same: It is good. He was pleased. It was all fine. Things were as he intended them to be. Then on the sixth day, humankind came onto the scene. The culmination of God's creativity had arrived. God was so pleased by this new creation that as he assessed his efforts over the previous six days, his appraisal changed. With his latest addition, the things he had created were no longer just good. They were now very good. God's prized creation had tipped the scales. With the addition of humankind, God, at last, awarded his five-star rating.

But things changed quickly—as the band the Eagles would say, "in a New York minute."³ After explaining in more detail his design for humanity, God said, "It's not all good." Up to this point, everything had been as he intended. However, in Genesis 2:18, God said that something wasn't right. Something wasn't good. He specifically said, "It is not good for the man to be alone."

For years, many of us have heard Genesis 2:18 quoted in the context of marriage—and rightly so. But I believe the implications go beyond an affirmation of the marriage relationship. At its core, this is a statement about the importance of connecting well

with others, marriage being the most profound illustration of that reality.

John Ortberg made a helpful observation about this passage, namely that loneliness is “not good,” even before the Fall:

The human being is in a state of perfect intimacy with God. Each word he and God speak with each other is filled with closeness and joy; he walks with God in the garden in the cool of the day. He is known and loved to the core of his being by his omniscient, love-filled Creator. Yet the word God uses to describe him is “alone.” And God says that this aloneness is “not good.”

Sometimes in church circles when people feel lonely, we will tell them not to expect too much from human relationships, that there is inside every human being a God-shaped void that no other person can fill. That is true. But apparently, according to the writer of Genesis, God creates inside this man a kind of “human-shaped void” that God himself will not fill.⁴

In other words, while God made people for himself, he also made us with a unique and real need for one another. While Adam depended on a relationship with God for his everything, it was not good for him to be by himself. As clinical psychologist Henry Cloud has observed, “Man was incomplete with God alone. So we see at the outset that relationship was at the core

While God made people for himself, he also made us with a unique and real need for one another.

.....

of the way things were created.”⁵

The point is that Adam needed more than what God could provide him. Part of what it means to be made in God’s image is our capacity for connectedness.

Adam was created for human

connection. And we still are. When our “human-shaped void” is not filled, when we live alone, it is not good. And for good reason.

ISOLATIONITIS

When we aren't in meaningful relationship, we suffer natural consequences, whether we realize it or not. Several maladies tend to come our way.

Lost Perspective

When we live in isolation, we can easily lose perspective on life. That's because there is no objective voice calling us toward balance. Our lows tend to be lower, and our highs tend to be higher. Our point of view becomes clouded, and our circumstances seem worse (or better) than they really are. Simple decisions can appear bigger than life, and our decision-making can become more impulsive without others to point us back to true north. As one writer has said,

Remember that the law of entropy holds that any system left to itself becomes more and more disordered over time. This is what happens in emotional isolation. As people are shut off from others, their anger, sadness, and depression begin to interfere with their thinking processes. Their circuits overload, and their thought processes become distorted.⁶

Spiritual Vulnerability

When we live isolated and lose perspective, we easily overlook that our battles are not just physical or psychological but also spiritual. We can forget that we have a very real enemy and that

he plays for keeps. He doesn't want to give us a bad day. He wants to entice us toward an ineffective, mediocre life! We can
 lose sight of the fact that our enemy's most successful strategy is to isolate us so he can attack and destroy us. Sheep are rarely attacked in herds. They are most likely to be attacked when they become isolated from the rest of the flock.
Sheep are rarely attacked in herds. They are most likely to be attacked when they become isolated from the rest of the flock.

Fear of Intimacy

People who don't have meaningful relationships tend to fear intimacy more. If you've never had close friendships, then you're probably going to be more fearful of that kind of relationship. People who fear intimacy think that if others really get to know them, they won't like them. So they would rather stay disconnected than risk rejection. By the way, that's why I believe that one of the best preparations for marriage is participating in a small group. If people learn to be open and honest with a few friends before they get married, they will have an easier time continuing that pattern of relational honesty and openness after they are married. Their track record for transparency will give them confidence and courage to communicate as they enter this new season of life.

Greater Selfishness

Disconnected people tend to be more selfish because isolation breeds selfishness. If a person's life is defined by his or her schedule, agenda, needs, and desires, chances are that person is

suffering from a good dose of self-centeredness. Over time, a disconnected person tends to become more and more self-absorbed. When that happens, life is seen through a very narrow lens.

Emotional Instability

How many people suffer emotional instability simply because they are not living with any meaningful, mutually satisfying relationships? Sadly, more than we realize.

Studies show that without solid, mutually satisfying relationships, the human soul will become stuck in psychological and emotional problems. As Henry Cloud has said,

The soul cannot prosper without being connected to others. No matter what characteristics we possess, or what accomplishments we amass, without solid emotional connectedness, without bonding to God and other humans, we . . . will suffer sickness of the soul.⁷

Poor Health

People who do life alone are at much greater risk of poor health than their connected counterparts. A 2015 study led by University of York researchers linked loneliness to a 30 percent increase in risk of stroke or coronary heart disease.⁸

In 2018, researchers at the Florida State University College of Medicine also “found that loneliness was associated with a 40 percent increase in risk of dementia even when controlling for external and genetic risk factors.”⁹

Additionally, a 2019 study led by a public health researcher with the American Cancer Society “analyzed data from more

..... than 580,000 adults and found
Strong relationships that social isolation increases the
pay huge dividends, risk of premature death from
even with our health. every cause for every race.”¹⁰
 John Ortberg referred to a
 study on relationships that tracked the lives of seven thousand
 people over nine years:

Researchers found that the most isolated people were *three times more likely to die* than those with strong relational connections.

People who had bad health habits (such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use) but strong social ties lived *significantly longer* than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.¹¹

Actually, in Atlanta, we would choose Krispy Kreme doughnuts over Twinkies, but you get the point. Strong relationships pay huge dividends, even with our health.

CULTURAL CHANGES AND COMMUNITY

As mentioned, recent years have brought numerous cultural changes. And as with most changes, they have come with upsides and downsides, with both benefits and challenges. Importantly, the changes have affected people’s ability to meaningfully connect with others.

THE GIG ECONOMY AND RIDE-SHARING SERVICES

Benefits: Flexible and efficient

Challenges: Transient and transactional

Potential Implications: Because people are choosing a more transient and transactional way of life, the implications on their relational commitments like small groups can be real. This kind of living affects people's understanding of commitment, which can be seen in marginal participation, partial engagement, and early abandonment of their groups. As a result, people don't experience meaningful community, or worse, they encounter its cheap substitute, pseudo-community.

EATING OUT

Benefits: Convenient and fast

Challenges: Hurried and impersonal

Potential Implications: Because extended time around the table is becoming less and less common, the nuclear family is having fewer times of meaningful engagement. Family members are becoming less patient, tolerant, and resilient when they are together, especially when working through relational challenges. That can happen with the small-group "family" as well. As Bill Donahue has said, "There is no fast food at the table of community."¹²

WORKING FROM HOME

Benefits: Accommodating and efficient

Challenges: Less connected and collaborative

Potential Implications: When people are less connected, less mobile, and less interdependent, the impact is real. They can become less resilient in weathering the tensions all relationships navigate, since they have had limited opportunities to develop that resilience. Also, the less connected they become, the less they are exposed to fresh perspectives and differing viewpoints.

ONLINE EDUCATION/GROUPS

Benefits: Convenient and accessible

Challenge: Limited leader/student interaction

Potential Implications: Effectively processing content together can be the loss in this system. Educators and group leaders need to ensure that content doesn't replace the give-and-take of meaningful interaction. It is not enough to be exposed to content. Part of the growth process is discovering how something applies to everyday life. Meaningful content is a part of a growing community but is never the chief end of the community.

SMARTPHONES/TECHNOLOGY

Benefits: Always accessible and available

Challenge: Can be all consuming

Potential Implications: Rarely disconnected people have a hard time being fully present. A recent *Inc.* article came to a telling conclusion while quoting some sobering stats: "We lost. The gadgets won. . . . The average smartphone owner unlocks their phone 150 times a day. . . . 85% of smartphone users check their phones while speaking with friends and family."¹³ In other words, *smartphones* can actually make people act relationally dumb. Smartphones and other devices are great as long as they are tools and not appendages. Otherwise, people craving connection remain disconnected in the most important ways.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Benefit: Ability for users to always know and be known

Challenge: Selective presentation of information

Potential Implications: Social media allows people to always be known and always know others. But the reality is that

many present only a partial version of themselves. Their preoccupation with how they are being portrayed online can cause them to miss out on real life. They can miss experiencing the joy of being truly known, truly accepted, and truly loved. As a result, their social media “lives” can actually keep them from living authentically and enjoying the many benefits of life in community. As professor and author Brené Brown has observed, “Social media are great . . . , but true belonging, real connection and real empathy require meeting real people in a real space in real time.”¹⁴

Living without meaningful connection, without community, is not good. Isolation and faux connections tend to bring with them disappointing results, because we were created for so much more. We were created for relationship.

THE CONNECTED LIFE

Not only does living connected lives with others protect us from experiencing some really bad consequences. Living bonded, connected lives as God intended also provides us with some great benefits.

We’re Challenged to Grow

Whether in the little things or big things, when we’re connected to others, we’re more challenged to grow to become better versions of ourselves and more like Jesus.

I recently was in a men’s group with a guy whose job changes had moved him four times over the past few years. While the moves were lucrative, the relational and spiritual impact on his

family was brutal. Now in Atlanta, his family was well connected with other families, his marriage was thriving, and most importantly, his kids were developing a faith of their own by being connected in their great small groups. And then another amazing job opportunity became available, but it would require them to move again. Our group encouraged him to make the tough decision to decline the offer.

Proverbs 27:17 reminds us, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” My wife, Terry, says it well: “Courage comes in community.” When we’re in community, we’re loved and supported, which provides us courage to make wise choices.

We’re Supported When We Stumble

Luke 17:1 says, “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come.”

What are some things that cause us to stumble? Other people do. Poverty does. Riches can. Unemployment will. Disappointment might. Death certainly will. And at least some of those things are bound to come . . . for all of us!

But Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 reminds us,

Two are better than one,
 because they have a good return for their labor:
 If either of them falls down,
 one can help the other up.
 But pity anyone who falls
 and has no one to help them up.

If we have others with us, they can help us up when we fall. Because we all will fall. And then we can help one another up. But if we don’t live connected lives, the outcome is, well, pitiful! “We’ve fallen and we can’t get up!”

Know what we've realized? It's easy to stumble out of church. Unfortunately, people do that all the time. We've realized it's somewhat normal for people to walk away from their faith for a season. Regrettably, college students do it too much of the time. But we've also seen that it's almost impossible to stumble out of a connected relationship, because we have people who are committed to us for the long haul. And if we run, they will run, too, because they're coming to look for us!

We're Comforted in Loss

In Galatians 6:2, Paul said these words to the Galatian church: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." What's the law of Christ? The law of Christ is to love one another as Jesus has loved us. That's the standard. It's better than the Golden Rule, which is to treat others the way we would want to be treated. Andy refers to this as the Platinum Rule.

When we're living connected lives, we're more comforted when loss comes. It could be the loss of a job, the loss of a dream, the loss of a relationship, or, sadly, the loss of a life. Depending on the intensity of the loss, its weight can, at times, seem too great to bear. But when we're meaningfully connected to others, they can help carry our burden and make the load more bearable.

.....
**When we're living
 connected lives, we're
 more comforted when
 loss comes.**

We're Simply Happier

When we're living bonded, connected lives, we're simply happier. As John Ortberg has observed,

An academic journal called *The Journal of Happiness Studies* publishes studies using the tools of research to identify what makes human life flourish. When researchers look at what distinguishes quite happy people from less happy people, one factor consistently separates those two groups. It is not how much money you have; it is not your health, security, attractiveness, IQ, or career success. What distinguishes consistently happier people from less happy people is the presence of rich, deep, joy-producing, life-changing, meaningful relationships.¹⁵

Social researcher Robert Putnam once said, "The single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United States but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections."¹⁶

We flourish and are simply happier when we're connected with God and people.

.....

We flourish and are simply happier when we're connected with God and people, and we're apt to languish when we're disconnected from either.

JUST LIKE HIM

When Terry and I were blessed with our daughter, Bailey, we were so excited. We still are. Most kids are special to their parents, but Bailey is extra special because of how long we had to wait for her. As is the case for more and more couples every year, it took a lot longer to start our family than we had anticipated. About thirteen years longer, to be exact. Being blessed with her has been one of life's greatest joys.

When she was younger, one of the joys (and challenges) of Bailey's fun personality was that she was a very busy girl. She was constantly active and enjoyed the company of her many friends. She loved to talk; she loved to sing; she loved to play; she loved to perform. Often she would hide behind the family room curtains and say "Introduce me" like she was the lead act of a show. Like any extrovert, she loved to do these things with people. At a party many years ago, one of our friends, remarking on her outgoing personality, said, "It is so amazing. Bailey is just like Bill. Their personalities are so much alike."

The truth is, we were all created in the likeness of our Father, our heavenly Father. God is a relational being. As God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, he is three persons in one. In Genesis 1:26, God said, "Let us make mankind in our image." The God who desires to have a
relationship with all humankind **The truth is, we were**
has always known meaningful **all created in the**
relationship. Always. Just as he **likeness of our Father,**
exists in meaningful relationship, **our heavenly Father.**
so we are to exist in this quality of
relationship. The need for it is part of our genetic makeup.

That's why, from God's perspective, living life alone is not good. It's not good because it's not how he created us to live. *Alone* and *isolated* were never to be used to describe his children. It's not good because we were created with a deep need for rich and meaningful connection with other people. Without it, we don't reflect the image of the One who created us. And without it, bad things happen, like lost perspective, fear of intimacy, selfishness, and poor health.

So what is God after in his desire to move us toward this kind of connected relationship with others? Pass the Krispy Kremes (or broccoli, if you prefer), turn the page, and let's find out.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY

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1. Describe a time when you were not living with any meaningful relationships. What were some of the consequences you experienced?
2. Do you believe someone can live a joy-filled life in isolation? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree with the statement that there is a need inside us that not even God himself will fill? Why or why not?
4. This chapter covered several consequences of living in isolation. Which consequence do you identify with the most, and why?
 - lost perspective
 - spiritual vulnerability
 - fear of intimacy
 - greater selfishness
 - emotional instability
 - poor health
 - other
5. Which cultural changes (the gig economy, eating out, working from home, online education, technology, social media, etc.) have had the greatest impact on your relationships? Which have had the greatest impact on your ability to be fully known, accepted, and loved?
6. What is one thing you can do to help people around you move toward community?
7. In today's culture of isolation, how can the church be a unique space to offer a better way?

CHAPTER 3



LIVE THE DREAM

MY PRAYER IS NOT FOR THEM ALONE. I PRAY ALSO FOR THOSE WHO WILL BELIEVE IN ME THROUGH THEIR MESSAGE, THAT ALL OF THEM MAY BE ONE, FATHER, JUST AS YOU ARE IN ME AND I AM IN YOU. MAY THEY ALSO BE IN US SO THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE SENT ME.

—JOHN 17:20-21

We all have hopes and dreams. We all have things we would like to do in our lifetimes. We might want to have a better job, run a marathon, become financially free, have amazing kids, buy a home, start a business, or go on an adventure. Everyone has dreams. What are yours?

When I was a kid, I dreamed of playing professional golf. When you grow up playing sports in south Florida, in addition to one of the big three (football, basketball, and baseball), you play

either a water sport, tennis, or golf. Since my dad and grandfather hit the little white ball, I ended up playing golf. I remember attending my first junior golf clinic when I was seven. There were twenty kids around the green, putting and chipping their hearts out. It was a scene out of *Kindergarten Cop* on steroids. Later that morning, I chipped one in. I'm pretty sure it bounced off an-

..... other ball, but I remember thinking, *This game is easy. This must be the sport for me.* With my longish blond hair, my dream of being the future Jack Nicklaus was cemented in stone. Or not. Little did I know that my dream would become a source of costly frustration for years to come!

Did you know that God has dreams for you and me? Some of us may think that God cares only about things like whom we will marry and what we will accomplish with our lives. But like any loving father, God dreams about all that will ultimately bring his children happiness and joy. He dreams about what he knows will bring fulfillment to our lives. Because of this, I believe one of God's biggest dreams for us is authentic community—the kinds of meaningful relationships that are characterized by oneness with him and with one another.

THE POSSIBLE DREAM

We read of God's dream for us in Jesus's prayer recorded in John 17. As Jesus moved toward the cross, he prayed not for himself but for those he would leave behind. With his life almost over, he disclosed what was closest to his heart, what was foremost on his mind. In their book *Building a Church of Small Groups*, my friends Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson have provided helpful insight:

It is sometimes said that when someone faces death, one's conversation reveals his or her deepest passions, hopes, and dreams. That's why we go out of our way to honor dying wishes. In his final hours, Jesus gives us clues to his chief concerns.¹

It's obvious from Jesus's prayer that his focus was on his followers. His primary concern was the depth of relationship the disciples would experience with one another. Notice his words: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one."²

So that they may be one as we are one. The significance of this statement cannot be overstated. Jesus was praying that his disciples—the men who for three years had disappointed him and misunderstood him and who would ultimately abandon him (in other words, people like you and me)—would experience something amazing. He prayed that they would experience the same quality of relationship with one another that Jesus had been enjoying as part of the Trinity since before the beginning of time. To understand the significance of this, we need to explore what this quality of relationship really looks like.

Throughout the Scriptures, we see the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—enjoying a unique, affirming kind of relationship with one another. They encourage one another, support one another, love one another, defer to one another, and glorify one another.³ If you get the picture that they have an ongoing mutual admiration society, you're right. What's not to admire about such deference? What's not to love about expressions of servanthood and support? This type of relationship breathes life into our souls.

Jesus's prayer was that the disciples would experience this kind of life-giving relationship with one another—the kind that makes our hearts come alive, the kind that can come only from God himself.

AN OPEN INVITATION

It would have been understandable had Jesus's prayer been only for the disciples. After all, they had spent three years of intense ministry together. They had walked the breadth of Galilee and Judea. They had seen multiple miracles in their midst. But his prayer wasn't just for them. John 17:20–21 makes that clear:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Jesus's invitation to life-giving relationships was also for those who would come to faith through the disciples, which includes us! How's that for amazing grace? Jesus's prayer was that all his followers would experience the kind of meaningful relationship with one another that the Trinity has always experienced. He wanted qualities like mutual encouragement, support, love, deference, and honor to characterize our relationships with one another. That was his prayer and that is still his dream.

As important as it is for each follower of Christ to experience this unique kind of relational life, the benefits go beyond us. They influence a watching world. Notice Jesus's words at the end of verse 21: “so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Do you feel the weight of that statement? Jesus was saying

that the credibility of his life and message in the eyes of unbelievers is dependent on the way we as his followers relate to one another. Somehow their belief and our behavior are connected. It's as if Jesus was saying that unbelievers are just waiting to believe, but the question is, Will they see us relating in this magnetic, irresistible way? Remember these earlier words from Jesus?

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*⁴

Do you see how high the stakes really are? Do you grasp why we can't settle for anything less than Jesus's dream for community? The credibility of the gospel is at stake!

As Francis Schaeffer rightly concluded in his classic work, *The Mark of the Christian*, our oneness in relationship with each other is the final apologetic.⁵

THE CHURCH IN COMMUNITY

In this first section, we have emphasized the fact that people need community. We were designed by the Master Designer to need it. And people need community today more than ever. We are still a society living in isolation, seldom enjoying the benefits of meaningful relationships. We live and work around people, but most of us have chosen to do life alone. This is certainly not what God had in mind. We were created by a relational God with the need for relational connection. And we were created in his image. Each one of us. And when we don't connect well, bad things tend to follow. When we do connect well, good things tend to follow. And even when bad things happen, we have others to help get us through whatever has come our way.

The kind of connection we need is more than casual. Contemporary culture is the master purveyor of casual, noncommitted relationships. The overabundance of dating apps available today poignantly reminds us of this reality. But casual connections aren't usually affirming or supportive. Neither do they tend to be encouraging or challenging. As a result, casual connections aren't life giving. They can't provide what Jesus dreams of and what he died for. They can't provide the kind of oneness with one another that makes the world take notice. The kind that God uses in the hearts of people. The kind that transforms lives. Only the church in community can display that kind of relational oneness. Only God's Spirit unleashed through his body can make that kind of difference.

That is what God has called the church to be about: creating environments where authentic community can take place, building transformative communities where people can experience oneness with God and with one another, unique communities that are so satisfying and so compelling that they create thirst in a watching world.

If you think what you're trying to do as a small-group leader isn't important, think again! You may be providing some people an introduction into their first experience of meaningful, life-giving relationships. Relationships where they are known and ultimately changed. Some of you may be part of changing not only the lives of people but also the narrative and reputation of your church.

Our first key is knowing that people need community. So how do we go about creating this kind of authentic, life-giving experience? What are some of the things we need to consider to make

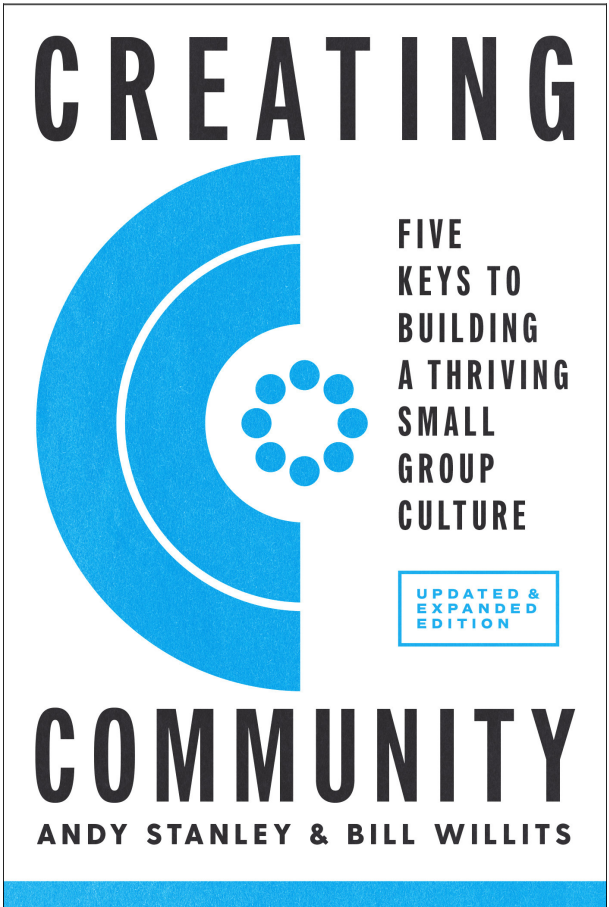
God has called the church to create environments where authentic community can take place.

God's dream a reality? How can we help more and more people experience what Jesus described in his prayer? Those are the keys we will discover and discuss in the pages that follow.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY

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1. What do you think about the statement that one of God's dreams for his people is community? What does that say about the importance of what we are trying to do in group life?
2. What role has community played in your faith journey?
3. What characteristics of community make it attractive to those outside the faith?
4. What are your specific dreams and desires for your community or small group?
5. Most people are not used to deeply connecting with other people and becoming fully known. What makes it so daunting?
6. What examples of relationships from film or culture might you point to as echoes of what Christian community can be? Would others want to live in that way? Why or why not?
7. What can you do to create a safe space for people to experience authentic community?



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