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CHAPTER 1

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Loneliness.

It's a heavy word. One that everyone feels but no one wants to admit. Something in us longs for the connection we have when we sit at a meal with those we love. There we experience abundant food, authentic relationships, laughter, and tears. We are fully known and fully loved. We wish that we could spend all of life around that table, but often we feel that we just can't get there. We want community, yet we struggle with loneliness.

As a pastor, I've heard countless heartbreaking stories of people wallowing in loneliness. My friend Jay, for instance, spent ten years living in New York City. He was surrounded by people yet, by his own admission, he was the loneliest he'd ever been. He told me, "Proximity with twenty-five million people does not equal community."

Or take Nicki who grew up in a big family. Each Sunday they plastered on smiles as they entered the church building, but Monday through Saturday, Nicki lived in a horrific prison that her parents called a home. One of the first things Nicky shared with me was that she had been lonely as long as she could remember.

Or there's the married couple who attended a church I pastored. One evening I listened as they poured out their struggles, seemingly unable to zero in on the cause of their frustrations. These two people, whom most would refer to as the life of the party, confessed that they

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each struggled with intense isolation.

Loneliness can challenge church leaders as well. On countless nights during a season of incredible church growth, I felt as though no one really knew or even cared about me. Each week I'd preach three services in a row to capacity crowds, and then get in my car and aimlessly drive around, wondering why I felt so alone. I was con-

nected to thousands of people, yet I struggled with an overwhelming sense of separation.

Isolation has no prejudice. It will seek you out regardless of whether you live in a small town or the big city, earn millions or barely make minimum wage, rarely attend church or are a pastor. It attacks all people at all times.

MORE SOCIAL THAN SOCIAL MEDIA

We live in the most connected time in world history, yet as a society we are as isolated as we have ever been. Two hundred and twenty-two million US adults can connect with the world from any location with the touch of a button. Cellphones make it possible to talk to someone without being present, and we can text without ever hearing a person's voice. We are constantly linked through Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, Instagram (and whatever else some Ivy League student creates next week).

Technology has made communication so easy that we are addicted to convenience. Sadly even with all this amazing technology, it is more difficult than ever for us to build genuine relationships. In a *Newsweek* interview, John T. Cacioppo, a neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, stated: "Social-networking sites like Facebook may provide people with a false sense of connection that ultimately increases loneliness in people who feel alone. These sites should serve as a supplement, but not replacement for, face-to-face interaction."¹

These advances—while not bad in and of themselves—have the

potential to lead us into more isolated lonesomeness, especially when we replace authentic, vulnerable, face-to-face relationships with more-controlled, less-genuine social media ones.

Recently I overheard someone in a coffee shop sharing weight loss ideas. “Every time you feel the urge to eat, crunch ice instead,” the man told his companion. He explained that the sensation of chewing and consuming the ice would help soothe the urge to want to eat. “It’s a way to trick your body.”

That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard, I thought. Dumb or not, sure enough, a couple days later I found myself trying it. (Just getting back to my fighting weight, you know.) I discovered that while ice is good for cooling a drink, in the end it doesn’t supply the sustainable nourishment that my body needs. And chewing ice certainly doesn’t fulfill noshing on something more satisfying and lasting. It works only for a brief moment.

Likewise, social media tricks our society into believing that it can give us what we need. But really it fails to be a sustainable means of community. We think we are growing strong bonds of friendship, while we spend inordinate amounts of time reading posts and updates from others who make us aware that everybody else has a cooler life than we do. We may think it will satisfy our loneliness, but the reality is that it only manages to deepen it.

HOW LONELY ARE WE, REALLY?

Any person can make “friends” through social media, but when was the last time you had a conversation with someone who genuinely cared for you and meaningfully spoke into your life? Far too many Americans offer an alarming answer to that question. Recent studies from Duke University and the US Census suggest that our society is in the midst of the most dramatic and progressive slide toward disconnection in history. Consider these disturbing statistics:

- 27.2 million people live alone.
- More people say they *feel alone* than at any other time.

- 25 percent say they have no one they can turn to as a confidant.
- More people link their depression to loneliness.
- The number of “socially isolated” Americans has doubled since 1985.²

Not only are more people physically living alone, they are becoming emotional lone rangers. Since they have no one to turn to, they seek the individualistic dreams that ultimately cripple human flourishing and societal progress. Rick Warren summed it up well: “Isolation exists because we have a culture that feeds individualism. The fruit of rampant individualism in our culture is massive loneliness.”³

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Instead of sitting on the porch and talking with neighbors and friends as it was in the “good ole days,” often we now enter our homes as the garage door closes behind us, and surrounded by our privacy

fence, we eat dinner alone and then vicariously live out community by watching television “reality” shows (as our neighbors do the same).

Yet even in our chosen solitude, we have insatiable need for connection. Give us two seconds of down time and we reach for our phone to scan Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram feeds.

You can even see our desire for community through our television viewing choices. Some of the highest-rated shows over the past thirty years include *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Parks & Rec*. Each show represents what the 1980s’ classic *Cheers* communicates in its theme song: “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name” or as *Friends* references, “I’ll be there for you.”

Those are not empty lyrics but rather an outcry from culture. We are part of a civilization that starves for unpretentious relationships with others who genuinely care and can share in life’s common struggles. These shows are not reality. Life is not one continuous dance in a fountain with our closest friends. Nonetheless these shows strike a felt need.

People want real community. We yearn to be part of a community that discovers and clings to identity, worth, and value.

It's as if watching these sitcoms gives us a taste of what it would be like to have genuine relationships with people who not only know our name but who know us and are willing to struggle with us.

A BETTER ANSWER

Despite our inherent longing, many of us feel that sense of belonging is somehow unattainable. We desire it, but we resist it at the same time. We fear being transparent with others. What if we get hurt? Rejected? Betrayed? Ignored? Neglected?

The answer the world might give to this conundrum is simply for us to find people we like and trust, then try to work on our issues (whatever that means). It's a self-improvement, *pull yourself up from your bootstraps* mentality.

Christians have a profoundly different answer to this longing, which we find in the good news of Jesus Christ. We know that God Himself placed within us this yearning for community—a God-given appetite for honest connection with others. The idyllic garden of Eden with its unbroken relationships haunts us because that's what we were designed for (see Gen. 2:18; Rom. 5:10). But as our self-centered sin entered the picture, that perfection was lost—traded for the brokenness and despair we feel from being disconnected from God and one another (see Gen. 3).

Yet God did not leave us there. He created a history-sweeping work to redeem us, to restore the wholeness of Eden. That redeeming work happens through the church—the people whom, through Christ's death and resurrection, God has rescued from their own folly (see Eph. 2:1–10). He has taken a bunch of traitors and adopted us into His family, welcoming us to His table (see Gal. 4:4–7; Rev. 19:6–9). God has made us a community with a deeper foundation and a brighter future than anything the world has to offer.

During the time I struggled with loneliness, it was through community that the pockets of emptiness began to fill. Many argue that Jesus is

all we need. While I agree that Jesus alone is all we need for salvation, I find throughout the Bible that the Christian life is designed to be lived with other believers. From the outset God told us, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Moreover, in all the letters the apostle Paul wrote, he specifically gave communal instruction for how to live the Christian life: love one another, serve one another, confess your sins to one another, etc.

When I battled loneliness, restoration didn’t magically and immediately occur, and it didn’t happen on its own. I had to be honest with others and then be willing to listen and soak in their words of blunt truth and timely encouragement.

God’s Word speaks in a direct, relevant, and timely way to the tension that resides between people’s desire for relationships and their inability to sustain those relationships. As the church we are called not only to seek the lost, we are called to bring hope and help to relationships, to minister to people’s loneliness. To do that, we must contend for a community defined by the Scriptures, rather than fall into the counterfeit pattern of individualism that is so prevalent in the world (and that too often sneaks into our churches).

Throughout Scripture we see the power and importance of community. In John 17:20–23, for instance, Jesus prayed for the unity of the believers, while in John 13:35, He said the world would know that the disciples were His by how they loved one another.

Even Jesus’ instruction for evangelism and mission were all given to a community of tight-knit believers—not simply to individuals (see Matt. 28:19; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). These types of communities bring hope to a lonely and isolated society. In fact, our entire lives are meant to be lived in community on mission (see Eph. 2:1–22).

Often when I speak of community, I find that people believe they are already walking in healthy community. But as I ask them to dig deeper, I find that they have a set time and place (often on Sunday) when they meet together, but they are not by any means digging beyond the surface into the matters of the heart.

Community is an incredible gift God has given us to experience, but

because of our tendency toward individualism, the real thing is often far from our reach. With God's gracious pursuit and some intentionality, however, we can recover it in all its fullness.

AN UNNECESSARY DIVIDE

For many churches, the idea of community usually takes the form of a small group. Many of these small groups follow a specific type of structure, whether cell groups, Sunday school classes, life groups, or some other clever name they've brainstormed to emphasize Christian community. Alongside these community-focused groups, churches have also concluded that they are designed to engage in missions (at least I hope they have).

Though missions and groups are assumed staples within the church, the depth of community often varies. These strategies have often, inadvertently, created a divide between the mission to reach those outside the church and the mission to connect individuals in the church to one another. Most churches are good at one or the other.

Some churches pride themselves in being a loving church, meaning that they care well for one another. Often these churches struggle to reach out to new people because they might mess up the fellowship that the body cherishes. Other churches pride themselves in reaching out to those who are far from God. Often these churches struggle to connect new Christians to genuine relationships where they can grow in Christlikeness.

Church researchers Tim Chester and Steve Timmis have discovered that

As people live on mission with others, they discover community. And as people live in true community, they will seek mission.

Western culture has become very compartmentalized. We want to spend more time in evangelism, but because this can happen only at the expense of something else, it never happens.

Rethinking evangelism as relationship rather than event radically changes this. . . . Our identity as human beings is found in community. Our identity as Christians is found in Christ's new community. And mission takes place through communities of light. . . . Christian community is a vital part of a Christian's mission. Mission takes place as people see our love for one another.⁴

Do mission and community have to be separated? No. We must aggressively fight against the false idea that community happens over in one area while mission and evangelism take place separately with in their own space or program. When this duality exists, the church's effectiveness is diminished severely because it compartmentalizes our lives as believers.

How do we pursue community and mission? It's more closely connected than you may realize. As people live on mission with others, they discover community. And as people live in true community, they will seek mission. Community and mission are not in competition with each other—they are inseparable. You don't have to choose one or the other.

If you have ever been on a mission trip then you know what I'm talking about. You return from the trip having never felt closer to a group of people or more inspired to be involved in God's work. For many churches, mission trips are the only place that Christian community and intentional mission intersect. Why is the environment created through mission trips not the culture that daily permeates our churches?

Eliminating the duality that exists in missions and community and melding these ideas together will help spread the gospel to a lonely world. Not only do gospel communities act as a beacon of light but they also become a place of healing for the soul.

MISSION THROUGH COMMUNITY

Gospel communities alone do not bring about identity and worth, but they display the One who does. God has reconciled believers to

Himself. Gospel community is a means to exhibit the gospel's light to a dark and hurting society (see Matt. 5:14–16).

“The most persuasive argument for the Christian faith is the Christian community,” notes Todd Engstrom, executive pastor at Austin Stone Community Church. “The majority of conversions throughout church history have come not through argumentation, but through belonging to a meaningful community before belief is ever required.”⁵

What would it look like if our communities were united by this hope-filled gospel, actively loving and caring for one another as they live out mission together? Acts 2:46–47 gives us an indication: “Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Communities centered on the gospel fly in the face of isolation and yet convey the grace-filled inclusion that we so desperately desire. These communities bring with them the answer the world is hungry for. It is a community that invites others to feast at the Lord's table.

Picture it: a community for the hurting, the lonely, the has-beens, the have-nots, the accomplished, the rebellious, the self-righteous. Picture God taking this ragtag group and forming them together for the greatest mission we could ever join. This is His track record from Genesis to now.

Community is more than a Sunday and mission is more than a trip. Discovering and building this idea may seem overwhelming, but through the Holy Spirit's work, it is possible. Through gospel community, we can eradicate the epidemic of individualism and loneliness. I have experienced it and have watched as God has done this in thousands of others' lives.

Why does life in community matter? That's what we're about to discover. Through the pages of this book we'll explore the power and importance of doing life together, we'll dig into what that should look like, and we'll make a proactive plan for how we will pursue intentionally living that way. Are you ready to be part of the exciting adventure of life in community? Let's go!

GETTING PRACTICAL

- **WHEN** was the last time you had a deep, heart-level conversation with another believer? What has been the challenge in pursuing that? Would you commit to scheduling a time to talk with a fellow believer and go deeper?
- **DOES** heart-level conversation happen regularly with a consistent group of people (ideally from your local church)?
- **WHEN** was the last time you had meaningful conversation over a meal at your house? At someone else's?
- **HOW** many of your neighbors do you know more intimately than by merely saying, "Hey, how's it going?"
- **HOW** many people know the real struggles you face? To what degree?