

THE PROBLEM OF ISOLATION

It can never be said that Adele Gaboury's neighbors were less than responsible.

When her front lawn grew hip-high, they had a local boy mow it down. When her pipes froze and burst, they had the water turned off. When the mail spilled out the front door, they called the police. The only thing they didn't do was check to see if she was alive.

She wasn't.

On Monday, police climbed her crumbling brick stoop, broke in the side door of her little blue house, and found what they believe to be the seventy-three-year-old woman's skeletal remains sunk in a five-foot-high pile of trash, where they had apparently lain, perhaps for as long as four years.

"It's not really a very friendly neighborhood," said Eileen Dugan, seventy, once a close friend of

Gaboury's, whose house sits less than twenty feet from the dead woman's home. "I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and I was sick of her coming over at all hours. Eventually I stopped answering the door."

Isolation. It's the second major obstacle to connecting in true community. This contemporary human condition flows out of the first major obstacle, namely, a culture of individualism, which promises to give us the best—only to inflict on us the disease of loneliness.

Remember the Johnson family? They have the same problem, even though it has certainly not manifested itself as severely as it did in the life of Adele Gaboury. They are not yet aware of their problem as something that robs them of community, for it's usually not recognized until trouble hits. But they clearly have the disease. All you have to do is look back at chapter 1 to see how isolated Bob and Karen are and just how little time they have to do anything about it.

How did two highly educated, intelligent people get themselves into this place? Well, it wasn't so much a situation they consciously chose to adopt as it was something they were drawn into—like many of us are. Just as they were influenced by a culture of individualism, so they were influenced by a culture of isolation. As it turned out, the Johnsons were simply mimicking the lifestyles of the people they admired from a distance; they came down with the same thing these people had been afflicted with—"closet loneliness"—a type of isolation that can't readily be seen in public but is nonetheless very real and very painful.

A MODERN-DAY PRISON

When did this experience of isolation begin to rear its ugly head against the American people? Once again sociology experts point to the 1950s as a pivotal period in the development of a culture of isolation. It was during this era that Americans began to build places to live that have turned out to be more of a prison than a home—we know these places as *the suburbs*. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* staff writer Liz Stevens writes the following:

Suburbs were created after World War II to remedy a housing shortage where the land was the cheapest. The automobile made it easy for people to commute longer distances to work. The clean, spacious suburbs, as they were, fit neatly into the concept of the American Dream. What happened is that suburban developers created a housing market aimed at newly affluent populations. That, plus deteriorating inner-city services (especially schools), racism, and other factors, catalyzed the white middle-class's flight to the "burbs." But these developers were not architects or urban planners, and the new suburbs did not take into account basic human needs.²

What did suburban design, or lack of design, do to keep our most basic needs from being met? Consider life in community before the 1950s. In ancient communities, including those built in America prior to the 1950s, designers placed residences, retail stores, and workplaces within walking distance of each other—and they did this, for the most part, for purely practical reasons. The kind of individualized transportation available to people today via the automobile was not available to prior generations. Yet, as it

turns out, these densely created communities met more than practical needs; as a result of their layout, they facilitated our more basic and essential *relational* needs as well.

Paul Geisel, a professor of urban affairs at the University of Texas at Arlington, writes:

Before suburbs, developers would build on city streets already laid out for them. In a typical pre-World War II urban neighborhood, homes were built upward to promote density and placed close to the street. They had spacious, covered front porches close to the public sidewalk, making it easy to talk with neighbors walking back from the local market. Today's subdivisions feature wide, winding streets, which promote speedy driving. New homes with tiny front porches sit imposingly behind large private lawns. And there is no corner store, or public space for community gatherings.³

Nan Ellin, assistant professor of urban design and planning at the University of Cincinnati, adds to Geisel's indictment by pointing out that all you have in the suburbs is private space. People drive into their driveways, go into their houses, and never see one another. And when television and newspapers become a person's only source of information about his or her community, fear and isolation run rampant.⁴

Philip Langdon, senior editor at *Progressive Architecture* magazine, observes the following:

The United States has become a predominantly suburban nation, but not a very happy one. . . . It is no coincidence that at the moment when the United States has become a predominantly suburban nation, the

country has suffered a bitter harvest of individualized trauma, family distress, and civic decay.⁵

Writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*, author James Howard Kunstler is brutal to the suburban way of life, suggesting that it is "socially devastating and spiritually degrading."⁶

Architects and urban planners aren't the only ones blaming the suburban life for the current angst and isolation of the majority of American people. So are "people experts" and sociologists. Communications scientist John Locke has this to say:

The world's longest-acting vocal suppressant has undoubtedly been urbanization. After World War II, ownership of homes increased, suburbs formed, commuting intensified, and people began to isolate themselves in homes with television sets and other private amusements. . . . In our modern, complex societies, we are suffering from a social form of progressive aphonia. That is, we are losing our personal voices. During a period in which feelings of isolation and loneliness are on the rise, too many of us are becoming emotionally and socially mute.⁷

This research, similar results of the research, and the real-life stories of the tragedy of isolation are unending. I believe it's time for church leaders to take a long, hard look at the negative effects of the suburb on the development of biblical community. The fact of the matter is, this is where most church members live. As we ponder the question of how to develop authentic Christian community, we must carefully probe the obstacle presented by the places we have created in which to live. Too often church leaders lay out

biblical mandates for the church community and wonder why people are not committed to it. We must not only interpret the ancient text of Scripture, we must also interpret the contemporary culture if we hope to fulfill the goal of helping people become fully developing followers of Christ in the context of authentic community.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

When Bob and Karen Johnson are at home, there is no one with whom to talk or connect. There is no one walking by—not even themselves—contrary to what they were thinking and hoping would happen after they moved to their new home. Everyone seems to be connected to their homestead only through a closed-in automobile. As a matter of fact, various studies have suggested that walking has decreased significantly in America in the last twenty years. John Locke proposes that many people have traded in real walking for a virtual brand: ambulating on motorized treadmills while watching television or listening to their favorite tunes, neither reaching physical destinations nor satisfying social appetites, but “pretty much keeping to themselves.”⁸

While at home the Johnsons turn to television or newspaper for local news, and now “real time” global news as well. Samaritanship is seldom covered on the news (unless, of course, a young man helps an elderly woman across the street and she falls in the process, then sues the man). Because sizzle is what sells, the newsmen tell Bob and Karen that the neighbors around them are predominantly crooks and murderers, even though only a relatively

few Americans are actually severely immoral and devious. This serves only to intensify the Johnsons’ fear. They install alarm systems, keep their doors locked at all times, and require their children to play in the backyard, which is surrounded by a six-foot privacy fence.

When the Johnsons go out for routine errands, they seldom encounter or relate to actual, real live people anymore. They get gas at a station where there is no attendant. Bob just sticks his credit card in the automated machine, fills up his gas tank, and takes off, not speaking to a single person in the process. Like most banking experiences these days, the Johnsons’ experience is an automated one. (In some banks in America, you’re now charged a three-dollar fee to talk to an actual person.) When the Johnsons venture out to the large mall fifteen minutes away, they find themselves surrounded by a multitude of people, but they know no one. People seem to work hard at avoiding conversation.

Because their experience outside the walls of their home seldom involves meaningful human interaction anyway, the Johnsons are discovering that it’s more convenient to do their banking and shopping on the Internet. Yet, while it’s more convenient, the reality is, it’s not helping them with their boredom and loneliness.

Once a year the Johnsons venture out to the local amusement park. They even made the “great American Dream” journey out to Disneyland. At these places they are literally surrounded by thousands of people. The parks re-create little townlike structures that seek to give you the impression that everyone is kinfolk or a close family friend. Yet, there’s no denying the truth: The Johnsons know no

one, and they spend much of the day standing in long lines, uncomfortably close to people they know nothing about. Happily, the theme parks have provided strategically located TV monitors to enhance the waiting experience, so that people can ignore each other more comfortably.

When the Johnsons go to work, they go in opposite directions. They had never given much thought to the location of their work in relationship to their home. With high-speed freeways, initiated by President Eisenhower in the 1950s, and automobiles allowed to travel sixty-five or seventy miles per hour on these freeways, who really cares anyway? In the Johnsons' metropolitan area, the freeways have HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes for cars with more than one person in them. On those many evenings when Bob and Karen are both stuck in a freeway traffic jam on their way home, they often think just how nice it would be to hop over into an HOV lane—after all, no one else is using it.

On many evenings, the Johnsons overestimate how many errands they can run with their fast-moving metal homes on wheels, with the result that they find themselves eating fast food in the car. Bob has had so many dining experiences in the car that he has pondered buying a car equipped with a foldout dining table to go with the six cup holders already installed.

THE CHURCH—PART OF THE PRISON SYSTEM

Everything and everyone in the Johnsons' life is disconnected. Their church experience is no different. The Johnsons enjoy the sermons, but they had really hoped for

a deeper sense of community. They thought they might experience community through their small group, but now, after a year, they've begun to miss on average one of the two monthly meetings because they just can't fit it into their schedule. Their hearts are in the right place, but their electronic palm-held calendars just can't work it out. While the once-a-month gathering doesn't add up to a meaningful experience for them, in reality the every-other-week thing didn't do it either. What they hoped would be the answer to their search to belong has turned out to be yet another world to manage—one that feels contrived and forced.

The Johnsons are beginning to contemplate checking out another church. They are unable to pinpoint exactly what they think is wrong with the church they're in, but in America, if you have any kind of inkling that your needs are not being met, you tend to move on. So in time the Johnsons will just slip out the door, never to return. Maybe someone will make a phone call, or they may have one encounter with a well-meaning church member about their whereabouts, but essentially their absence will go unnoticed. And their search for satisfaction continues.

we apparently only asked, "Can we do it?"—not "Should we do it?" Looking back at fifty years of suburban life, I would suggest that we could do it—because we did—but we should not have done it in the manner in which we did it. We ignored what our ancestors had learned about designing a place where people could live together and grow in community. They taught us, if only we had paid attention, that there are principles governing how to build places that promote close-knit human community. While modern-day circumstances are different, Americans have responded in much the same way the people of Israel did to the charge Jeremiah gave them over 2,500 years ago:

*This is what the LORD says:
 "Stand at the crossroads and look;
 ask for the ancient paths,
 ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
 and you will find rest for your souls.
 But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"²*

This chapter will reveal that Bob and Karen Johnson have made some critical decisions that they obviously *could* have made but probably *should* not have made—and they are not alone.

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY AROUND A COMMON PLACE

When we built our suburban homes and our new cities, we not only ignored what those who had gone before us could teach us about human community, we also ignored what the Bible teaches about biblical community. Biblical community is a collection of people who gather around a common biblical purpose and common principles.

FINDING A COMMON PLACE

There's a line from the 1993 box office hit movie *Jurassic Park* that aptly describes the American lifestyle. At one point in the movie a group of people, comprised of a lawyer and some "salt of the earth" paleontologists, are sitting around a large conference table. It finally sinks in that eccentric billionaire John Hammond has created a genetic wonder world of prehistoric dinosaurs reconstructed from the DNA of dinosaur blood extracted from ancient mosquitoes. The paleontologists are caught up in the marvel of actually seeing flesh on the bones they have been digging up for years; the lawyer sees dollar signs. Only one character, John Malcolm (played by Jeff Goldblum), offers a stern word of caution and concern. He says, "Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should!"¹

This confrontational statement can and should be applied to the American way of life adopted over the past fifty years. When we began to build our sprawling suburbs, superhighway systems, and faster automobiles in the 1950s,

However, a group of people can be committed to the Bible from its opening page to its concluding page and still not be a community. By the same token, a group of people can experience community and not be biblical in its purpose. What does this mean? That there are some common characteristics shared by groups of people who experience true community around a common place. When these five characteristics are fully functioning, they seem to facilitate the chemistry for community. When one or more is absent, something essential is lost. If all five are missing, it's highly probable that human community is not being experienced, regardless of the group's commitment to the Bible. As you read about each characteristic, evaluate whether it is present and functioning within your "community."

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is defined as "acting or taking place without any outside force or cause."³ Places of effective community exhibit this very characteristic. While there are gatherings that are planned with rich tradition and elaborate ritual, most of the gatherings are unplanned—that is, spontaneous.

Take, for example, the small-town neighborhoods in America before the 1950s. People may have had one car per family; many simply used public transportation. If a family did own a car, it was usually driven to work by the man of the house. Throughout the course of the day the wife would need to shop for groceries or other staple items; she may even need to get to the town square's post office to check for mail. Everyone else in the neighbor-

hood needed to do the same. In those days houses were located within walking distance of places of work and retail shops. As a result, numerous times in a single day people in the neighborhood would walk by other homes—homes cropped closely to the street, with a sidewalk in between. Oftentimes family members were found outside, sitting on the front porch and sipping iced tea. They were outside because there was no central air conditioning in the house; the porch was the place that held the most breeze for the money. There was nothing of particular interest on television—which most people didn't own anyway. They were very likely drinking simple brewed tea to keep themselves from dehydrating—not the exotic flavored teas we drink today as the "hip" thing to do. Whenever Mrs. Jones would walk by on her way to the store to get some fresh milk or eggs, the family on the porch would call out a greeting. They might even take the time to "shoot the breeze" over a glass of tea. Their interaction wasn't a planned event but a spontaneous encounter in which human contact was made and the local "gossip chain" was usually kept alive.

Consider the lives of the children in these old-fashioned neighborhoods. While Dad was at work, did little Johnny ask Mom if he could go over to Billy's house on the other side of town? Did Mom agree and pull her seven-passenger van out of the rear-entry garage and take her beloved son over to Billy's house twenty minutes away? Well, if truth be told, this wouldn't have happened! First, many families didn't even own a car, let alone a seven-passenger luxury van. Children were expected to play in the neighborhood with the children who lived there. There were relatively few organized

sports. Parents were not reduced to playing the role of licensed chauffeur and entertainment specialist. Children were expected to use their imagination, on a nonexistent monetary budget, to create a day filled with spontaneous play. They never got away with a lot of mischief, because the other neighbors were out on their front porches, taking a walk to run a necessary errand, or working in their backyards—which were not, by the way, protected by six-foot privacy fences. If little Johnny was up to something, Mom and Dad would most likely know about it before he came home for supper.

This kind of spontaneous activity was not just characteristic of pre-World War II American neighborhoods; it has been the experience of 99.9 percent of human civilization before that. Only in the last fifty years have people been robbed of their spontaneity. Jesus experienced it with his disciples. They didn't have to schedule teaching times or mealtimes, because they were together already. The Old Testament patriarch Jacob didn't have to wonder whether his eldest son, Reuben, would remember to call each night; Reuben was living in the tent next door. Every night the family members would gather by the fire and tell stories and laugh together. For their entertainment they didn't travel twenty minutes away to the late-night movie theater, equipped with the latest and best high-tech features, stadium seating, and football-field-size screen. That kind of entertainment just didn't exist. When the sun went down, the lights were out. Only the light from an oil lamp or a small fire was available for family members to gather around and talk.

John Locke tells us that “our spontaneity has taken a plunge.”⁴ Most Americans don't know that they lost it, or that they ever had it, for that matter. But it seems that they do long for it. For most of the last decade of the twentieth century, two television shows, *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, consistently received the top awards from the People's Choice Awards, whose honorees are chosen by a special opinion poll of thousands of Americans.⁵ What both shows have in common is a small group of friends who go in and out of each other's lives and apartments spontaneously more times in a half hour than most “real” Americans experience in a year. *Seinfeld* even promoted itself as a show “about nothing.” Why would busy Americans watch a show about nothing? Because it wasn't about nothing—it was about a group of great friends spending a lot of spontaneous time together, talking about everyday stuff and loving every minute of it. Apparently so did the people who watched the shows.

If Americans are going to find fulfillment in their search to belong, they must find a small band of people who spontaneously go in and out of each other's lives. The small group the Johnsons had joined at church seemed to hold this promise, but the desired result was never achieved—at least in part because *this* type of small group requires everything to be planned in advance or it doesn't happen. (As a matter of fact, one of the cardinal rules for a leader of a small group is that you must plan the next meeting before the last one ends or you may never be able to coordinate schedules to get back together again.) It's not that the Johnsons and the other group members don't want spontaneous encounters, it simply isn't

the way their lives work. The distance between friends, which can only be overcome through careful planning and some kind of a commute, places spontaneity out of reach. Once again we see that the characteristics of community go against the grain of our contemporary culture, that is, they are countercultural. Yet, this shouldn't surprise us. The "me" world we've created for ourselves is not a compatible environment for the principles that govern human community.

Availability

Closely akin to spontaneity is the characteristic of *availability*. Those who have found a meaningful experience of life together discover that most of the time it is because their comrades are ready, willing, and eager to lend an ear or a hand—or even to offer the simple gift of their presence. It's not that these people do not have important things to do; it's just that they see being available to each other as more important than most of the things we in today's society deem important—the things that keep us continually on the road to nowhere.

In other times and in other cultures a *screen* was commonly understood as a lightweight meshed-wire door designed to let fresh air in the house, keep bugs out, and signal to the neighbors that someone was home. It was a sort of invitation. In our suburban way of life, a screen has come to carry the opposite connotation. It does not filter out bugs, but people. Peepholes, Caller ID, answering machines, and voice mailboxes give us the option to say yes to one and no to another. Mind you, this is not all bad. The technological world we have created for ourselves enables

the entire world to be a potential caller. Most of the calls we receive are from strangers trying to sell us something—in the end, preying on our loneliness. At the same time, most of us really do long for a true friend to drop by or call—but we understand when they don't; after all, everybody really is so very busy.

In the past, if a person who lived in a place of true community wanted to chat with a friend, the chances were good that the friend would be instantly available because they both lived within walking distance of one another—you see, for the most part, they didn't have the kind of mobility options we have today. The person was available because there really were no other places to be.

We have already voiced the opinion that most of us don't know the people who live around us. So, instead of *getting* to know these people, we typically opt to engage in contractual friendships with those who are most like us or with those we like the best, regardless of where they live. Why? Because this is one thing we *can* do. The unspoken goal of contractual friendship is to "associate up"—usually as it relates to economic class.

There are significant problems in adopting this style of contrived community. First and foremost, it isn't pleasing to God. Jesus scolded the religious leaders of his day for trying to define one's neighbor in any sort of restricted way. One expert of the law tried to justify himself as a good neighbor but wanted his evaluation to include only those of his own race and status. In response, Jesus told the famous story of the Good Samaritan, thereby dismantling this faulty view of community.⁶

In an article in the *Cornell Law Review*, Greg Alexander challenges this breed of friendships as well. Alexander views the tensions around community in American life as a conflict between the *contractarian* and *communitarian* theories of community. The former, related to a rational-choice theory, views individuals as atomistic, not connected to each other except as they agree to be connected for personal benefit. In the communitarian ideal, “individuals are embedded in society, connected not only through their common humanity but through the social structures they jointly create and benefit from.”⁷⁷

The second significant problem with contractual friendships is this: They don’t really work. As time and practice have proved, we are not really available for each other apart from precise planning. We might take a moment to look out our kitchen window to see if someone is available, but it isn’t likely that we would drive across town on the hunch that a friend will be home and free to talk with you. This isn’t to say, of course, that the intentions are not good. It is simply to say—it *doesn’t really work*. Imagine a monk not being happy with the type of people who reside in his monastery. So he opts to develop his deepest friendships with guys in the monastery thirty miles away. Ludicrous, you say. It would never happen. You see, monks may lack mobility, but they do maintain the highest level of availability. This is one of the reasons their experience of community is such a positive one. If we hired a Benedictine monk to guide us toward a more simple way of life, I’m convinced he would tell us that we can’t get where we want to go given the lifestyle we have chosen. He would

recommend a “radical reinventing” that includes freeing up more time to be available for community. The question is, how badly do we want community?

Frequency

Another characteristic of community that promotes the value of a common place is *frequency*. Simply put, people who are satisfied with the experience of community are those who spend a great deal of time together. In the book of Acts we are given a rare peek into the wonderful and effective community of the “First Church of Jerusalem”:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*⁸

Luke tells us that this close-knit group of Christ-followers devoted themselves to four principal things: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Beginning in verse 43 of Acts 2, and continuing on for several verses, we are shown the outcome of their community devotion. Miracles took place, people’s lives were being changed, the believers cared deeply and sacrificially for each other, new people were coming to know Christ—and as a result their group grew rapidly. The Bible says they even enjoyed a spectacular reputation in the surrounding community. But there is one aspect of their fellowship most modern-day believers overlook—how often they got together: “Every day they continued to meet together.”⁹

The big issue in Bob and Karen’s church is how often should a small group meet—once a week, or every other week. What we are learning from studying healthy places

of community is that neither once a week nor every other week is enough to create the results of real community. If we want the outcome of the "First Church of Jerusalem," we must be willing to put in the same level of commitment. It doesn't make sense to input one-seventh or one-fourteenth of all the available time and expect 100 percent of the results.

You are no doubt shaking your head in disbelief at such a suggestion. But this kind of daily interaction has been a dominant characteristic and requirement of community throughout history. In India a small group of Christians in a village gather every day to pray. You can see the depth of their love for each other as you view the videotape of their meeting—it's that evident. Christians in India need our financial resources to help them accomplish Christ's mission, but they *don't* need our style of church. The worst thing we could do is to "colonialize" the American church model in India, imposing it on them. Rather, we should rejoice to give them all our money to teach us how they do Christian community.

Even in the college fraternity house, the notion of multiple encounters in a given day with the same people is not seen as unusual but the norm. (Maybe this explains why so many people have such fond memories of their college days.) Add as an overlay a common commitment to Christ, like Campus Crusade for Christ does, and it thoroughly ruins the graduate's chances of a happy assimilation into today's "individualized" church.

The American lifestyle does not represent the norm in the world today but the exception. The world we've cre-

ated for ourselves pulls us apart from daily interaction, making us the loneliest people in the world.

This social condition has progressively worsened in the last fifty years, much like the frog placed in a pot of room-temperature water. When the temperature was slowly turned up, little by little, he was unaware of what was happening—he, like us, being boiled to death and never realizing it. John Locke lays bare a very telling study of American life:

Each year in a large and respected poll, the General Social Survey, Americans from a range of demographic groups are asked how often they spend an evening socializing with a neighbor. In 1974 nearly one in four Americans visited with a neighbor several times a week. By 1994, that figure had declined to 16 percent. But in 1994 there was a shocking increase in the number of people who had *never* spent an evening with a neighbor—from one in five to nearly one in three—a 41 percent increase since the same question was asked twenty years earlier.¹⁰

The isolated places in which we live have given rise to an unprecedented number of practicing counselors in the marketplace. I would never want to imply that mental health professionals are not needed to help us through some of the struggles we encounter in life. However, people often employ them as nothing more than a "paid friend." In my opinion, I would cautiously suggest that roughly 80 percent of this industry has been created in the last twenty-five years as an alternative to what true community used to provide free of charge. I see churches

struggle as they try to create community, as they try to establish strong, properly functioning small groups, in a “place,” or lack of place, where friendships are outsourced to paid professionals. As they strategize to create community today, church leaders must find a way to address these issues. Jim Petersen lays it out in the simplest of chromatic terms: “Body Life is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and embraces the full spectrum of our activities.”¹¹ If people are not willing to restructure their lives and their time to get to the heart of this characteristic of frequency—and trust me, it can be done—the experience of true community will continue to elude them. Unless we make these changes, we will never have the kind of community the “First Church of Jerusalem” had, and we should stop pretending that we do.

Common Meals

It is hard to believe that something as mundane as sharing a meal together could be included in the list of the top characteristics of community, but it is. Now, note carefully, it’s not just eating, but eating *together*. In a story about Dr. Daniel Sack, author of *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture*, writer Jeffrey Weiss from *The Dallas Morning News* begins his article with these words: “The casseroles and Jell-O molds of the traditional Protestant potluck supper may seem unlikely sources for serious insight. But Daniel Sack, associate director for the Material History of American Religion project, says there is important information about belief and custom hidden among the beanie-weenies.”¹²

Although many Bible readers tend to overlook it, eating together was a significant part of the early church experience: “Every day they continued to meet together. . . . They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”¹³ There is something vitally important and special about sharing a meal together. Just consider the fact that the Lord’s Supper (an act of partaking together of food and drink) is one of the few New Testament rituals we are commanded to observe. Eberhard Arnold, who founded the Bruderhof Communities, put it eloquently when he wrote, “Symbolism can be found in the trivialities of existence, too: when approached with reverence, even daily rites such as mealtime can become consecrated festivals of community.”¹⁴

By and large the concept of eating together has become foreign to the American culture. It is rare for the average American family to share two to three meals together during the week. Look more closely at the Johnson family, and you will see that the children’s sports activities and a lot of extra hours at the office account for most of the meals missed together at night. Just try once to suggest that a small group of people share a meal a couple of times a week, and see how many people will laugh at you because they can’t even manage to do that with their own families. Admittedly, given our current lifestyles, this is an unreasonable expectation—which is precisely why making progress toward real community will take major restructuring. When we fail to practice the community value of eating together, something serious is lost in the quality of our contemporary experience of community.

Geography

The characteristic of community that facilitates and drives the previous four is *geography*. The simple fact is that in all places of effective community people live in close proximity to each other—and the closer the better! Consider Jesus and his disciples. To those he encountered, Jesus extended the invitation, “Come, follow me,” not “Come, make the commute each day.” The late Henri Nouwen left a prestigious Ivy League professorship to become the executive director of L’Arche, a residential community for mentally and physically challenged people. He did so because of what he perceived as a divine call. What he found at L’Arche was the richest community he had ever experienced. However, soon after he arrived he fell apart. In his own words he tells the story:

After many years of life in universities, where I never felt fully at home, I had become a member of L’Arche, a community of men and women with disabilities. I had been received with open arms, given all the attention and affection I could hope for, and offered a safe and loving place to grow spiritually as well as emotionally. Everything seemed ideal. But precisely at that time I fell apart—as if I needed a safe place to hit bottom.¹⁵

Christian psychologist Larry Crabb offers this insightful commentary regarding Nouwen’s experience:

When he gave them [his prestigious career and all it offered him] up for life with people who were not impressed by such things, perhaps his repressed desire to be loved rather than merely admired overwhelmed him.

The taste of love that his new community provided may have awakened deeper longings than he ever knew existed, longings that he feared would never be satisfied.¹⁶

We learn from Henri Nouwen’s experience that community does not necessarily require profound intelligence, but it does require being geographically close enough to be available for each other spontaneously and frequently enough to feel safe and loved.

One lady wrote of her experience in a residential community with a group of women who lived together in one house. While not everything about it was positive, on the whole it was remarkably meaningful for her. Soon after getting married she abandoned this style of relationships. She began to attend her husband’s church-sponsored small group. Here’s her honest assessment of that experience: “Living in residential community raised my standards. For several months I attended my husband’s church small group. I thought, ‘This is intimacy? This is challenge?’ After years of prayer, fellowship, and everyday life with five close roommates, a weekly meeting with a dozen people seemed shallow.”¹⁷

The Johnsons’ suburban small group experience is not a bad thing; it’s just not enough. For their experience to go to the next level of meaning, it should be “pedestrian accessible”; you should be able to walk to get to each other. In the Western world, as it comes to expression in the suburb where the Johnsons live, this means finding community in a neighborhood. You can contract with a collection of the brightest, smartest, strongest, prettiest, and most spiritual people to form a small group, but if they are not in close

proximity (that is, living within walking distance), it just won't compare to what poor people in a House of Prayer in India experience. Their village closeness and their commitment to Christ and to each other daily make their life together a sight to behold. Once you see it, you will emphatically want it for yourself.

Of course, many would raise objections to this counter-cultural concept of geographic-based relationships. With Internet chat rooms we *can* have instant friendships with anyone at any time and anywhere in the world for a minimal cost. Critics would also add that nowhere in America are social networks established today according to geography—and they would be right. However, this is not a strong argument to abandon the rediscovery of neighborhood, especially when you consider that the current model has produced what many social experts call “the loneliest people on the face of the earth.” I also understand that there are negative reactions that are more personal in nature. Because we naturally want to defend the quality of the relationships we have already formed, many of us will be offended by this exposé on the potential weaknesses of nongeographic friendships. All I would plead for as you respond to my subjective and personal evaluation is an open mind.

Having said all this, I hasten to add that geographic-based community has its share of problems and challenges. Just ponder for a moment the small, old-fashioned town with a main street where everyone works and shops, a town where houses are all pretty much within walking distance. Some who live there would say that they do not experience intimacy but an invasion of their privacy! Everybody

knows everything about you and might even, on occasion, use their knowledge to feed the local gossip mill. This isn't true community; rather, it can be classified as “community without character.” The good news is, this can be changed. By contrast, most people who live in suburban America are left alone, and news about their life is kept secret (at least in part because people don't care). Real community is simply not accessible to them. In the former situation, it's a matter of changing the ethics of community; in the latter, it's a matter of trying to find community at all.

Take a man and a woman with three children and stick them together under one roof, and you'll get moments of intense conflict and irritation. But most people are not willing to forsake family life just because it has its challenging moments. They stick with it not because it is easy but because it is meaningful. So it is with Christian community as well. If everybody is spread out geographically so that they see each other just once a week or once a month, it might be less burdensome from a scheduling perspective, but it will most likely not be meaningful. One of the biggest challenges in the effort to build community is to convince people to choose something that may not necessarily be easy, but is nonetheless good for them.

The profundity of this characteristic of geography lies in the simple accessibility it offers people. If Bob and Karen were to find their most significant relationships within their neighborhood, these relationships would begin to meet some of their deepest needs. But because the Johnsons are a product of their culture, they just can't see how this could work. A lot of people don't know *anyone* in their neighborhood, let alone

another Christian individual or family from their church or from another church. However, this principle should not be immediately dismissed just because the circumstances aren't all lined up at present. If they were, there would be no need for me to write this section of the book. In the next chapter you'll discover just how close you may be to experiencing real Christian community!



REDISCOVERING NEIGHBORHOOD

As Bob and Karen are introduced to the idea of simplifying the many disconnected worlds they manage into one hub, to be built around Christian relationships within a neighborhood, they breathe a sigh of relief. Yet, they can't see how it could work. Well, it can and does work for many people. The Johnsons need to remember that what currently defines their lifestyle and time commitments is not working. While this commitment to community will take time and experimentation, something new must be attempted. If we continue using the same methods, we should not expect to achieve different results. Princeton professor Robert Wuthnow cites this testimony, which emerged out of his research on America's quest for community:

I used to be in this group of people who met weekly, and that was a specific circle of friends where we really did help each other out, sharing problems, sharing whatever. Now my friends are more linear. I'm friends with this person and I'm friends with that person, but I don't have a circle of friends who sort of know each other right now.'