

Community Life 101

**Getting the Most
Out of Your Small Group
Experience**

By Randall Neighbour

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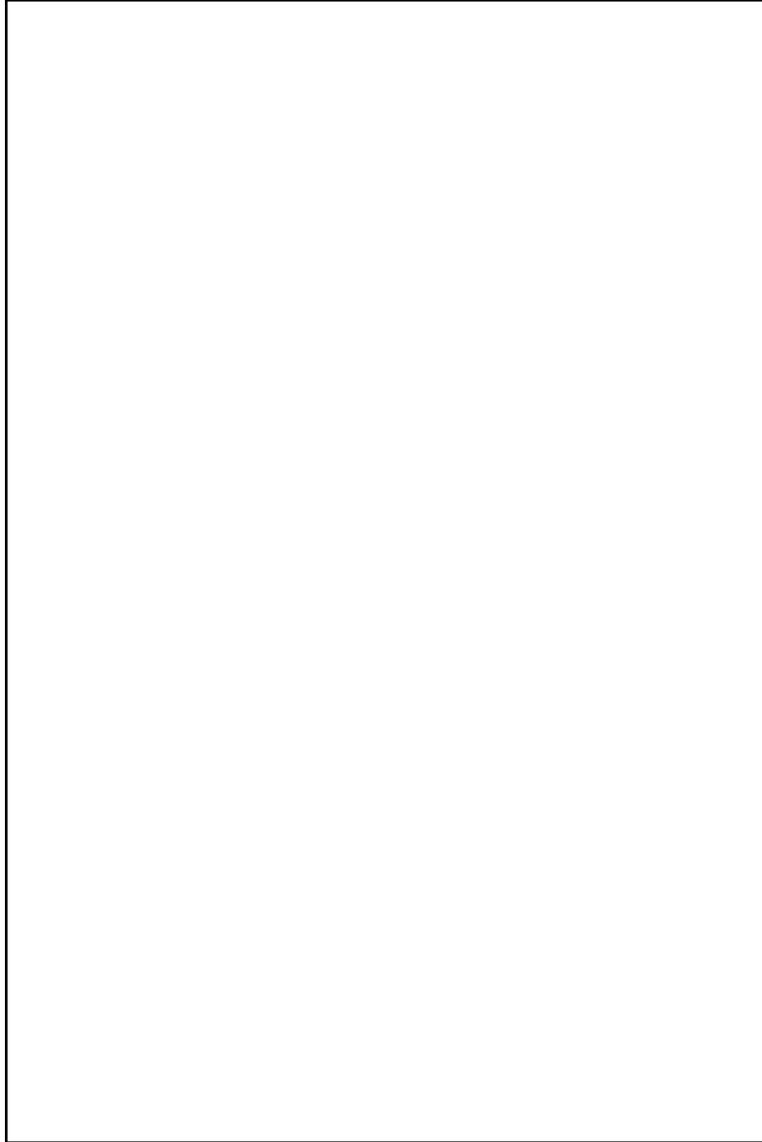
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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter One: What is Biblical Community?	9
Chapter Two: The Power of Prayer	23
Chapter Three: Lean On Me	51
Chapter Four: Widening Your Circle	83
Chapter Five: Leaving Home	105
Chapter Six: Your Weekly Meeting	119
Chapter Seven: Community As a Way of Life	147



Introduction

When I was a kid, Christmas morning was hands-down the best day of the year. For weeks leading up to this wonderful day, I dreamed of unwrapping that special toy. In the mind of a child, Christmas Day was all about receiving gifts.

December 25th is still one of the best days of the year! As an adult, I now receive a great deal of joy and satisfaction knowing I have found the perfect gift for my wife, family, or friends. Now it's all about giving, just like the reason for the season...the gift of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

It may be that your main objective in small group life is to discover what you can get out of it, which isn't a bad place to start. I think everyone looks at something new and thinks about this first.

Your small group offers a lot, including a sense of belonging, and a place to discover God and share one's hurts. But just like my shift in thinking about Christmas, you'll find that the more you invest in others, the better group life becomes for you.

This book was purposely designed to be brief and lighthearted. Others have written deep,

theological books on the basis of community. I've read many of these books and none of them told me how to be a better small group member or get more out of it. That's why I wrote this book, and filled it with true stories from my life in small groups. I hope you enjoy it, and find a bunch of good tips and ideas to make your small group the best thing in which you've ever been a part!

A Quick Note: At the end of each chapter, you'll find some practical ways you can apply and share what you've read. If the chapter leave you wanting more, additional resources are listed.

Chapter 1

What is Biblical Community?

I grew up in the church as a preacher's kid. Life was my church and church was my life. My dad, the senior pastor, ensured our church always had a very strong small group emphasis that included prayer, ministry to one another, and lots of time invested in unchurched people.

By the time I was a junior in high school, I was a successful small group leader in our church's growing youth group. Seven of my friends found Christ that year and four of them became group leaders themselves. This small group experience, or what I would call my Christian community, gave me a strong sense of purpose in life during my difficult adolescent years.

Being a small group leader in high school was exciting. I saw God radically change my friends and even their parents, who wanted to know what had transformed their teenagers. Despite all the good I saw and experienced, I still longed to be on my own and independent from family and church. I couldn't find where my family and church ended and my personal faith began.

I stopped going to church when I left home and enrolled in a Christian college. I decided that five days of chapel every week was enough church for anyone. I dropped out of college in 1982, moved back home, and took a job in a small, independent photography lab near downtown Houston, far away from my childhood home and church in the suburbs.

One day, the owner of a little tavern down the street came into my photo lab to have his vacation pictures developed. He invited my boss and me to come to his bar after work for a beer. He said that if we showed up, he'd buy the first round because we did such a great job on his pictures.

When my boss and I walked in that evening, we both were definitely outside our comfort zones. The tavern was dumpy; it smelled a little; the carpet was nasty; and the clientele actually scared me. It just looked like one of those places in the movies where the bikers start fights over side-glances at their girlfriends.

From my Baptist upbringing, this would be considered the exact *opposite* of church, right up there with topless bars, casinos, and pawn shops. (Don't ask me why pawn shops were considered bad places, but they were!) The bar owner introduced

us to his wife and a couple of regulars in the bar. He told them that we made him look like a professional photographer, and everyone should take their film down to our lab when they get home from vacation. This was music to my boss' ears—he was desperate for more customers!

My boss had a beer and I had a cup of coffee, mostly because growing up as a preacher's kid, I never drank alcohol. The bar owner's wife thought my request for coffee was hilarious, and she told me she'd give me a free cup of coffee anytime I wanted to come in for a "drink."

This was music to my ears. I was broke and starved for community—the kind I had in high school in my small group. Her offer was all I needed to become a regular at this dump every day at lunch and most evenings after work. (She fed me often for what I had in my pocket that day.)

Since I was not in a church where I could find community, this dump became a place of community for me. Everyone knew one another and helped out when someone had car trouble or needed a ride home. The regulars in this bar listened to each other's problems even though they couldn't do much to solve what was shared. I always thought, "What if church could be just like this place, with

the addition of worship and an understanding of the love of God?”

Six years after my high school graduation, I came back to the church through an invitation from a high school friend. He said he'd found a church where their small groups rivaled what we had in the '70s, and I agreed to go.

He was right. It was far better than the tavern! The presence of God was strong among us each week when we met, and I realized something important. Everyone wants to be a part of a group of people where they are loved, help others, and find meaning and purpose in life. My friends at the tavern were working hard to create fellowship among themselves, and they did manage to create the human parts of it. They just never discovered a spiritual meaning and purpose for their lives. This explains why many turned to booze instead of Jesus.

Home Fellowship Groups

For years, churches have created home fellowship groups for members to experience a time of being together, to eat a meal, and pray for each other. In addition, the members are asked to help each other out between meetings, if there's time.

For the most part, traditional home fellowship groups achieve all they are designed to do. Millions of Christians gather in homes each week and are doing it right. The problem, however, is that loving one another is the main goal. Within six months, a home fellowship group has achieved its goal and stagnation sets in. There's no challenge the group needs to achieve beyond maintaining what they're doing.

For many years, the church has characterized *fellowship* in this way. This has made for a lot of dissatisfaction, especially when it comes to small group involvement.

It's Time to Redefine "Fellowship"

The word fellowship is a deep word, scripturally speaking. In 1 John 1:3, John gives us a glimpse of the depth of fellowship when he writes, "*We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.*" What John is describing is a communion with God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ. In verse 7, Paul goes on to share that when Christians have discovered this communion with God, they are also in communion with each other.

When God's people enter into fellowship with Him and each other as described here, there are powerful results. The intertwined relationship with God causes them to be transformed into completely different persons. The relationship also brings physical and emotional healing to their lives. Paul describes it enthusiastically in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Paul's understanding of fellowship was exciting. For many Christians, "fellowship" in their minds does not live up to how Paul saw it. To them, it just means getting together with other Christians and eating a meal, which is ok, but not *exciting*.

When a word has lost its definition in a society, other words or terms are used to define the original concept. *Biblical community* is one of those terms. Think of a biblical community as a typical home fellowship group on steroids, without negative side effects. It grows with new members. The exciting life it experiences is so contagious that it attracts others from beyond the four walls of the living room where it meets. It is a place where Christians gather to experience

Christ in their midst. This is the fellowship John describes as the first century church.

That's the kind of small group I want! How about you? Don't you want to be a part of a biblical community that experiences God in such a way that it radically transforms you and those around you? Or, how about experiencing the presence of Christ in such a way that you'll burst if you don't tell someone?

This book is all about helping you to discover ways you and your small group can embrace biblical community. Without a doubt, it will be a challenge to put into practice what I have written here. Nothing good comes easy! The best part about this challenge is that you're not alone. You have God and other Christians from your small group on the journey, all moving in the same direction. How could you lose? All you really have to do is to be willing to take the time to apply what you read.

Making Room for What's Important

Let's do a little mental experiment together. Take a jar and fill it with large rocks, right up to the top. Is the jar full?



Yes and no. It's full of rocks for sure!
Now take some small pebbles and pour a few
into the jar to fill in the spaces between the rocks.
Add as many as you can. Is the jar full?

Yes and no. It is filled with rocks and pebbles, but there's probably more room for something smaller.

Add sand to the jar to fill in the tiny spaces between the pebbles until you can add no more. Now the jar is truly full, right?

Well, you're almost there. Now pour water into the jar. You won't be able to add much, but the water will absolutely fill that jar completely.

Wait! The experiment isn't over. Remove the rocks, pebbles, sand, and water from the jar and try to fill it back up with the same contents in a different order. What will happen?

If the sand or pebbles are put in first, the rocks won't fit! And so it goes with our priorities in life. We must insure we do the big things first. If we do, the small things fit in fine.

You may be thinking, "I don't really have the time to read this book, let alone spend more time with other people in my small group!" You know, I'm feeling the same way about writing this book. I just don't have the time to write, edit, and get this book to the printer on time. I have a family, a small group that my wife and I co-lead, a full-time job heading up an organization that involves lots of travel, a hobby I enjoy, a golden retriever that needs

a bath every two weeks and, well, I could go on and on.

The bottom line is that we all lead very busy lives filled with responsibility. We're pulled in a half-dozen directions at the same time, leaving little to no time to add a handful of new, time-consuming relationships to an already packed schedule!

But, we always find time for what's important, don't we? I found the time to finish this book and get it to the printer. It wasn't a big rock for me, but a very important pebble in my life. Deepening my relationships with my family and home group members is my *larger* priority. In case you're wondering, yes, my dog has been bathed regularly. I guess that would be the water in the experiment we did earlier!

By prioritizing my time on the bigger issues of life, everything fits as it should. And so it will be for you as well when you embrace a lifestyle of biblical community. I don't exactly understand how God does it, but He's always faithful to multiply the time for those who keep living in biblical community at the top of the priority list as a big rock.

The key to making this change in lifestyle is to start small, by implementing one thing at a time.

So, start small right here and right now. Make a decision to finish reading this book!

You're not too busy to learn about how you and your small group can find a powerful, fulfilling, and exciting new way to live, are you? Read a few pages every morning as part of your quiet time with God if you are not a reader. Before you pick up the book to read each morning, ask God to show you a truth that you can share with a family member, a friend, or another small group member each day.

I believe that if you finish reading this book and share what you're learning with others along the way, you'll put much of it into practice without realizing you are doing it. While some things I share here may take a little work, many of my written thoughts are just common sense things you may already be doing, but with a *twist*. You may find that the twist (my way of looking at the activity through a community-based view) makes an event or meeting powerful for building biblical community with fellow small group members.

By living in biblical community with my home group members, I'm getting just as much done as before, but I'm not running on empty all the time. For the most part, my emotional, spiritual, and

physical reserves stay full. God has given me a balance in life and a newfound understanding of how the world seems to tug at me in the opposite direction of how God designed me. Wouldn't you enjoy a new level of emotional, spiritual and physical energy in your life? Then get busy reading and apply as much as you can.

Apply it!

- Choosing to live in biblical community is putting God's big priorities in your life before the pebbles or the sand that our world tells us to add first. The choice will keep you balanced and centered on what's most important. If you are not familiar with Matthew 6:25-34, take a few minutes to read this important passage now and meditate on it. Ask God to reveal the "big rocks" He wants you to put in your life's jar first. What pebbles and grains of sand have you put into your jar first that God would challenge you to put in last to make room for more important, everlasting things?

Share it!

- Often, sharing what God is telling you about your priorities is the best way to reinforce the changes you may need to make in your life. At your next small group gathering, share with the group that you are examining your priorities in life to make room for biblical community. Ask them to pray for you! When you begin to discover God's priorities, ask the group to hold you accountable to live them out.

Additional Reading

These two resources are excellent and will help you discover God's priorities for your life:

Ordering Your Private World – Gordon MacDonald

Making Room For Life – Randy Frazee

**Have you enjoyed reading
this first chapter?**

Then you'll love the rest of this book!

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