

How to Build Real Community

By Charlie Rosser

In speaking upon the topic of building real community, I will first define what I mean by real community. Second, I will enquire why we should bother with this labor of love at all. Finally, I will show practically how to begin this process of establishing communities that glorify the Lord.

What is Real Community Anyway?

To understand what I mean by real community it is first helpful to learn what real community is not. Real community is not a group of guys or girls that meet once a week at a consistent time to discuss passages of the Bible. While real community can happen in this setting, and I hope that it does, this is not the definition of real community. We are tempted to pat ourselves on the back for the number of people who show up to a time of Bible study, even when there is no relationship built with those who attend. The problem here is valuing quantity of relationships over quality of relationships. Relationships with no foundation can only last for a little while, and then will soon be forgotten. If we are to establish real community in our small groups, then we must pursue quality relationships over quantity.

Real community does not mean agreeing with every view held by others in the community. We are tempted to feel accomplished in our small groups when it seems like everyone is in agreement and there aren't too many moments of unintended silence. However, it is rare to get a group together that truly agrees on everything. If it seems like the group is always in agreement, then there are probably people involved who don't feel safe to disagree in this community. On the contrary, when people in your small group begin to offer differing perspectives, this is a sign of security and deepening of relationship. If we are to establish real community, then we must create environments where it is safe for those who disagree.

Real community is not a judgment-free zone. The world wants us to believe that truth is relative - what's true for me is true for me and what's true for you is true for you. This is a lie from the enemy and a stumbling block to real community. I have heard it said that the person who loves you the most is the person who tells you the most truth. Think about it. If you saw someone begin to walk into a busy intersection and you had the ability to stop them, wouldn't you do it? How much more so if you loved the person? Then why should we think that we can watch those we love be enslaved to sin and death in silence? If we are to establish real community, then we must be willing to speak hard truths, and receive hard truths from others.

So what is real community? Real community is a community that loves one another deeply, honors one another, shares truth, shares a common cause, and enjoys one another. If we are to honor the Lord with the way that we relate to one another, then this needs to be the foundation on which we build our relationships. This level of authenticity must define our communities if we are to obey the command of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Why Bother?

A reasonable question to ask at this point is "Why bother?" Why should we care if our community doesn't reflect these characteristics? If establishing real community is so difficult, why would we bother to take on such a task?

First and foremost, we must take this role building real community seriously because this is

what Jesus calls us to do. Every single follower of Christ is charged with the role of establishing a community as I have described here. John 13:34 says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

1 John 4:19-21 says: "We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."

Jesus calls us to love one another in the same way that He loves us. To the same degree that Jesus has loved me, I must love my brothers and sisters in Christ. That is a high calling! To love someone is to choose unselfishly for their highest good. Is there any question that this type of love would work to establish real community as I have described? When you establish real community as described here, are you not choosing unselfishly for the highest good of your community?

Moreover, if you have benefited from this kind of community, how could you choose not to work at bringing this blessing to those around you? Chances are, if you know Christ, you have had someone pursue you and try to create this type of relationship with you. As people who have seen how beautiful real community can be, how could we deprive those that we claim to love of this level of relationship?

What God has done in you, He wants to do through you. This is the ministry that we have all been called to do, regardless of title, position, or training. You don't have to be an ordained minister to create the kind of real community that is a light to those enslaved to the darkness. All you have to do is commit to the labor of loving one another as Jesus has loved you.

How to Establish Real Community

It is one thing to know that you should work hard to establish real community so that you may honor the Lord, but it is another to actually take the steps necessary to make that happen. William Shakespeare wrote, "I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching." So the question remains, how is this to be done? What can one do to establish communities that love one another deeply, honor one another, share truth, share a common cause, and enjoy one another? Let us look at some principles that will help us to better understand the practices of building community.

First, everyone has an internal need for relationship. This is a natural part of who we are, instilled in us by God when He created us in His image. When God created Adam he said it was not good for him to be alone. God created us with community in mind. Another way to say it is that we are all influenced by our longing to belong.

This longing to belong is the first principle that we need to take hold of to be effective at building real communities. We must understand that every person that we pursue has been designed to desire community. We can't be content with creating shallow communities because relationships with no substance can never sustain. There is a need in each of us for deep, authentic relationships that create an environment where love is at the center. John Joseph Powell said, "It is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being."

What does this longing to belong mean for us? It means that we must fight to fill this need in others before they seek out the community of the world and its darkness. If this need is not met when people enter our communities they will seek it out wherever they can find it. If we are not quick to meet this need in others, the enemy will be quick to snatch them up.

If we are to leverage this longing to belong for the kingdom of God, what do we need to do? How can we begin to meet this need? We must begin by creating an environment that is inviting. When others enter our communities, they need to feel at home. J.R. Miller defines a home as “one of the most sacred of places. It is a sanctuary into which men flee from the world’s perils and alarms. It is a resting-place to which at close of day the weary retire to gather new strength for the battle and toils of tomorrow. It is the place where love learns its lessons, where life is schooled into discipline and strength, where character is molded.”

If we are going to establish communities that fill this longing to belong, this is the environment we need to create. We need to create these feelings of home wherever we start building these relationships. The easiest step in creating these feelings of home is inviting people into your home often. I don’t just mean just the place where you live. I mean the “sanctuary into which you flee, your resting place, and where your character is molded.” That will probably involve the place you live, but it is much more than that. What people do you spend time around that help you “gather new strength”? What activities help mold your character? Invite people to join you in these activities. This is your home and this will help create those feelings of home in others.

The next step in establishing authenticity in our communities is to create memories together. If we are going to inspire these feelings of home in others, we must create memories that will stir up those feelings whenever they come around us. Looking back at my experience in college, I do not remember many of the sermons I heard. I do not remember many of the Bible studies in which I participated. What I do remember is the shenanigans that we would get involved in before and after these times of study. Did those sermons and Bible studies help mold my character and my thinking? Absolutely. They were crucial. But they are not what I will remember. They are not what created those feelings of home.

Feelings of home were inspired in me when I was able to spend extravagant time with the guys in my small group. When we joked together, played together, and went on adventures together, I felt at home. We started prank wars, ran countless miles together, watched movies, played games of our own invention, started weekly competitions to test manliness, cooked terribly for each other, had communion together, and hundreds of other activities. My co-leader in my Life Group once shared that he would like to visit Charlotte, North Carolina someday. That next weekend a group of us made the journey together so that he would have that opportunity. These are the memories that last and helped fulfill my longing to belong. You will remember the especially significant spiritual moments that you share in your Life Groups and those times when big decisions are made, but it will be nearly impossible to get to that level of authenticity before memories have been created. If others don’t feel safe or at home in your community, why would they share the deepest parts of themselves with you? Work hard to create memories, especially at the genesis of the new community you are bringing together.

Sometimes it seems like no matter how hard you work there is no progress being made with certain individuals. With some people you must work extra hard to break down their defenses, to gain their trust. When it seems like discussion in Bible study is going nowhere, when it seems like you can’t get past the shallow in conversation, when it seems like there is no buy-in to the community, remember this bit of wisdom from Chi Alpha at Sam Houston State: love and laughter plow the hardest hearts. With some people, there is immediate buy-in. They come primed and ready to love and be loved. Others will need lots of love and adventure together

before they can feel at home. Remember, love is unselfishly choosing for the highest good. That means that even when someone is hard to love, you will continue to fight for them. You will continue to try to create these memories that will make them feel at home. You will fulfill their longing to belong. This is real community.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you increase the authenticity of your Life Group members?
2. Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." What does that look like in day-to-day life? How can we intentionally love our brothers and sister in Christ in a way that glorifies Him?
3. What has God been doing in you that He wants to do through you to bless your brothers and sisters in Christ?
4. How do we help people to feel at home in our community? What can you do to be more inviting to those around you?
5. What can you do in the next week or two to create memories that will deepen your relationship with those in your Lifegroup?

Below is 100 ideas for creating memories or sharing life with members of your Life Group. It is not comprehensive, but it is a start.

What Could I Do With My Life Group?

Real Devotional Life:

1. Pick a book of the Bible to read together and discuss at Life Group (Proverbs is great, there's a chapter for every day of the month).
2. Talk about what you are reading, and ask about what they are reading.
3. Memorize Bible verses as a Life Group.
4. Integrate music as a way to allow God to speak to your group.
5. Pray together during Life Group.
6. Prepare open-ended questions for discussion about the topic you are studying.
7. Share something from the week that inspired thoughts about the Lord.
8. Pick one song or verse to meditate on for the week.
9. Have each student share their favorite Bible verse from the week.
10. Have group members select a book (other than the Bible) to go through together.
11. Set aside time to have regular conversations about spiritual life with your Life Group members.
12. Incorporate prayer walks occasionally, including campus prayer walks.

13. When you are open and honest, they will be too. Be an open book!
14. Don't give or take fluffy answers, dig for the deep stuff!
15. Have a plan for the students in your group that won't know what it means to have a devotional life - PROAPT, or a reading plan, or something to help get them started.
16. Introduce group members to journaling. It's amazing to see how God works over time!
17. Go to church together, giving rides, if needed.
18. Follow a Bible Reading Plan together.
19. Fast together for a specific purpose.
20. Do a day retreat.
21. Share "altar" or "monument" moments monthly.
22. Keep each other accountable to tithe.
23. Keep a "Day of Silence" together.
24. Pray a prayer from the Bible (like Paul's in Ephesians 1) for each other for the week (or for your Life Group, for Chi Alpha or for the campus).
25. Keep a 1-week commitment together to not lie, or even exaggerate.
26. Pray for each other to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
27. Pick something in nature and comment together about how it illustrates something about God to the group (e.g., a big old oak tree - protection in His branches, provision, etc.).
28. Do the LiveDead Journal together.
29. Make and keep the commitment to read through the Bible in a year (or the New Testament over the summer).
30. Plan a day of Thanksgiving - where each person commits to thanking someone in a unique and creative way for 10 things. And then write out 10 things to God that you're thankful for.
31. Pick a trait from God's nature or character and write prayers to God on why that trait is so important.
32. Every time someone sneezes, say, "God bless you" and then pray for them.
33. Commit to spending 10 minutes a day for a week just listening to God - in a quiet place (no noise, music, cells, etc.).

Real Community:

1. Plan outings!
2. Plan over-night trips.
3. Invite them over for dinner.

4. Make your Life Group members part of your closest friend circle-invite them to do life with you!
5. Share hobbies.
6. Be willing to meet physical needs (driving them places, for example).
7. Be discerning about what is most important and what can wait when it comes to meeting the needs of those in your Life Group.
8. Celebrate their birthdays with them.
9. Create a facebook group where the members of your Life Group can post prayer requests or God-moments they may have.
10. Go out for dessert!
11. Go to Cooper's Rock or Valley Falls for a picnic or something!
12. Invite them to the after-Chi Alpha activity! Applebees isn't an exclusive party!
13. Have movie nights/game nights!
14. Tuesdays at Tygart Valley Cinemas, tickets are only \$4.50--GREAT night to go out for a movie! But make sure these are appropriate movies for your Life Group to watch together...keep in mind the question "is it holy?"
15. Holiday-specific events such as pumpkin carving.
16. Thanksgiving dinner for students who can't or don't have family to be with.
17. Christmas gift exchange/party before school lets out for winter break.
18. Invite them to your home for holidays. (your apartment or family's home)
19. If they are involved in sports or something of the like, show up to support them.
20. Go spelunking.
21. Eat breakfast together before church.
22. Road trip together.
23. Share prayer needs weekly and pray for one another.
24. Go treasure hunting at a used bookstore (Wheeling, Parkersburg, Cumberland).
25. Do the affirmation hot seat (one person in the middle; everyone affirms that person and the person can only say, "Thank you" - nothing else).
26. Go to District Retreat together.
27. Go to World Missions Summit together.
28. Celebrate spiritual milestones (salvation, baptism, spirit baptism, 1st convert, etc.).
29. Crash another Life Group's meeting and pelt them with snowballs.

30. Wrestle.
31. Invite another Life Group over for a party.
32. Take people in your Life Group to your favorite place to go in West Virginia.
33. Visit each Life Group member's hometown and meet their family.

Real Responsibility:

1. Exchange prayer cards during Life Group with the purpose of praying over them throughout the week.
2. Choose a book to go through (Christian book or book of Bible) and read a chapter independently each week for discussion during Life Group.
3. Have different students lead prayer each week.
4. Allow different students to read the discussion questions each week.
5. Let them plan an event for your group.
6. Decide on a missions project to work on together.
7. Encourage students to become involved in their local churches.
8. Have students find a scripture that ties in to the topic for the next week's Life Group.
9. Encourage students to invite other students, too!
10. Have everyone become an English Conversation Partner with an International Student.
11. Teach tithing.
12. Ask them about spiritual conversations they are having. (If they know you're going to ask, they are more likely to attempt to have them)
13. Give them simple jobs like handing out notecards and pens, collecting and redistributing prayer cards, etc.
14. Let them organize a car pool for somewhere.
15. If your Life Group wants to have snacks, let members rotate who brings what.
16. Put someone in charge of greeting new people every week at XA Thursday night worship, and at Life Group if there are new faces.
17. Incorporate community service whenever possible!
18. Assign one of them the job of being the announcer every week, their job being to relay announcements made at XA Thursday night worship.
19. Save together to sponsor someone to go to District Retreat.
20. Serve at the Soup Opera.
21. Adopt a missionary.

22. Go on a missions trip together.
23. Have your Life Group adopt an international student to become their friend.
24. Host a cookie reception for XA after Thursday Night Worship.
25. Bless another Life Group (throw them a party, commit to pray for them for a month...).
26. Go in pairs and do LunchMeets in the cafeteria.
27. Go in pairs and do Treasure Hunts on campus.
28. Volunteer to serve at the Union Mission monthly as a group.
29. Talk to a dorm RD and offer a wing/floor/dorm clean-up day from your Life Group.
30. Do an "Every1 Bring 1" week for your Life Group or for Thursday Night Worship (bring a new person).
31. Participate in a contact table together.
32. Put a crate on campus. Take turns standing on it and reading the book of John aloud to the campus.
33. Do the God Test with 10 people each on campus. Share the results; bring people to Life Group that received Christ.
34. Go to the Chi Alpha Mosaic conference over Thanksgiving with an International student - www.mosaicec.com.