



**WHAT
GREAT
MINISTRY
LEADERS
GET
RIGHT**

Six Core Competencies You Need
to Succeed in Your Calling

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BUILDING BIBLICAL COMMUNITY

In the spring of 1940, during the apex of World War II, Hitler's panzer divisions advanced on the Allied soldiers, trapping them in Dunkirk, France. With the harbor and ocean behind them, and the force of Hitler before them, all seemed lost. The majority of Belgian and Dutch troops had already surrendered, and 225,000 British soldiers and another 110,000 French and Allied soldiers faced certain capture or death. The British Royal Navy had enough ships available to rescue 17,000 soldiers from the French beach. The remaining 320,000 soldiers would face the fury of an unmerciful Hitler. Churchill told the House of Commons to brace for hard tidings.

Winston Churchill called what followed "Operation Dynamo." In nine days, from May 27 to June 4, as the world watched in amazement, a ragtag fleet of more than nine hundred merchant marine vessels, fishing boats, sailboats, pleasure crafts, rowboats, and lifeboats—all captained by civilians—made their way to Dunkirk and rescued 338,226 Allied soldiers. Every English floating vessel was called into duty. If the owners could not be contacted, available ships were simply commandeered for use in the

rescue operation. The fleet would come to be known as the “Little Ships of Dunkirk.” It remains one of the most beautiful demonstrations of community that the world has ever witnessed.

As the miraculous rescue concluded, England was reinvigorated by the success of Operation Dynamo. Upon the last soldier’s rescue, Churchill stood before the House of Commons on June 4, 1940, and said, “We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”²¹ Churchill’s words are remembered as one of the greatest speeches of the twentieth century.

The story of Dunkirk moves me because it is a picture of the kingdom of God, a ragtag band of followers who have been captured by Christ reaching out to serve and save others who remain in the same waters from which we were rescued. Dunkirk is a story of community and the need for connection, because everyone comes to a point in life when they need the intervention of others to rescue them from the coming darkness. Dunkirk is a story of what can be accomplished when we join together to attempt the impossible.

First Corinthians 12 reminds the church that we are all a part of the body of Christ. If one suffers, we all suffer. When one part is honored, we all rejoice. Community was never intended to be a program in the local church. Participation in a small group and attending the annual church picnic do not get close to the biblical ideal (though I love a good picnic). Community is and always has been designed to be a core value of every church and every believer. The local church is defined as the visible community of believers.

The Biblical Basis for Community

Biblical community begins with the basic understanding that everyone, including ministry leaders, were created for community. The church is a gathering of Christians who have been called from isolation into authentic biblical community. Christian community is the gathering of believers, not only in body but also in heart. While there are several expressions of biblical community, I want to focus in this chapter on small groups.²²

Believers gathering in smaller communities to share life together began in the Old Testament. There were five divisions within the nation of Israel: the nation, the tribe (the twelve tribes of Israel), the clan (in the book of Exodus we are told there were fifty-seven clans among the twelve tribes), the household (the extended family), and the family. The home played a key role in Jewish culture. The house church became a natural expression of this emphasis.

The supreme example of biblical small-group community comes from Jesus and His twelve disciples. Jesus spent the majority of His time with His band of brothers. They traveled together, ate together, experienced hardship together, and lived life together in a real-life leadership training lab. Relationships, not organizations, were central to Jesus' method of reaching the world with the good news. In this community, far from a formal academic experience, Jesus taught and modeled spiritual truths and attitudes. In community Jesus equipped His disciples to carry on the work of the gospel.

Jesus' model of community was lived out in the early church, especially in the home. Acts 2:46–47 indicates that gathering in homes was a daily occurrence:

And 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.

While meetings in the temple court were a significant part of the early church, gathering in homes was, too. It's worth noting that the house church did not emerge as a result of persecution. As persecution increased, the house church grew in significance, but the need for small gatherings of believers has always been the norm.

In the fourth century, Christians began to build church buildings. As the popularity of the building gradually increased, the house church began to slowly diminish. By AD 1250, the Gothic temple had reached its height of popularity. At that time, a theological error began to be spread, one alive and well today: that church is not the people but the building. And yet, nowhere in Scripture or the writings of the early church fathers is the church referred to as a structure—except as a metaphor for referring to people! And nowhere in Scripture are we commanded to bring members of our broader community into a structure referred to as the church. In fact, the command to believers is to take the church into our community. The church needs to be taken where believers work, live, eat, and play. The church needs to be taken to the arts, the business community, and the medical world. The church needs to be carried into education, government, and media. The church needs to touch every fragment and segment of our community.

I believe that regularly gathering together both in a larger community worship service as well as a house gathering is the ideal. Gathering together is an opportunity to celebrate the

sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as hear the Word preached. Gathering with a larger community allows for celebration, inspiration, and emotional connection, while gathering with a smaller community will emphasize devotion, mission, and relational connection. Large gatherings are important, but most of the Christian life is lived in small gatherings and day-to-day community. There are more than one hundred "one another" instructions given to believers in the New Testament—love one another, be devoted to one another, carry one another's burdens, etc.—that simply cannot be lived out in a large group setting devoid of personal relationships. When Hebrews 10:24–25 encourages us to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" by "meeting together," it means more than a Sunday morning worship service. It means finding fellowship in community throughout the week.

The Assault on Authentic Biblical Community

Social media alone cannot replace community. While digital interaction can augment community, it is not a replacement. It is a growing trend for those in isolation to define their online e-community as their church, but this is a stretch. Your Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok followers and Facebook friends cannot be your sustained biblical community because they are, in a literal sense, virtual.

A shrinking percentage of people within the United States are connected to a church community. Less than 20 percent attend worship services, and those who self-identify as "active" attend on average 1.9 times per month. To have five hundred attend an average weekend service, more than one thousand people would need to call your church home. While the COVID-19 pandemic made attending church from our living room the norm for a season, the

long-term approach of watching your favorite preacher online does not qualify as sustainable biblical community. The coronavirus pandemic set several dangerous precedents if they are adopted as a long-term strategy. For example, a resident of California erroneously may consider himself to be an active member of a New York church community because he watches the worship service live every week. But ask anyone in that church if they know him.

To be engaged in community means opening one's heart to fellow sojourners. Not surprisingly, to be in community means that we have something in common. The words *common*, *community*, *communication*, and *communion* all share the same root. What we have in common is Jesus Christ. Because we have Jesus Christ in common, we minister to one another simply by being together. That is what we mean in the Apostle's Creed when we say "the communion of saints." We don't have to have a Bible study to have community. There is community when we gather with believers for a game of softball. No pre-game prayer is needed to sanctify the event.

For a number of years, the Lord flung open doors for me to minister to people who were engaged in cults. I was able to engage in hundreds of conversations with those who were often living under indescribable oppression. At the outset, I wrongly believed that by demonstrating the error of their theology, I could help them see the truth. I worked to master a carefully crafted biblical response to every argument that might be thrown my way. And yet, after engaging in theological debates with a number of people, I had an insight that changed the way I approach people trapped in a cult. Literally no one I met joined the cult because they were in search of truth and found it in their cult. People join cults because they are in search of community. People join cults because

someone invited them into a place where they felt loved, accepted, and valued. When you are isolated, lonely, desperate for connection, and in search of community, you generally don't care what the other person believes, as long as that person genuinely receives you into their group.

While you may be passionate about biblical theology (as am I), the primary calling card of your church must be authentic community. The majority of people who are in search of a local church are generally shopping for church as a social association and not a theological institution. Good theology and good community go hand in hand.

The Disappointment of Community

There is inevitable heartache that comes with community. Real life and real community lead inescapably to conflict. But the certain pain is no excuse to avoid community. Rick Warren, summarizing a key theme of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic on fellowship, *Life Together*, writes, "Disillusionment with our local church is a good thing because it destroys our false expectations of perfection. The sooner we give up the illusion that a church must be perfect in order to love it, the sooner we quit pretending and start admitting we're all imperfect and need grace. This is the beginning of real community."²³ When we don't acknowledge and admit our imperfection, we play the church game. We come to church lonely, isolated, and afraid of being discovered. We put a smile on our face, sit through worship and small groups, and go home unchanged to our prisons of emotional isolation. The remedy is to bring our whole life to church—our pain, brokenness, hopes, fear, shame, and yes, even our joys.

Missional living in community is unquestionably difficult.

Admittedly, doing life together is messy, hard, and painful. Living in community involves risk.

But you know what's harder? Living without community. Isolation means being unknown. Community means living life fully known. Isolation protects the façade of the frontstage. Community allows us to be known on the backstage of real life. Isolation sees only above the waterline. Authentic biblical community looks below the waterline.

As I look back on my journey, there are certain seasons I couldn't imagine going through without community. When my wife's younger brother died after battling cancer for nearly two decades, we needed community. When my wife and I adopted Paige and Allie, we needed community. When both of my parents were called home to be with Jesus, we needed community. The list goes on and on. When our brokenness is before us, we need community. The need for community is birthed out of the impossibility of living life to the fullest in isolation. Community leads to life.

We must intentionally, passionately fight for the belief that we were created for community. We long to belong. We want to be wanted. Deep in our hearts we all yearn for release from isolation. We're all interconnected as the body of Christ, which means that it is not possible to be freestanding, isolated entities. It's not possible to survive apart from one another.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

On a scale of 1 to 5, how developed are you in the competency of building biblical community?

1	2	3	4	5
“I admit I am clueless in this competency.”	“I know enough to know what I don’t know.”	“I can get by.”	“I have a healthy skill set in this competency.”	“I’m killing it in this area.”

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