

When Relationships Aren't as Deep as You'd Hoped

How to grapple with four challenges to meaningful relationships

By Bill Search

Building communities within our church is hard work. It feels like it shouldn't be—after all, God created us for community. But we live in a broken world that has altered and inhibited the relationships God created us to enjoy.

For that reason, it's helpful to examine the different road blocks that prevent communities from being formed and damage communities that used to be healthy. Here are four of the biggest community killers that we as church leaders have to overcome:

The Challenge of Time

The first challenge to cultivating relationships is a tension we keenly feel in our Western world: We simply don't have enough time. People talk about time in the U.S. like some people in the developing world talk about food or water.

I was standing in the atrium of my church a few years ago handing out cards about small groups. A young, newly married couple came up to me and began to chat. When I asked if we could connect them with a group, they explained that they'd like to do it down the road, but they were really busy right now. I almost laughed in their faces. I have three kids, a demanding job, and a home to maintain. Busy? They don't know *anything* about being busy. But it's a common song today, isn't it?

Do you know what most people are busy doing? In a typical week, people spend most of their time at work. The second biggest consumer of time is sleep. Both of those are necessary. But do you know what the third most time-consuming activity is? Watching television.

According to the Nielsen Media Service, the average American watches nearly 5 hours of TV a day. That's 35 hours a week and over 1,500 hours per year. Let me break that down another way. The average American watches 1.5 days of TV per week. That turns into 78 days per year—which is 1.6 months out of every year watching television! So, an average person who lives to be 70 will spend 5,460 days of his or her life watching TV. That's 15 years!

If churches and small groups are going to conquer this community killer, we must challenge people to really look at what's keeping them busy. Randy Frazee addressed this in [Making Room for Life](#). As developers of community, part of our mission is to help people find the time they need to make relationships a priority. We must continue to emphasize the importance of gathering together, and we should celebrate what happens as a result of our time together. This will emphasize the need to make time for relationships.

The Challenge of Avoidance

The second challenge to cultivating relationships is what I would call avoidance. This happens in a relationship when you know you need to deal with some conflict or problem, but you don't.

My first real job is a good example of this. Right out of college I served on staff at a church with a man named Fred. He was a championship talker. You could mention any subject and he'd wax on for what felt like hours. Fred had a thought about everything. Now, I'll be transparent for a minute here—I'm a talker, too. I come from a long line of talkers, ramblers, and conversation dominators. (But since I'm writing this and not Fred, I will say that Fred had my talkativeness beat hands down.) Fred and I pretty much controlled all the words on our staff of eight people. This went on for months. Every staff meeting, every lunch gathering, was like a ping-pong match between Fred and me. Every now and then we'd take a breath and someone else would talk, but we were quickly back at it.

I didn't know this was a problem. (I was too busy talking). But after several months, our boss pulled me aside and asked, "Do you know that after meetings Sara goes back to her office and cries?" I couldn't understand why. Then my boss explained that Sara—who was a bright seminary graduate—couldn't get a word in edgewise thanks to Fred and me. For months our group had avoided the ugly truth that two talkers were killing the dynamic. But it took just one courageous guy to step up and challenge us. I'm glad he did! Our group was dramatically better after that. If my boss had avoided the problem, our group would have continued to suffer. And I wouldn't have grown in the way I relate to others.

Does a problem exist in your group that regularly damages the people, relationships, or interactions within it? If so, you've got to deal with it. Avoiding it will only make things worse. If you're not sure how to handle the issue, talk with your coach or pastor. Then decide on an action plan and follow through. Don't avoid the issue any longer.

The Challenge of Strange People

The third challenge to cultivating relationships is what we in pastoral circles are often tempted to call "weirdoes." Some call them ECR (extra care required) or EGR (extra grace required) people. Some gently refer to them as Emotional Black Holes. But to put things simply, they are strange. We don't want to give these people our e-mail addresses or cell phone numbers, much less spend time with them in a group.

Most of us have a weirdo or two in our lives. Maybe it's End Times Larry, who sees the imminent return of Christ in every newspaper headline. Or it could be Needy Ned, who "just wants a special woman to share his life with." Maybe it's Steve the Bible Expert, who always knows more about the intricacies of the Bible than anyone else in the history of humanity. Or it could be Bill the amateur comedian (that's me!). As the saying goes, if you can't identify the extra grace required person in your group, it's probably you!

I think John Ortberg said it best in his book [*Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*](#). Ortberg writes that we all have an "as-is" tag. Like the seconds rack at the back of a department store, we're all slightly imperfect. We're all weird.

But you know what? Odd people have a lot to teach us. Jesus says that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It's these people that often provide the best opportunity for us to learn to love. In fact, the more we love them, the more we love God.

John puts it this way: "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" (1 John 4:20–21). The strange people are a gift to your group. They are a gift from God.

The Challenge of Unreal Expectations

The fourth challenge to cultivating relationships and building community is unreal expectations. Let's face it: we all have expectations—and we usually think they're reasonable. But here are just a few of the expectations often placed on small groups: intimacy, accountability, evangelism, close fellowship, deep worship, and so on.

Sometimes it feels like our church leadership expects our small groups to take a person from unbeliever to missionary in two years—in a group that meets every other week and takes summers and holidays off! It's simply unrealistic to expect this on a regular basis.

Perhaps the biggest challenge, however, is the expectation of intimacy. Let me ask you: How often have you tried to "sell" small groups based on intimacy, promising deep friendships?

In [*The Search to Belong*](#), Joe Myers points out that people only need a few intimate relationships. We need lots of social and personal relationships, but intimacy isn't required to enjoy a relationship. In fact, intimacy can deter it. Imagine you're in a couples' small group and one of the men shares that he really struggles with lust.

He tells the couples circled around the coffee table how difficult it is not to look at women and take a sensual snapshot. That's an intimate level of sharing! But does his sharing help or harm the group?

It's not that a small group shouldn't be intimate, but when people expect a "deep" group to mean a certain level of intimacy, they'll usually be mad if the group stays at the surface. Other people expect their small group to be "deep" by being an intense Bible Study—especially people who have a background with Campus Crusade or The Navigators. If you expect a typical small group to morph into an in-depth exploration of biblical texts, you will be disappointed. It's not that we want "shallow"—it's that we can't agree what "deep" is.

In order to address these unreal expectations, it's important for your group to honestly talk about what each group member hopes to experience. And when a person voices an unreal expectation, it's more than okay for you to set expectations that are more reasonable.

While these may seem like daunting barriers to community, God is able to overcome them all. If we're willing to follow his guidance and learn from him through the people and circumstances of our group, we'll make great strides in demolishing these barriers.

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Discuss

1. How can you encourage group members to make time for your small group and the people in your small group?
2. Do you have any strange people in your group? What might they have to teach you? How might you grow through your relationship?
3. How are small groups "sold" to your church? Are people promised friends, intimacy, accountability, life change? Are these promises realistic or unrealistic?