

GOSPEL GROWTH AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

Everybody wants a richer experience of community. According to the most recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS), when church attenders were asked for their opinion about what should be given priority by their church over the next year, the top response was ‘to build a strong sense of community’.¹ This is the first time nationally that this aspect of church has topped the list. And a longing for community is not unique to the church. Particularly after COVID, loneliness is rampant and many are feeling more disconnected than ever. This would suggest that our churches have a unique opportunity to be and provide the kind of communities that people are searching for.

But what exactly should these communities look like? Unfortunately, this is where we can often come unstuck. After all, the topic of community can be surprisingly divisive among Christians.

To begin with, there are some who suggest (or at least imply) that nothing less than intense life on life relationships is biblical. The model for this is usually the post-Pentecost church of Acts 2, where ‘all the believers were together and had everything in common.’ ‘Every day they continued to meet together.’ ‘They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.’ It’s a compelling picture!

On the other hand, others argue that this is an unrealistic goal for churches today, particularly since it didn’t last very long for the early church. After all, those who travelled to Jerusalem for Pentecost had to return home eventually! What’s more, it wasn’t long before Ananias and Saphira were lying about the sale price of their house (Acts 5:1-11) and the Greek speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). In other words, maybe the Acts 2 ‘church’ was closer to an Acts 2 ‘camp’. Great for a Summer vacation, but unsustainable in the long run.

So where does this leave us? Do we need to lower the bar and settle for a vision of Christian community that can be squeezed into 75 minutes on a Sunday? By no means! As we shall see, to do so would severely undermine God’s purpose for the Christian community, not to mention our own experience within it. What’s more, it would rob our world of a much needed witness. Francis Schaefer once wrote, ‘We must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians... this is what is needed if [the world is] to know that Jesus was sent by the Father and that Christianity is true.’² The world needs Christian community!

¹ See the article *Churchgoers Prioritise Community* on the NCLS website.

<https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/churchgoers-prioritise-community/> accessed 24.04.23

² Francis A. Schaeffer. *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Classics, 1970).

But what exactly *is* Christian community and how do we build it within our churches? That's what this ebook is about. After a brief chapter on the meaning and use of the word *community*, Part 1 will explore Paul's treatment of the concept of Christian community in the book of Ephesians. You may be tempted to skip this part, but it lays some foundational truths for the rest of the ebook, so stick with it! Part 2 gets extra practical, and explores seven ways that we can help to lead and facilitate the *In Community* outcome in our churches. In Part 3, we conclude by attempting to defuse seven common community landmines that often derail church leaders as they seek to lead and live out the biblical vision of Christian community in their churches.

Let's jump in.

COMMUNITY: AN IMPERFECT WORD

As we seek to build a Christian understanding of community, there are two foundational things to grasp. The first is to appreciate the range of meanings that the English word *community* has, and the second is to recognise that *community* is more of an ‘us word’ than a ‘Bible word’.

To begin with, we tend to use the word *community* in two related, but slightly different ways. For example, we use it to speak of *a group of people who share something in common*. Thus we speak of a local community, a school community and a church community. But we can also use the language of *community* to speak of *the warmth and depth of relationships experienced by people within a community*. For example, many schools and postcodes boast of a ‘tight knit community’. In a similar way, many Christians join churches looking for a ‘sense of community’, or leave them grumbling about a ‘lack of community.’ Clearly, there is overlap between these two ideas, but they each describe slightly different things.

But what does the Bible mean when it speaks of *community*? This is where it’s important to appreciate that *community* is more of an ‘us word’ than a ‘Bible word’. After all, while the word *community* does appear in some English translations of the Bible (e.g. NIV, HCSB), it’s almost exclusively used in the Old Testament, and only ever in the first sense outlined above.³ So we read of ‘the Israelite community’ (Lev 16:5), ‘the whole community of Israel’ (Lev 16:17) and ‘the elders of the community’ (Lev 4:13).⁴ In each case, *community* is a helpful translation since the thing being referred to is a group of people (the Israelites) who share something in common (ancestry from Abraham and redemption from Egypt by God). But it’s not the only valid translation of the word.⁵ What’s more, at no point is the word *community* used in the second sense outlined above.

So what is this ebook about?

It’s about gospel growth and Christian community. As we use the language of *community*, however, we do so with an awareness that we are talking about some broad topic areas, which the Bible uses a variety of words to describe. For example, with regards to the *community* that God has created in Christ, the biblical authors use a cluster of terms to speak into this idea including the church, assembly, congregation, body, temple and many others. Likewise, when it comes to the kind of communal life that we’re called to express

³ The one exception is Acts 25:24, where both the NIV and HCSB translate the greek phrase *hapan to plēthos tōn ioudaiōn* as ‘the whole Jewish community’.

⁴ In each of these cases, the Hebrew word being translated is ‘edā.

⁵ The ESV and NASB translate the same word as *congregation*.

as believers, the Biblical authors use words like fellowship and member, together with words like build, love, serve, and a range of other 'one another' commands. It is beyond the scope of this ebook to examine each of these terms in detail, but it is important to remember that each of them contribute to the biblical picture of what we often call *community*.

PART 1

COMMUNITY IN EPHESIANS

Rather than examining each of the words mentioned above, we are going to focus our attention on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This is because it is arguably one of the most helpful and comprehensive explanations of Christian community in the Bible. With this in mind, we will trace some of the key moments in Paul's argument throughout the book, making a few comments along the way.

1. Foundations of community in the local church

The first step in understanding community in the local church is to appreciate the connection between it and what God has done in the heavenly realms.

i. God's plan to unite all things in Christ

Paul begins his letter by outlining the spiritual blessings that God has bestowed on his people in Christ, one of which is the revelation of his will. He tells us, God's will is 'to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ' (Eph 1:10). This is God's cosmic plan for the end of time, but as Paul goes on to explain, he has already taken significant steps towards its fulfilment. To begin with, God 'raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms [and] placed all things under his feet' (Eph 1:20-22). Furthermore, 'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:6). In the heavenly realms, therefore, God has already established a community of his people around his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the community that is going to be revealed 'in the coming ages' (Eph 2:7).

ii. The heavenly church - a new humanity in Christ

One of the most surprising features of this heavenly community (at least for the early Christians) is that it consists of both Jews and Gentiles. Prior to the coming of Christ, the Gentiles 'were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12). In other words, the Jews had all the privileges of being the people of God and the Gentiles had none of them. God's law also intensified this divide. While the law was a good gift given to the Jews by God, it amplified the differences between Jews and Gentiles and fueled the hostility between them.

But the gospel changed this. Through his death, Christ 'made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with

its commands and regulations’ (Eph 2:14-15). By fulfilling the law and setting it aside, Christ destroyed the barrier dividing Jews and Gentiles. But the gospel doesn’t just destroy old barriers, it also creates new bonds. Paul goes on, ‘His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross (Eph 2:15-16). The church, therefore, is a community of both Jews and Gentiles, reconciled to God and reconciled to one another.

iii. The local church - a community with Christ in common

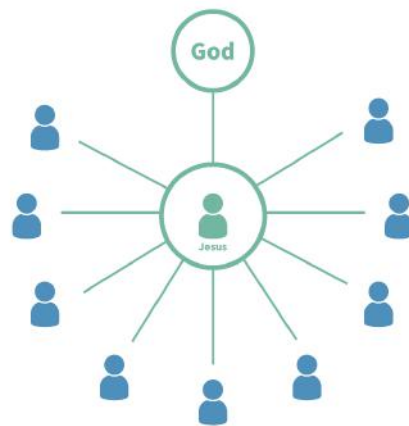
The church we have just been describing is first and foremost a heavenly community. Having said that, as the message of the gospel is preached and people respond in repentance and faith, they are drawn to Christ and to one another. Therefore, God’s foundational work in the gospel also gives birth to local communities of believers who gather regularly as churches. Indeed, as we shall see later, they are commanded to gather.

Tony Payne describes a community as ‘those who share in a common object of love’ and uses the image below to depict it.⁶ As the diagram so helpfully illustrates, communities can be built around any number of things, including shared hobbies, shared life stages, a need to belong, and various other things.



Prior to the coming of Christ, Jews and Gentiles had no basis for community. As we’ve just seen, the only thing they shared was a history of hatred and hostility. But again, the gospel changed this. Paul writes, ‘through [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit’ (Eph 2:18). What’s more, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles now share in one hope, ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all’ (Eph 4:5-6), all which provides a rich foundation for community. To borrow another one of Tony Payne’s diagrams, we could depict this as follows:

⁶ This language originally comes from Oliver O’Donvan. For example, see Oliver O’Donvan, *Common Objects of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).



The local church, therefore, is a community with Christ in common. Everything they are and everything they do centres on the fact that God has reconciled them to himself and one another through his son Jesus Christ.

2. The shape of community in the local church

The local church is a remarkable accomplishment of God. Paul tells us '[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms (Eph 3:10). The very existence of the church, both heavenly and local, is a revelation of the wisdom of God! Why? Because in the church we see both Jews and Gentiles, former enemies of God and one another, united together and loving one another as family. But the church does more than exist! As we shall see, the community of the local church engages in at least three activities that give a distinct shape to their common life.

i. A community that engages with God

The fellowship that believers have with one another is a key part of Christian community. Having said that, it would be a mistake to assume that this is all that matters. To put it simply, God's purpose in the gospel was not just to help Jews and Gentiles play nicely together, but to reconcile both of them to himself in Christ. The local church, therefore, is not just a gathering where Jews and Gentiles hang out, but a gathering where Jews and Gentiles come together to engage with God. This happens as they engage with God in his word, and as they respond in prayer (Eph 2:18; 6:18) and praise (Eph 5:19-20). Furthermore, Paul tells the Ephesians that they are 'being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit' (Eph 2:22). Gathering to engage with God, therefore, is the first and most foundational feature of the Christian community.

ii. A community that builds itself in love

One of the images that Paul uses to describe the Christian community in Ephesians is the body of Christ. Paul applies this metaphor in a few different ways, but one of them is to communicate the trajectory of the Christian community, and the responsibility that each member has within it. He writes, ‘speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ’ (Eph 4:15). Maturity is the goal, and from the broader context, it is clear that the mature Christian community is united in sound doctrine (Eph 4:14) and righteous living (Eph 5:22-25). Significantly, the maturity of the body is also a community project. It is not just the responsibility of church leaders to speak the truth in love, but of all its members. Indeed, it is only as ‘each part does its work’ that ‘the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love’ (Eph 4:16).

Such Christlike maturity will also have a profound influence on the quality of love that this community has for one another. To begin with, they will be eager to ‘share with those in need’ (Eph 4:28), and will be ‘kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave [them]’ (Eph 4:32). The command to forgive one another is worth highlighting as it reminds us that relationships in the local church will not always be easy. Rather, we are called to ‘walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’ (Eph 5:2).

iii. A community that is light in a dark world

Even though Christian community requires hard work, when local churches live and love like Christ, God uses them to draw others to himself. Paul uses the metaphor of light and darkness to make this point. He begins, ‘For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light’ (Eph 5:8). God’s children are called to shine brightly in a dark world. Paul goes on, ‘have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them’ (Eph 5:11). They expose the deeds of darkness not by pointing them out to everyone (for it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret), but by the radiant righteousness of their lives.

The effect of this on some who are still in darkness is remarkable. Paul writes, ‘But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light’ (Eph 5:13). Paul sees grace working in the life of those who do not believe over three stages.⁷ First they are exposed, then they are illuminated by Christ, and lastly they too become light. Don’t miss this! The light of love that shines through the Christian

⁷ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989).

community has the power to turn others into light! Or perhaps it is better to speak of the light of Christ that shines through the Christian community. So Paul concludes, ‘This is why it is said: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”’ (Eph 5:14).

None of this is to fall into the old adage of ‘preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words’. After all, Paul encourages the community to ‘make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil’ (Eph 5:16). Given everything Paul has said so far in the letter, this would include sharing the gospel with those still in darkness. They can do this both within their gatherings, and as they scatter throughout the week.

It is also important to remember that the light of Christian community exists within the broader context of the apostolic mission. This, after all, is what gave birth to local churches in the first place. God sent out his apostles, prophets and evangelists into the world (Eph 4:11). The expectation, therefore, is that as Paul (and others) fearlessly declared the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19-20), the Christian community would function as a powerful witness to the truth of what God had accomplished in the gospel.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has not been to exhaust the Bible’s teaching on community. Rather, it has been to explore Paul’s treatment of the concept of community in Ephesians, and in particular, to understand the foundations and shape of community in the local church.

As we have seen, the local church is a community founded on what God has accomplished in the heavenly realms in Christ. It is made up of Jews and Gentiles, reconciled to God and to one another. As a result, it gathers to engage with God and build itself in love, and does so trusting that Christ will shine through it to bring light in a dark world.

PART 2

LEADING A CHURCH IN COMMUNITY

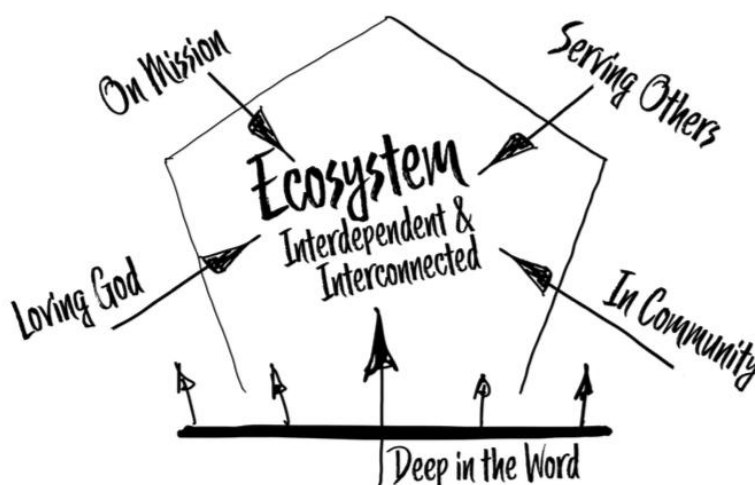
A. Community and the local church ecosystem

Although broad and far reaching, our journey through Ephesians has been important to grasp the nature of the Christian community and the purpose and function of our relationships within it. What's more, it is a helpful reminder that we cannot reduce *community* down to a list of three programs in church life (connection, community and care, for example) and expect this to capture the totality of what Christian community is all about.

Having said that, Christian community is a complex beast.

As we've just seen, Paul's letter to the Ephesians identifies *at least* three activities that the community of the local church engages in. They gather to meet with God, to build one another in love, and do so with an eye to a watching world. In one sense, all three of these things can and usually do happen at the same time (in the weekly church service for example). Nevertheless, there is also great benefit in considering each of these activities (or areas) on their own, so as to give more focussed attention to how they can be encouraged and/or pursued more effectively.

It can also be helpful to conceive of the disciple (and a church of disciples) as having five characteristics.⁸ These can be seen in the diagram below:



⁸ A lot could be said about each one of these aspects, but briefly we could say that a mature disciple has five characteristics. We can think of these five characteristics as sub-goals or mini-outcomes that we want to achieve. For more on this, see the *Framework* ebook from Reach Australia.

The particular focus of this chapter is the *In Community* outcome. Having said that, it is important to remember that we are not trying to define the totality of what Christian community is. That was closer to the purpose of our last chapter. Furthermore, so much of what makes our communities distinctly Christian are the other four. Our communities:

- Love God;
- Are deep in the word;
- Serve others; and
- are on mission

In other words, to permanently hive off the *In Community* outcome from the others is to severely short circuit our understanding of what Christian community is. Or to put it differently, if you perfectly applied each of the practical suggestions we're going to outline below, but did so in a context without the other four outcomes, you would not have a healthy Christian community. It may not even be a *Christian* community! Church is an ecosystem, and it's only when all of the areas function together that the local church will be considered healthy.

B. Understanding the *In Community* outcome

It is helpful to break the *In Community* outcome down into three parts. At the risk of labouring the point, this is not because we believe this captures the totality of what Christian community is, but because each of these things are necessary within the Christian community and they can often be overlooked if all we ever do is focus on the other four outcomes.

The three parts of the *In Community* outcome are as follows:

- i. **Connection** - leading the church to welcome and integrate Christians and new believers into membership in the local body of Christ.
- ii. **Community** - leading the church to grow in their love and affection for one another so that they might spur one another on towards love and good deeds.
- iii. **Care** - leading the church to show care and concern for one another, by caring for the whole person in all the joys and trials of life, with a view to maturity in Christ.

Each of these things are important in a local church, no matter its size. What's more, each of them is the responsibility of the whole church, not just those in leadership. We want *everyone* in our churches to be warm and hospitable to new people, we want *everyone* to engage in rich relationships of mutual love and encouragement, and we want *everyone* to

care about the practical and spiritual needs of others in their church family. Again, this is the responsibility of the whole church!

Having said that, we also believe there is considerable wisdom in appointing someone to oversee and take responsibility for one, some or all of these areas. In smaller and newer churches, this may primarily be the senior leader or a key volunteer leader. In time, and for the church to grow, however, they would be wise to delegate oversight of some or all of these areas to godly and gifted volunteers. Eventually, and if the scale of the church requires it, they may also want to employ someone to oversee this outcome part or full time.

C. Putting it into practice

To help you as a senior leader, staff person, or volunteer to champion the *In Community* outcome in your church, here are seven practical steps you might like to implement. Be sure to discuss them with the rest of your team, because many of them will require buy-in and cooperation from those leading other areas in your church.

1. Stir the heart and set the vision for *In Community*

Many people treat church as if it's their spiritual gym. They may see the pastor as their spiritual fitness instructor, they may have a few friends that they do spiritual work outs with, but they primarily attend church for what they can get out of it rather than what they can contribute. And sometimes they don't even do that! 'After all,' they think, 'If I don't need to go to the gym to stay physically fit, then why do I need to go to church to stay spiritually fit? As long as I'm disciplined and following my own self-directed spiritual program, what's the problem?'

As we have already seen, the Bible is far less individualistic than this. Church is not just an event we attend but a community we belong to. It's a community with Christ in common! It's a body with many members! It's a light in a dark world! Part of the problem is that many in our churches have forgotten (or never known) this. So we need to teach one another, and then remind one another, over and over again. The group that meets at 8am, or 9am, or 10:15, or 6pm at church on Sunday is our spiritual family, and God calls us to love and care for one another.

So how do we stir the heart and set the vision for this in our churches?

- i. **Preaching** - does the preaching regularly cast a vision for the beauty of Christian community, and does it use the gospel to motivate people to live this out? Are people motivated to *connect* with others because they see that they were once outsiders too, but that God in Christ welcomed them into his family? Are people seeking to grow in love and affection for others in the *community* because they see that God purchased them with his blood? Do people desire to *care* for the weak and wondering because they see that God in Christ carried their burdens and came to seek and save them? Preaching that casts a gospel vision for Christian community will go a long way towards shaping the culture of a healthy church.
- ii. **Services** - do your church services communicate 'we are a family' or 'you are an audience'. Again, you want people to think, 'Church is not just an event to attend, but a community to belong to.' There is no one correct way to do this, but your joint decisions on a variety of factors will tend to influence which message people hear. These include (but are not limited to), Who is invited on stage? Who/what is prayed for? What kind of things get announced? How is the congregation addressed? Is the congregation mostly passive or do they participate at various points? The size and culture of the church will influence these decisions as well, but even a large church in a professional location should seek to give expression to the fact that they are a spiritual family in Christ.

- iii. **Stories** - share stories that celebrate and illustrate life in community. This might be as simple as profiling someone from church, learning their story and praying for them. It might involve interviewing a new member of your church and asking them to share their experience of being new and who or what helped them to get connected. It might involve profiling the work of a particular small group that has worked hard to care for sick or struggling members. There is no shortage of stories that you can share, but celebrating them (from the stage, in small groups, through your emails and/or social media) will all contribute to and encourage a culture of shared life together.
- iv. **Sacraments** - the Reformers said that a true church could be found where God's word was preached and the sacraments were duly administered. Although there are some theological differences in how we understand and practise baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of them are key opportunities to cast a vision for and share in Christian community together. They also play a helpful role (both for Christians and non-Christians) in defining who belongs to the Christian community. For example, among other things, baptism is a symbol of membership in the new covenant people of God (Acts 2:38-41). Likewise, as we share in the Lord's Supper, we feed on Christ together by faith and demonstrate that we are one body (1 Cor 10:15-17).

2. Teach on the responsibilities of church membership

If we never teach people what God expects of them as church members, we can't expect them to live it out. A lot of these expectations will come up naturally, as we unpack God's word, week by week and book by book. But there is also great value in teaching on this topic more specifically, so as to connect the dots for our people and summarise the Bible's teaching in this area.

So what are these expectations? There are at least five different areas of expectations that the bible has for church members. This is not trying to be an exhaustive claim, and there is overlap between them, but we can summarise the five areas as follows:

- i. **Faith** - although 1 Corinthians 14 assumes there will be non-believers present when the church gathers, they are not thought of as members. The NIV calls them 'unbelievers and enquirers'. In other words, they are people who need converting before they can be considered members of the body of Christ. The first expectation of church members, therefore, is that they have a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we saw earlier, membership in the local church is really just a manifestation and consequence of membership in the heavenly church.
- ii. **Holiness** - the consistent teaching of the New Testament is that we should increasingly become what we already are in Christ. We are commanded to take off the old self and put on the new self (Eph 5:22). The obvious implication, therefore, is that church members are expected to pursue a life of holiness. In fact, persisting in public and unrepentant sin can even lead to disciplinary action (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5).
- iii. **Service** - as we saw in Ephesians, the church is a body that grows to maturity 'as each part does its work' (Eph 4:16). The expectation, therefore, is that church members take an active role in the growth and maturity of the body. They do this as they speak the truth in love to one another and as they use their gifts to serve and build the church.
- iv. **Relationships** - although believers are called to do good to all people, they have a particular obligation to love, restore, care for and carry the burdens of those in the household of faith (Gal 6:1-10). These are the 'one anothers' they are so regularly called to 'one another' (teach, admonish, rebuke etc). Additionally, believers are regularly commanded to recognise and come under the authority of the shepherds who keep watch over them (Heb 13:17).
- v. **Gathering** - a final expectation of church members is that they gather regularly to engage with God and build one another up. In fact, the Scriptures command believers not to give up the habit of doing so (Heb 10:24-15). The primary place where believers meet together is in the weekly assembly, although (as we shall see

later) there are many additional opportunities for gathering with God's people as well.

The most natural place to teach people about the biblical expectation of membership is as they join the church. In fact, this can be a powerful discipleship moment. Most people will come to a new church with their own understanding and expectations of membership, and depending on where they have come from, this may or may not be biblical. This is your chance to correct any misunderstandings they may have, and cast a vision for the kind of member they could be within your church community. Depending on the size and culture of your church, you may choose to do this formally through a membership course, or less formally through individual conversations and/or meals.

But this is not your only opportunity! In fact, if this is the only time you teach on the expectations of membership it won't be long before most people have forgotten about it. So consider additional avenues where you can teach on this topic. Could you do a sermon series on it every few years, or make it the topic of a church weekend away? Perhaps you could get your small groups to work through something like *Six Steps To Loving Your Church* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, or give everyone a copy of *How To Walk Into Church* by Tony Payne. There are plenty of other good resources in this space, so why not use a variety of methods and opportunities to teach and train your people in this area?

3. Clarify and communicate your pathway

One of the most helpful structures for any church to have is a discipleship or integration ‘pathway’. This is a series of steps designed to help people move from being non-believers through to being mature believers and active members in the church community. There are a variety of discipleship and integration pathways in existence, some of which include:

- Connect → Grow → Serve → Go
- Engage → Evangelise → Establish → Equip
- Belong → Believe → Become
- Community → Crowd → Congregation → Committed → Core

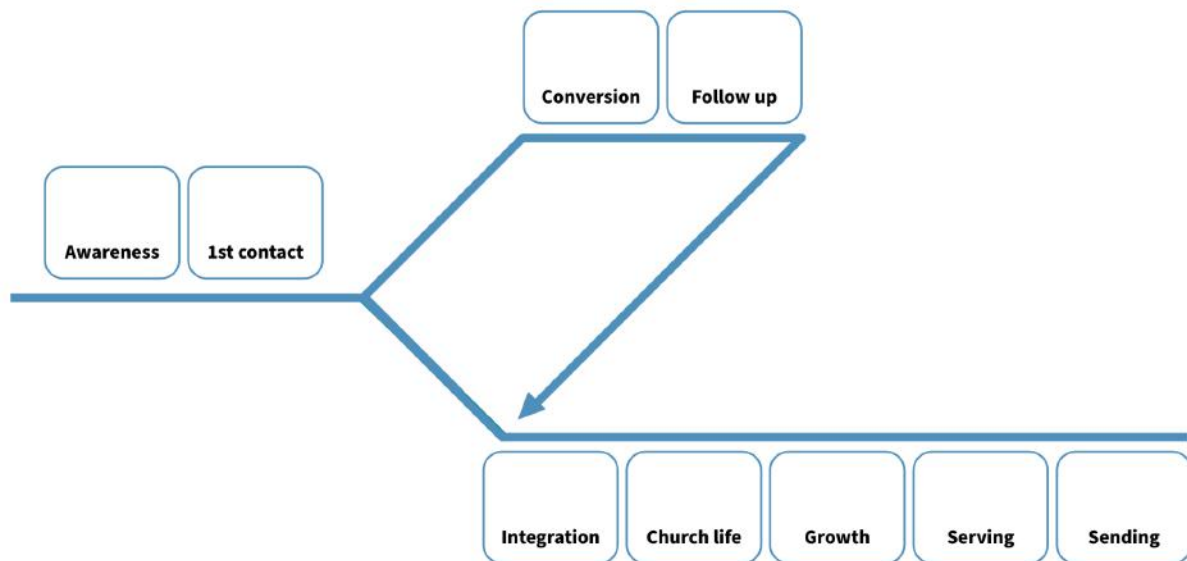
These aren’t the only discipleship pathways out there, and some of them are better than others. Nevertheless, it’s more important that your church actually *has* a pathway than which pathway it ends up using. In particular, it is important for church leaders because it helps them to think intentionally about how to pastor each of the people in their church and to think strategically about which courses and programs they run. For example, most churches will have one or two programs attached to each step specifically designed to help move people along the pathway. This is also important for people in the church, because if done well it helps them grow to maturity in Christ and clarifies potential next steps for those who are new.

To get the most out of your pathway, you must regularly do two things:

A. Clarify the pathway

One way to clarify your own pathway is to write down all the programs and ministries at your church and then chart them on the diagram below.⁹ This will help expose any gaps or blockages in your pathway, as well as revealing any double ups or ministries that aren’t serving a clear purpose.

⁹ This diagram has a certain view of church membership and belonging built into it. For this reason, you may need to tweak it slightly to fit your own context, particularly if missional communities are a key part of the evangelistic strategy at your church.



If you notice a gap in your pathway, you might decide to start a new program/course or ministry designed to bridge that gap. For example:

- You may discover that you need a more intentional way to convert the non-Christians who are connected to your community, and so you might decide to start an evangelistic course.
- Or you might discover that Christians who join your church don't often join a small group, or take months and sometimes years to join a ministry team. This might alert you to the need to implement another step in the pathway (like a course or simple conversation) to help resolve this bottleneck.

In the event that you discover double ups, or ministries that don't serve a clear purpose, it is a good idea to begin a conversation with the key stakeholders of this ministry. In particular, you will want to explore whether there is a way to repurpose the ministry to make it more effective, or whether it is time to retire it.

Finally, it is a good idea to reassess and clarify your pathway at least once a year. This helps to ensure that your ministry programs have not become unnecessarily cluttered or complex, and that each of the ministries you run is still serving a clear purpose in moving people along the discipleship pathway. To do this, simply repeat the exercise above and write down each of your ministries and programs on the diagram above. Then discuss them together as a ministry team.

B. Communicate the pathway

Once you have clarified your discipleship pathway, it is important to communicate it to the relevant people, on a regular basis, in the relevant forum. This is important both for new people to your church (since it helps them identify their own next steps), as well as for established members of your church (since it helps them to play an active role in helping new people in the church to take their best next step).

There are a variety of ways to communicate each of the steps in your pathway:

- i. **Announcements** - when it comes to announcements in the weekly church service, most churches would be wise to prioritise the early steps in their pathway. In particular, what is the best next step for the non-believer who wants to find out more about Jesus, and the Christian who wants to find out more about your church? Depending on the size and culture of your church, this may be one event (like an informal newcomers night) or two separate courses (like exploring Christianity and a membership course). Announcing these as often as you can will not only help people to know how to connect, but will also embed the pathway into the culture of your church.
- ii. **Website** - is your pathway clear on your website? Most people who visit your church will visit your website first, and so it can be helpful to give more information about some of the early steps in your pathway on your website. If your website also includes a way to register for these next steps, and further details on where and when they are taking place, it can also become a helpful 'one stop shop' for your Sunday announcements. That is, you can say something like, 'To register your interest for any of those events, just head to the website and it's all under the *What's On* tab.'
- iii. **Church emails** - most churches send a variety of emails. In the case of follow up emails sent to new visitors, the early stages of the pathway should be emphasised. In other words, visitors should be reminded what the most helpful next step for them might be, depending on whether they are a Christian or not, and directed to your website to register their interest. In the case of whole church emails, you might like to highlight some of the later stages in the pathway, such as how to join a small group, how to join a ministry team, and/or how to give to church. This can be a helpful prompt for members who may have stepped off the pathway for various reasons, or never progressed beyond a particular step.
- iv. **Welcome packs** - many churches give first time guests an info pack. This is a great idea and provides another opportunity to communicate the pathway, particularly the early steps of the pathway. Again, it should be clear from the information in these packs what the next step should be for a non-believer who wants to find out

more about Jesus, and the Christian who wants to find out more about (or join) the church.

- v. **Membership course** - if your church has a membership course, this is the key place to communicate the later stages of your discipleship pathway. In particular, you should seek to clarify how each of these steps will help them on their discipleship journey, as well as flourish as church members who bless and benefit from others in the community.

Communicating the pathway in each of these ways, and in each of these contexts, will help to embed the pathway within the culture of your church. As a result, it will create a context in which your members know the pathway, and encourage others to progress along it. For example, your members will increasingly start inviting new people they meet at church to attend your membership course if they are Christian, or exploring Christianity if they are still exploring the faith. In a similar way, you might find that your members encourage other members to join a small group, join a ministry team, start giving to church and/or start sharing Jesus with their friends if and when the opportunities present themselves.

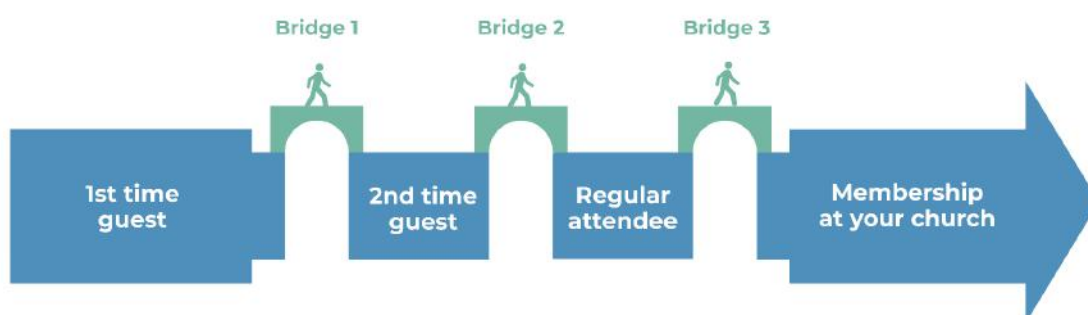
It is important to remember that the joy of this process is not that people are progressing along a pathway, but that they are progressing towards maturity in Christ. Of course, no pathway can guarantee maturity, nor is it the only way for someone to mature as a Christian. Nevertheless, clarifying and regularly communicating your discipleship pathway will help the whole church to be actively involved in building itself up in love as each part does its work.

4. Help the newcomer to connect by oozing hospitality

The integration pathway we have just explored will be a helpful summary of your church's discipleship strategy. Having said that, it doesn't get into the nitty gritty of helping newcomers connect into the life of your church. That's what this section is about.

A. Understanding the newcomer journey

When it comes to newcomer integration, it is helpful to recognise that there are typically three mini-bridges someone needs to cross in order to join your church.¹⁰ Even if you don't have an official 'membership' or course, these three bridges will still be true, it's just that how you define membership may be less concrete.



As the diagram suggests, someone crosses Bridge 1 when they come back to your church for a second time. They cross Bridge 2 when they come back to your church for a third time or more, and they cross Bridge 3 when they go from being a Regular Attender to a Member.

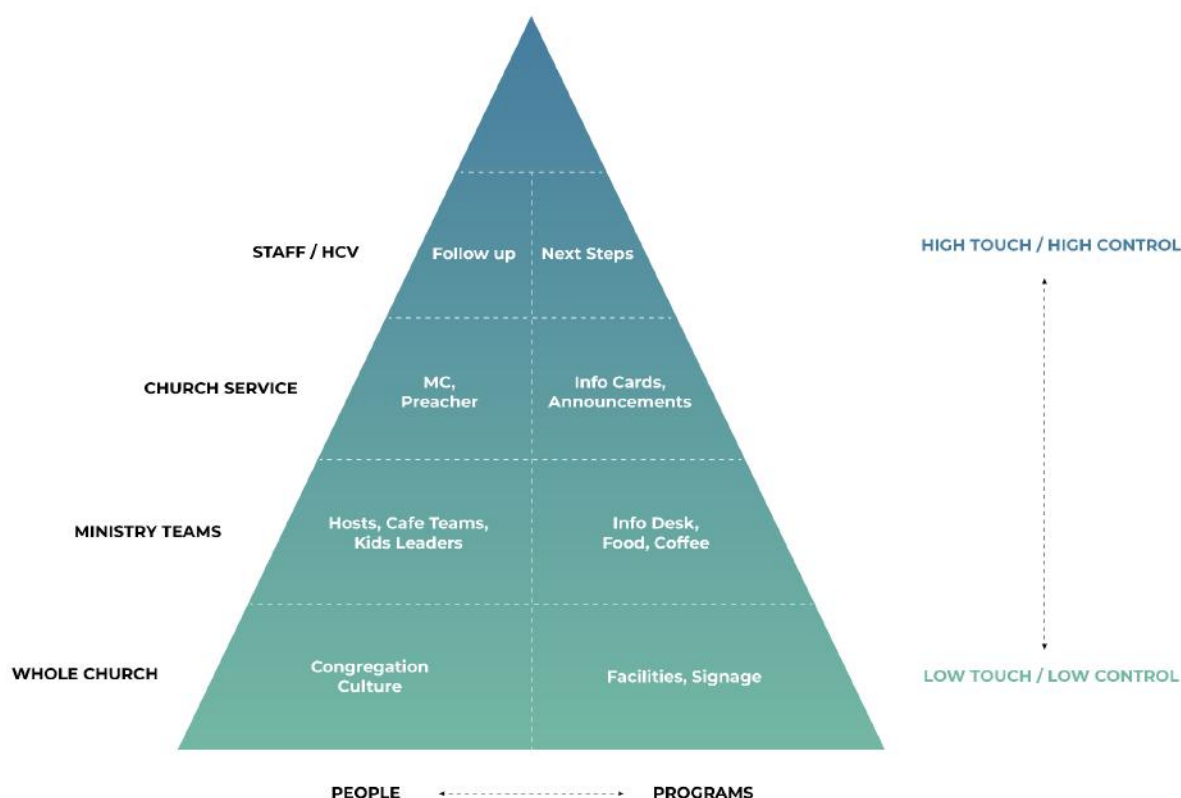
The primary benefit of understanding this process is that it can help you consider how you might encourage people to take their next step. For example, is there anything you can do to make a first time guest more likely to come back for a second time? And what about our second time guests? Presumably they've come back for a reason. How are their needs different from both a first time guest and a regular attender? What do they need to come back for a third or fourth time? And what about those people who come regularly but haven't joined you in membership? Simply recognising the reality of these steps will help you to love and care for each of the people who are coming to your church according to their particular needs, rather than treating everyone in the same generic way.

¹⁰ Nelson Searcy, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

B. Make it easy by oozing hospitality

Imagine that you've invited guests to come over to your house for lunch. How would you prepare? It may vary from context to context, but perhaps you'd clean the bathrooms, tidy the house, get the food ready, light a scented candle, and then put some music on in the background. Why? Presumably, it's because you want your guests to feel welcome and you want them to want to come back! Given we act this way when we're expecting guests at home, it's odd that more of us don't act this way when we're expecting guests at church. If we want people to feel welcome at church and want to come back, we should do everything we can to ooze hospitality.

So how can we ooze hospitality as a church? The diagram below outlines eight things that you'll want to give attention to before, during and after the Sunday gathering.



In terms of how to read the diagram, with a few exceptions your guests will experience things from the bottom to the top, which also means that you have the least control over the things they experience first. You'll also notice that the left hand side highlights the people that your guests will encounter, while the right hand side highlights the programs (or non- people side of things) that your guests will encounter. We consider each of them below:

- i. Congregational Culture** - One of the biggest factors in determining whether a guest returns to your church will be the quality of their interactions with the members of your congregation. Did anyone speak to them? Did anyone extend an invitation to lunch? Naturally, you cannot control how members of your church behave or what experience the guest has. But you can influence it! Remember, you can stir the heart and set a vision for it through preaching, telling stories and providing training. What's more, if you pay attention to the other elements in the triangle, you may find that they work together to help build the kind of culture where this kind of thing happens more often than not.
- ii. Facilities/Signage** - Your church facilities will have an enormous impact on how warm and welcoming newcomers find your church. For those meeting in rented facilities or a dark hall, this can be discouraging. But don't underestimate the difference that simply adding a few plants, curtains, wooden pallets, or mood lighting can make to how warm your church feels. If this isn't your area of expertise, that's OK! Ask someone to help make it a place that people actually want to spend time in before and after the service. At the end of the day, this is a key place where relationships are going to be built and so the longer people want to stick around, the better it will be for the community.
- iii. Hosts/cafe/kids' teams** - Irrespective of what you call your welcomers, it can be useful to encourage them to think of themselves as hosts. For example, the host of a party doesn't just stand at the door and greet people, they walk in with them and get them a drink. Then they might also chat with them and introduce them to another friend, before telling them what they can expect from the night. That's the kind of mindset you want to train your hosts at church to have. Encourage them to take ownership of the guest's whole experience, not just to say hello or get their details. It is also important to train your kids' leaders to have an eye to the outsider. New parents don't just need to be welcomed, they need to feel confident that their kids will be safe and well cared for.
- iv. Food/Welcome Desk** - Not all churches will serve food, but if you do, it's important to put some thought into the kind of food that you serve. As a general rule, it is a good idea to serve the kind of food at your church that the people at your church would serve if they invited their friends over. For example, if most people would serve Iced Vovos and jelly snakes to guests at their house, then this is probably a good fit for the food at church. On the other hand, if they tend to serve up cheese boards, fruit platters and home baked cookies, then it's probably better to serve those kinds of food at church. Again, it's about oozing hospitality.
- v. MC/Preacher** - By the time a guest is actually sitting in your church service, they've ideally been made to feel welcome by your hosts, if not one or two church members as well. But the service gives you another opportunity to acknowledge

the guest and welcome them to church. It doesn't need to take long, but a brief comment by the MC or service leader (together with the preacher later on) can go a long way.

- vi. Announcements/Info Cards** - As we discussed above, the announcements are a key opportunity to communicate the pathway and make it clear what the guests best next step might be. In addition to this, it can be a good idea to have some kind of *Connection Card* (whether physical or digital), and give people time to fill it out during the service. This is arguably the most important thing you do, since you can't follow people up without their details. To get the most number of guests filling this out, it can be a good idea to encourage your members to do it too. To help facilitate this, you might like to include a space for them to add prayer requests so that members don't feel like the card is just about registering their attendance.
- vii. Follow Up** - Once you've got a person's details, you need to make sure you follow them up. The best way to do this will depend on the context of your church and the demographic of your people. In some contexts, people will expect a phone call and sometimes even a visit. In other contexts, even a text message will be considered too full on and so an email will be the best approach. The size of your church and the number of guests you have will also impact your approach. In general, the more guests you have the more generic your follow up will need to become, although you can still break it up according to how many times they have attended.
- viii. Next Steps** - This is just a simple way of saying, 'emphasise the pathway'. At the end of the day, it is your responsibility to ensure that people know what their next step could be, but they need to be the ones who take it.

5. Recognise and leverage the benefits of different sized communities

Most churches are made up of multiple overlapping and interconnected communities. By way of illustration, consider a simple church that runs three services on a weekend, a series of small groups during the week, and various ministry teams.¹¹ As the diagram below illustrates, this church actually consists of numerous communities, some of which are different sizes, and many of which serve different purposes. Recognising this can be an important step in appreciating the role that each of these communities play within the life of the whole church. Research from social science can also help us to see how we can leverage the different benefits of these communities, both for the good of the individuals within them and for the community as a whole.



A. Recognise the dynamics of different sized contexts

Proxemics is a field of study within social science that explores the different ways that individuals behave and relate to one another in different sized contexts.¹² For example, research suggests:

¹¹ In reality, the church is likely to be far more complex than this diagram suggests. That is, it probably has many other formal communities like kids church and youth church, not to mention all the other informal communities like families, friendship groups, mentoring relationships and so on.

¹² For more on how this applies in a Christian context, see Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

- i. In **‘public’ contexts** (100+) we normally gather to engage together with something outside ourselves, like at a sports game or a concert or a church meeting.
- ii. In **‘social’ contexts** (20-70), we interact with an affinity group of some kind, sharing snapshots of ourselves—like at a party or at morning tea after church;
- iii. In **‘personal’ contexts** (4-12), we reveal more of ourselves, and likewise get to know others at a deeper level—as at a dinner party or a small Bible study group;
- iv. In **‘transparent’ contexts** (2-4), we can be open and vulnerable, and share our innermost thoughts and experiences—usually with our marriage partner or a close friend.

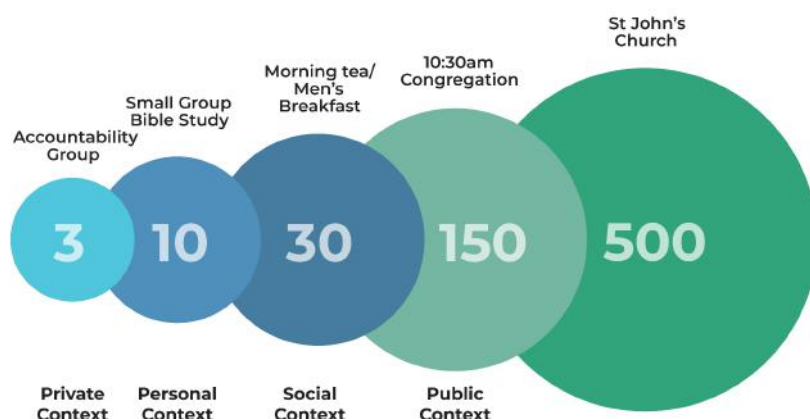
These insights can help us to understand the way that people will tend to behave in each of the various contexts within our churches, together with the roles that these contexts might play in the overall life and health of the community. For example, we might ask, ‘Where do the people in our church grow in their love and affection for one another?’ While we don’t want to downplay the role that our church services play in this (particularly in shaping gospel convictions), the church service is rarely the best context for building deep relationships. If we want people to go deeper, we will also want to facilitate opportunities for them to gather in social contexts (like morning tea after church, or a men’s or women’s breakfast etc.) and in personal contexts (like small groups and ministry teams). Furthermore, if we want them to be open and vulnerable with one another, we may also want to facilitate or encourage members to gather in groups of 2-3, which more closely resemble the transparent context.

Or suppose we ask, ‘Where does the church build itself as we speak the truth in love to one another?’ Again, having an awareness of these contexts can help us to see the important role that each of the various contexts within our church might play in this crucial task. For example, while it may only be the preacher who gives the sermon at church, everyone has the opportunity to tease it out over morning tea, or in their small group that week. Furthermore, it will often lead many others into more personal conversations with partners, close friends or mentors where they grapple with their own personal weakness, and encourage one another with the forgiveness that is found in Christ.

Recognising the strengths of different sized contexts and communities can also help us to diagnose potential gaps in our ministry structures. As we do this, we should be careful not to over engineer things. That is, it may not be the case that every context needs a corresponding formal structure in the church, but being aware of these different contexts can be a helpful tool in reflecting on existing ministry structures and formulating new plans.

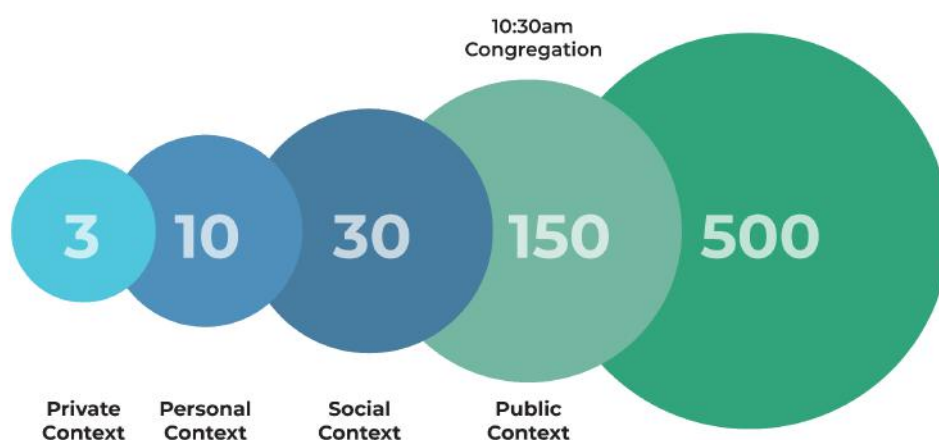
B. Encourage participation in different sized communities

Given the benefits that come from different sized contexts, both for the individual and for the church as a whole, we should encourage our members to participate in a wide range of communities and contexts at church.¹³ An example of how this might play out can be seen in the diagram below:



Most churches have formal ministry structures that operate in the personal and public contexts, while the private and social contexts tend to be more informal. As we mentioned above, this is not necessarily a problem, but it can be helpful to appreciate this and factor it into your ministry planning.

By way of contrast to the diagram above, imagine a church member who refuses to join a small group and ministry team, and habitually leaves church as soon as the service is over. While we cannot know the full story of how this person is engaged throughout the week, we might characterise their observable activity as follows:



¹³ There will always be some people who, for various valid reasons and/or seasons, are unable to participate in the full range of communities that your church has to offer. This includes, but is not limited to those with chronic illnesses.

How should we feel about this kind of behaviour? Well, it's certainly better than not attending church at all! And yet, there's something about it that seems out of step with what we saw from Ephesians. What's more, this kind of behaviour often results in people feeling disconnected and dissatisfied with church. They might even complain, 'I just don't feel like I belong'. At the end of the day, this shouldn't surprise us. As the diagrams try to illustrate, so much of where we build rich relationships and speak the truth in love to one another happens outside of the formal church service. Sadly, by habitually leaving early, this person not only deprives the church of their love, they also deprive the church of the opportunity to love and care for them in return.

Finally, let us consider the community of the whole church (or St John's in our example above). Some may want to question the extent to which it is appropriate to describe St John's as a *church*, since it is probably rare that all its congregations ever gather together as one.¹⁴ Having said that, most will consider it less controversial to describe it as a community. What's more, there is significant value in helping people to recognise their membership in this community, and to actively participate in it, so that it can be leveraged for the good of others and the glory of God.

For example, in addition to sharing Christ in common, it is likely that the members of this community also share a common leadership, common vision, common mission partners and a common heart for the people of their local community. By leveraging their fellowship in these areas, they will often be able to do more together than they could ever do apart. This fellowship can also benefit the individual congregations of the whole church. For example, it is not uncommon for members of an older congregation to give more financially, while members of a younger congregation serve more.

In summary, our churches often consist of overlapping and interdependent communities, and it can be helpful to recognise and leverage this reality for the benefit of the church, its members, and the local communities in which they gather.

¹⁴ Indeed, Jonathan Leeman goes so far as to call this 'picking a fight with Jesus'. See Jonathan Leeman, *One Assembly* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

6. Build and promote an ecosystem of care

As we saw from our study in Ephesians, Christians within the local church are called to love and care for one another. Significantly, this mutual member care takes place alongside and in partnership with pastors, whom God has appointed to shepherd his flock (Acts 20:28).

But what exactly does it mean for us to care for one another?

Given the priority of the gospel, it must begin with care for the ongoing growth and maturity of our fellow believers. This is particularly true in the case of pastors. Following the example of Paul, they are to care for the flock by preaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) and by protecting them from wolves who try to come in and distort the truth (Acts 20:29-30). Having said this, it is also true for church members. One of the key ways we care for one another is by speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15). This does not just refer to 'putting the hard word on' someone, although it will often include this. Paul urged the mature Christians in Galatia to restore those who were caught in sin gently (Gal 6:1), and James encouraged his readers to bring back those who wandered from the faith (Jas 5:19-20). Caring for one another, therefore, is first and foremost a spiritual exercise.

Nevertheless, it is also more than this. As James says elsewhere, 'Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?' (Jas 2:15-16). In the context, James is illustrating the worthlessness of faith without deeds, but the illustration only works because the failure to act in this instance is so clearly a lack of love. People are not brains on sticks nor disembodied souls, and so we cannot love and care for them without giving attention to their physical needs. Paul illustrates this point in Ephesians by telling them to work 'that they might have something to share with those in need' (Eph 4:28). Practical care, therefore, is an outworking of our love for God and our love for our neighbour.

Finally, there are clear times where someone's spiritual and practical needs combine. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is in suffering. In the midst of suffering and difficulty, we want to see people come to know, grow and persevere in Jesus. What's more, in God's sovereignty he often uses suffering to accelerate their growth (Rom 5:3-5). With that in mind, care in these situations often looks like walking alongside people when they may be tempted to doubt God's goodness, encouraging them with God's word, and praying with and for them. It may also require being gracious with them, and not expecting them to fit our one-size-fits all church programs.

To care for one another, therefore, is to show care and concern for one another, by caring for the whole person in all the joys and trials of life, with a view to maturity in Christ. But how exactly do we encourage and lead our churches to become communities of care?

A. Build structures of care within the church

It can be helpful to think of structures that provide care at multiple levels within the church. These are ‘the all’, ‘the some’ and ‘the many’.

i. The All

As we’ve just seen, all of us are called to care for one another. An important way to envision and equip your people to care for one another is through the regular preaching of God’s word. In addition to this, you can also provide church wide training in various things like marriage enrichment, budgeting seminars, managing stress, dealing with anxiety and so much more. When it takes place within a broader ecosystem, training like this can increase the capacity of church members to care for one another.

In a medium to large church, however, it is unrealistic to expect everyone (and this includes pastors) to provide direct personal care to every other member of the church. This is why many churches will seek to encourage their members to see their small group (and often their ministry teams) as their primary circle of care. Many of the spiritual and practical needs of church members are relatively minor, and so these can often be met by their small group. Even when more significant issues arise, many groups will have members with both the capacity and expertise to carry the burden of those in need.

It is important to point out that for this system to work most effectively, there needs to be ongoing training, support and accountability for small group leaders, as well as good lines of communication between them and the pastoral team. For example, we want to help small group leaders to facilitate a culture within their group that lovingly checks in and follows up with people if they haven’t been around for a while. Some will do this naturally, but most will benefit from a degree of support and accountability. While there are plenty of ways to achieve this outcome, a common way is to ask small group leaders to mark attendance at their groups, and then touch base with them once a term (or as needed) to discuss the health of those in their group.

Naturally, there will also be times where the needs of an individual will require (or benefit from) greater or more specialised care than the members and leaders of a small group are able to provide. This is why it is also helpful to build structures that care for *some*.

ii. ***The Some***

When it comes to practical care, there are some key structures that can be useful to have in a church to help care for those who need more care than their small group can provide. These might include some or all of the following:

- **Frozen meals** - is there a freezer at church, stacked with frozen meals, that people can give to those in need? Ideally, people's small groups will be providing meals for them in times of need. Having said that, sometimes those in need are not in small groups, or the members of their group are unable to cook for them. These are the times when a fridge full of meals can save the day.
- **Care fund** - some churches set aside an amount of money each year (or invite people to give for this purpose) so that they can provide momentary relief for members under financial pressure. This will usually require a level of sophistication (ie. application forms, approval process, and different levels of financial care), but it can be a very practical way to implement Paul's instructions to 'share with those in need.'
- **Gift packs** - few things disrupt and impact the life of our members more than the birth of a child or the death of a loved one. Therefore, giving baby hampers to new parents that include some practical necessities and a children's bible (or other resource) can be a great way to care for them and encourage a culture of discipleship within the home. For those who have lost loved ones, giving them a small gift (like flowers) and some resources on coping with grief and the hope of the resurrection can also play a small part in showing practical support during their time of need.
- **Marriage preparation** - newly engaged couples will often benefit from doing marriage prep before they get married. This is an opportunity for them to re-examine some of the bible's key teachings on marriage, as well as to grow in their self awareness and understanding of what marriage will be like. While far from a silver bullet, good marriage prep courses can often save the couple (and their community) a world of pain and heartache down the road.
- **List of counsellors** - while there are many things that church members and leaders can and should support people through, there will inevitably be times where professional help is required. This is when it can be helpful to have a list of trusted Christian counsellors near the church that you can refer people to.
- **Visitation team** - many large to very large churches also develop visitation teams, who function a bit like hospital chaplains. As representatives of the church, their role is to visit those who are sick (in hospital or at home), to provide a listening ear, and to encourage and support them with Scripture and prayer.

iii. The few

In many churches, the primary circle of care for members of the church will be their small group. As we've already seen, however, members and leaders of a small group won't always be able to provide the care and support that people need. Furthermore, not everyone will be in a small group and sometimes those who are, won't attend (despite the best efforts of their leaders). For this reason, it can often be helpful to develop an additional layer of pastoral care and oversight that kicks into gear when the small group system fails, or is stretched beyond its capacity.

For example, who follows up those who are in danger of slipping through the cracks and drifting away from church and the faith? The author of Hebrews describes church leaders as 'those who keep watch over you' and those 'who must give an account' (Heb 13:17). If we are to take our responsibility as church leaders seriously, we must do all that we can to watch over the sheep that God has entrusted to us. As we saw earlier, this is a critical aspect of pastoral care.

This is not to suggest that pastors must personally follow up all the lost sheep, but it does mean that they should feel the burden of responsibility for ensuring it happens. There is great flexibility in how this is done. In smaller churches, it may well be that the pastor is the primary person doing this job. In medium to large churches, however, it may be the work of pastors (congregational, focus or specialist), together with a team of others, who regularly look through the church database and share the load of reaching out to those in danger of drifting away.

In addition to this, there will be others in the church who will benefit from more intense care. Again, there is great flexibility in how this is done and who does it. For many churches, it will be most natural for a member of the pastoral team to drop everything and spend time with those in crisis. Perhaps someone has just died, or they have been told they only have six months to live, or a mother and her children are in a domestic violence situation. It is the privilege of pastoral ministry to walk with people through these moments of crisis. When the issues are more chronic and ongoing, however, there is also wisdom in establishing a care database and/or a specialised care team to share the load.

B. Promote structures of care within the church

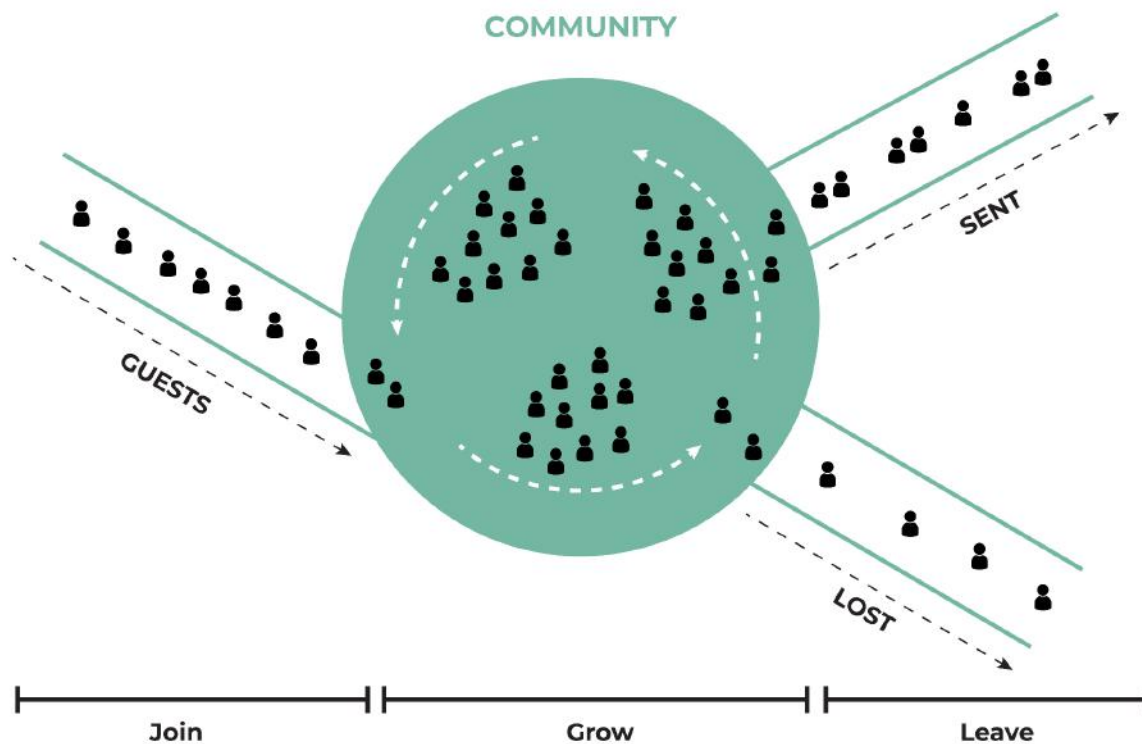
Having established the structures of care, it is also important to promote them so that members of the church are aware of them. This is particularly important if small groups are going to play a key role in care within the church. Below are some key places to communicate this:

- i. **New Members Course** - if small groups are the primary place where care happens in your church, you should make this clear at your new members course. Mark Boyley describes joining a small group as the church equivalent of swimming between the flags at the beach. That is, this is where it's safest to swim, it's where you can help save others if it looks like they are struggling, and it's also where you can expect to get help most readily. After all, that is the primary place that the lifeguards focus their attention. The risk of going it alone and swimming somewhere down the beach is that you could drown without anyone noticing. It is much the same when it comes to participating in a small group.
- ii. **Small Group Leaders** - if small groups are the primary place where care happens in your church, you also need to make sure your leaders are aware of this and trained for it. Naturally, the capacity of your leaders to care for the needs of their members will vary from leader to leader, but at the very least, they should be aware of each of the structures you have available for *The Some*. Additionally, they should be trained in something like *Recognise* → *Respond* → *Refer*. As each word suggests, this is a process by which group leaders *recognise* the need, *respond* if they are able, and *refer* if they cannot. This may be a referral to a member of the pastoral team, or it could be a referral to the list of counsellors, the care fund, or even just the freezer at church.
- iii. **Website** - it can be helpful to have a section on your website briefly outlining the church's approach to care, together with a list of all the structures that are available for access by *The Some*. Naturally, this would include your list of counsellors, a link to find out more about the care fund, a description of how to access the freezer and who the meals are for, how to apply for pre-marriage prep and anything else that might prove useful.
- iv. **Visitation and Care Teams** - where a church has developed visitation and/or care teams, it can often be helpful for team members to have a way of communicating that they are acting on behalf of the church. This might be as simple as saying, 'I'm calling on behalf of the church', or even having a badge, or t-shirt that indicates as such. Although not strictly necessary, this can be a helpful way of protecting against bitterness and disappointment in those receiving the care. That is, it attempts to prevent them from thinking, 'Person so and so is lovely, but *the church* doesn't care.' The church *does* care, and *Person so and so* is the evidence!

7. Embrace change and lead for growth

A. Embrace change in the church community

Every church community is in a constant state of change. New people will be joining, others will be leaving, and those within the community will always be going through the ups and downs of life. This can be seen in the diagram below:



Naturally, the location, size and context of a church will impact the degree to which the community experiences this change, but it will always be true for every church. This can be an intimidating concept to come to grips with, particularly for those who value stability. The problem is, while stability can be good in many situations (like a marriage), total stability in the church is not only unrealistic, it can also get in the way of gospel growth. After all, if nobody ever joins the church, it will only be a matter of time until that church dies off.

As church leaders, we need to embrace change in our church communities and encourage our people to do likewise. The makeup of our church community will not always be the same and that's a good thing! After all, while change will always come with a degree of sadness, it's also a necessary consequence if we are going to lead healthy and growing communities that engage with God together, build one another up, and shine as light in a lost world.

B. Manage and lead for growth

To help you understand, manage and lead through the regular changes of your church community, it can be helpful to record and review data, track progress, and make changes as necessary. In particular, it can be useful to pay attention to each of the stages outlined in the diagram above.

i. Joining

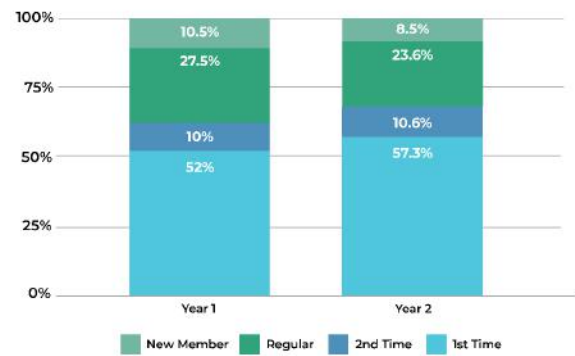
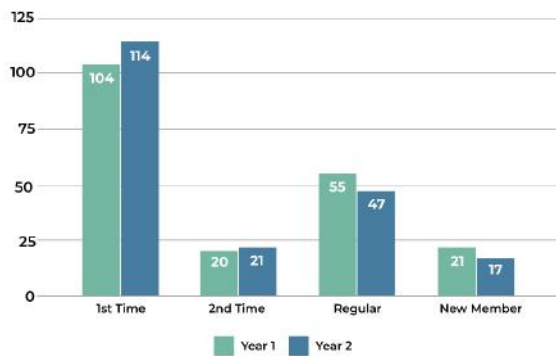
To assess the effectiveness of your welcoming and integration processes, there are a few key metrics to pay attention to.

The first is your **integration ratio**. You can calculate this using the formula below:

$$\text{Integration Ratio} = \frac{\text{Number of people who joined your church in membership}}{\text{Number of first time guests who visited your church}}$$

The higher your integration ratio is, the more welcoming and hospitable your church is likely to be. It is important to keep in mind that the integration ratio of your church will be heavily dependent on a number of factors specific to your church, so it won't always be useful to compare your ratio to that of other churches. More useful will be to compare your ratios year on year, and to see whether you are growing in this area. This will help you assess whether you need to make changes, and when you make them, whether they are effective or not.

A second useful metric is to record your **guest numbers**. In particular, the number of first time guests, second time guests, regular attenders, and new members you have each year. For year on year comparisons, it can also be useful to see how these function as a percentage of your overall number of guests. An example of this data can be seen in the graph below:



Tracking these figures will help you to assess where you tend to lose people in the joining process, and will encourage you to reflect on whether there is anything under God that you can do to improve this.

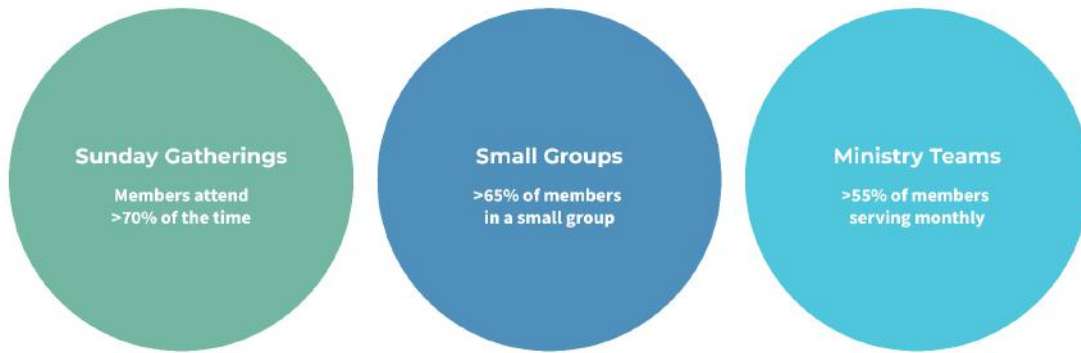
ii. Growing

To assess the health of your church community as a whole, as well as the people within it, it can be helpful to track attendance data and pay attention to some key engagement metrics. It is important to highlight that none of these figures will guarantee a healthy church, or even healthy individuals. Nevertheless, there is often enough correlation between the two that they can be helpful indicators to pay attention to.

Three key metrics to pay attention to when it comes to the health of your community are as follows:

- What percentage of Sunday services do members attend?
- What percentage of members are in a small group?
- What percentage of members are in a ministry team?

As with the integration ratio, it will be most useful to pay attention to your trends in these figures, year on year, rather than comparing your church's metrics to those of other churches. Having said that, many people would suggest that a healthy church community might have metrics along the lines of those indicated below:



Once again, tracking these metrics and noticing trends over the years can help alert you to what's happening in your community. Do members join your church, but never turn up? If so, is there anything you can do to address this in your new members course? Do people take too long to join a small group? If they do, don't be surprised if you have a growing number of people leaving your church out the back door. Are your volunteer ministry teams always short staffed? It could be that you need to think more intentionally about how you can help people to step up and serve.

In addition to the health of the community as a whole, it can be helpful to pay attention to the engagement of individual members along the same lines. Again, while attendance at services and participation in a small group and ministry team is no guarantee that someone is growing in Christ, these kinds of activities do help to paint a picture of how someone is going, and can often become a useful springboard for pastoral conversations. Furthermore, if someone is trending down in any one (or all three) of these areas, it may be a sign that they are at risk of drifting away.

iii. Leaving

Unless Jesus comes back, every member of your church will eventually leave. Some will pass away and go to be with the Lord, but the majority will either be *sent* or *lost*.

It is helpful to think of those who leave on good terms (like moving house or getting married) as being 'sent' by your church community to serve the Lord elsewhere. Although it is always sad to say goodbye, these farewells are a natural part of Christian ministry, and not something you can control. Rather than trying to prevent this from happening, it is better to acknowledge it as a reality and consider what you can do to prepare these people to join their next community most effectively. In contexts where there is a very high percentage of people being sent each year (like youth or uni ministries) it can also be helpful to think in terms of a 3-6 year 'curriculum' that equips people for service before sending them off.

Unfortunately, all churches will also have a steady stream of people who leave on less than ideal terms. Maybe they abandoned the faith, or failed to connect with others, or had a falling out with someone else at church. To some degree, these kinds of things are inevitable, and you will never be able to prevent them from happening completely. Having said that, it can be very helpful to keep track of how many people are 'lost' each year and (to the extent that you can know) *why* they left. Although it can be a sobering experience, analysing this data on a regular basis will help you to assess whether there is anything you can do to minimise those who are lost each year.

PART 3

Common Community Landmines

We began this ebook by acknowledging the fact that the topic of community can be surprisingly divisive for Christians. Some might even call it ‘explosive’! With that in mind, this chapter will attempt to diffuse seven common community landmines without blowing everything up. Or at least, that’s the goal! There is insufficient space to treat each of these topics comprehensively, but our hope is that by addressing each of them briefly, and in light of what we’ve seen throughout this ebook, you might be better equipped to navigate these issues in your own church and experience

1. The GATHERING landmine

One of the tensions we need to grasp is the relationship between the gathered and scattered community of God’s people. To begin with, the word *church* (*ekklesia*) means gathering. This simple fact points towards something fundamental about who we are and what we do. That is, gathering is both an *identity* and *activity* of the community of God’s people. We are those who have been gathered to God, through Christ, and seated with him in the heavenly realms. And yet we are also commanded to gather in his name, and all the more as we see the day approaching (Heb 10:25).

Significantly, it is the activity of regularly gathering together to engage with God and build one another up that establishes and maintains the community of the local church. A local church is not *just* a group of people with Christ in common. That’s true of all Christians. What makes them a church is that they regularly gather together. As we saw in 2.5- *Recognise and Leverage the Benefits of Different Sized Communities*, the activity of gathering can and often does take place in a variety of locations and contexts. Most foundational is the weekly church service, but church members can and should gather in many contexts beyond this to build one another up in love. We see an example of this in the church of Acts 2, which met in the temple courts and from house to house.

So, gathering is a central part of who we are and how our church communities function. And yet, the community of the local church doesn’t spend all its time gathered. We also scatter and head back to the families, neighbourhoods and workplaces in which God has placed us. God never commands his New Testament people to retreat into holy huddles and cut themselves off from the world. Rather, as the Apostle Paul indicates, we are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world (1 Cor 5:9-11). This explains why so much of the New Testament addresses our behaviour and attitudes *outside* the gathering. It addresses family life (1 Pet 3:1-7), the workplace (1 Per 2:18-21), and how we relate to authorities (1 Pet 2:13-17). The assumption is that we will be living ‘among the pagans’ (1 Pet 2:12). What’s more, the expectation of the New Testament is that as we live out the gospel in

word and deed, God will use our witness to bring some to repentance and faith in Christ (1 Pet 2:12, 3:1, 3:15). In other words, God uses both our gathering and our scattering to build his church.

So how much time should we spend gathering together and how much time should we spend scattered in the world? It is interesting to note that there are no time mandates in the biblical text, indicating that there is some degree of Christian freedom in this area. Karl Deenick estimates that there are 112 waking hours in a week, and that most people today will spend little more than 4 hours in church related activities each week.¹⁵ In other words, most people will only spend 3% of their time gathered in the formal ministries of the church. Naturally, many will spend additional time in informal gatherings, of different sizes and with different purposes, but the bulk of people's time will be spent scattered in the world rather than gathered with others from church.

Some will want to challenge this. In fact, many in the missional community, or house church, movements may believe that only spending 3% of our time gathered together is unbiblical. 'Surely' they might say, 'we have to be doing "life on life" and "living in community" much more than this!' To some extent, there is much to appreciate about this claim. Indeed, given the power of the world to disciple us and train us in its ways, there is great wisdom in forming thick gospel communities that disciple us in the Word and ways of Christ. Such communities also function as a powerful witness to the world. And yet, to suggest a certain percentage of time as a biblical mandate would seem to be going too far.

So where does that leave us? Rather than burdening the people of God with their personal preferences, it would seem wisest for church leaders to hold up the beauty and benefit of gathering with God's people (not to mention the obligation), to help their members to form and participate in thick gospel communities¹⁶, and then to equip them to live out the gospel in word and deed as they scatter throughout the week. What this looks like on the ground will almost certainly vary from church to church, and will depend on the needs of the community. And while some patterns may be more or less wise, it is safe to assume that there is a wide range that might be described as healthy.

¹⁵ Karl Deenick, *Gathered Together: The beauty of living as God's church* (Sydney, NSW: Matthias Media, 2022).

¹⁶ At the time of writing *Unmissable Church* was just released. To explore this further read chapters 2 and 3 on 'What is church really?' Antony Barraclough & Richard Sweatman, *Unmissable Church* (Sydney, NSW: Matthias Media, 2022).

2. The ORGANIC landmine

At its core, the church is a living and breathing organism, not an organisation or institution. Perhaps no biblical metaphor makes this clearer than that of the church as the *body* of Christ. Paul writes, 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body (1 Cor 12:13). Christ is the head of this body, and 'from him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love' (Eph 4:16). To think of a church as consisting of its legal structures, programs, or property, therefore, is completely foreign to the New Testament. The church is the Spirit filled people who gather to engage with God and build one another up.

The recognition of the church's organic nature has led some people to push back against any form of organisation or institutionalism within the church. A good example of this in recent years is Frank Viola. In his book *Pagan Christianity*, he advocates for what he calls *organic church*. He writes,

An organic church is simply a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs. Organic churches are characterised by Spirit-led, open-participatory meetings and nonhierarchical leadership. This is in stark contrast to a clergy-led institution-driven church.¹⁷

While that may sound attractive to some, he goes on to argue that things like an order of service, song leaders, a sermon, and paid pastors are all completely unbiblical and have their roots in paganism. For Viola and others like him, each of these things quench the Spirit and deprive God's people from participating in the work of ministry. Consequently, they call on Christians to leave their institutional churches and return to the life and practice of the early church by forming organic house churches.

So how should we respond to this? Does organisation and institutionalisation quench the spirit and deprive God's people from participating in the work of ministry? It certainly *can*, but that doesn't mean it has to! On the contrary, some degree of organisational structure is often necessary for the gospel to continue growing. Perhaps the clearest example of this is seen in Acts 6, where the early church set aside seven godly men to oversee the distribution of food so that the Apostles could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Significantly, Luke connects the introduction of this organisational structure to the continued growth of the gospel (Acts 6:7).

¹⁷ Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2012).

Other evidence of organisational structures include Paul's practice of appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23, Tit 1:5) and his instructions about which widows to enrol on the church's care list (1 Tim 5:9-16). In addition to some basic structures, some degree of institutionalisation is also necessary if a church is going to last for more than one generation, not to mention open a bank account, employ staff or own property. To be sure, a church's structures and institutions are something distinct from the church, but when healthy, they exist alongside the church and help it to pursue its God ordained purposes.

In fact, this can be a helpful litmus test for any structure within the church. We should always be asking, 'Does this support gospel growth in the church and in its members?' If the answer is 'no', we have a problem. When existing structures are getting in the way of growth, either by hindering it or by failing to support it, then they must be removed or revised. For example, we touched on the importance of reviewing your pathway in 2.3 *Clarify and Communicate Your Pathway*. Church programs have a way of getting stale with time, and sometimes the way a church used to do things will no longer serve the ongoing growth of the gospel. This is why church leaders constantly need to review their systems and structures and update them as necessary. Failure to do so can often lead to cold bureaucracy, rather than dynamic gospel growth.

3. The SIZE landmine

What makes for a strong biblical community? It may come as a surprise for some to notice that nothing in what we have seen so far suggests that it is a biblical requirement for every member of a church to know every other member. Rather, our exploration of Ephesians suggested that when a church community is healthy, it will first and foremost be built on God's foundational work in the gospel. It will be a community with Christ in common, made up of men and women from all different backgrounds who have been reconciled to God and reconciled to one another. In addition to this, it will be a community that gathers regularly to engage with God, build itself in love, and do so with an eye to a watching world. Technically, a church can do all of this irrespective of its size, whether it be a church of 50, 500 or 5,000.

So where does the desire for smallness come from? Many point to research from Robin Dunbar that suggests a cognitive limit to the number of people with whom we can maintain stable social relationships. According to his theory, we only have the capacity to maintain stable relationships with about 150 people. He explained it informally as 'the number of people you would not feel embarrassed about joining uninvited for a drink if you happened to bump into them in a bar.'¹⁸ Technically, this number accounts for all the people you know (including family, friends and work colleagues), rather than the number of people in a congregation at church. Nevertheless, it may go some way to explaining why many people prefer congregations of less than 150.

Dunbar's number also helps to explain why many churches find it difficult to grow beyond 150. This time, it is less about the desires of church members, and more about the desires and relational capacity of the senior leader. If the senior leader needs to be needed, and desperately wants to maintain stable relationships with every member of his flock, then it is unlikely that it will ever grow beyond 150. He simply does not have the capacity for it. If, on the other hand, he is able to raise up others and delegate (not abdicate) some of the pastoral responsibility to them, then it is more likely that the church will be able to continue growing.

It is important to stress the need for delegation rather than abdication in pastoral responsibility. For a church community to be healthy, it needs strong pastoral oversight. As we have seen throughout this ebook, church leaders have been charged with watching over the flock 'as those who will give an account' (Heb 13:17). Therefore, while it is not strictly necessary for the senior leader to know everyone by name, he must ensure that a system of care exists where every name (and story) is known by someone. We explored

¹⁸ Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, gossip, and the evolution of language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

this concept in 2.6- *Build and Promote an Ecosystem of Care*. Without a system of care, it will be far too easy for people to slip through the cracks and drift away from the community and the faith. Needless to say, that's not a strong biblical community!

The other essential aspect of ensuring that a strong biblical community exists in a medium to large church was outlined in 2.5- *Recognise and Leverage the Benefits of Different Sized Communities*. The larger the church, the more helpful it will be for people to participate in smaller groups (like Bible studies and ministry teams) if they are to have any hope of getting to know others, not to mention playing their part to love and build the church. It is interesting to note that many churches with congregations significantly larger than 150 will often develop additional ministries that resemble the social context in size. Examples might include men's and women's ministries, mid-sized small groups, and even sporting teams. While none of these are strictly necessary, groups like these can provide a helpful context in which members of the church can build relationships with others in a smaller setting than the Sunday gathering.

4. The BELONGING landmine

Almost everybody longs to belong somewhere or to something. Belonging gives us a sense of identity, and safety, and a place or people in which we feel like we ‘fit’. Barnabas Piper describes it as ‘a delicious, easy, comfortable feeling—it is a little slice of heaven.’¹⁹ But even for those who find it, it can be fleeting. Piper goes on, ‘almost inevitably, something shifts. Circumstances change. People come or go. Our sense of belonging begins to fade and we lose our grip on it. Now we find ourselves back searching for it again.’ For most people, the desire to belong will be like an old injury that never properly healed. It stings every now and again, but they have learned to live with it. For some, however, the pain will be so acute that they will be tempted to leave their church and abandon their faith in God.

So how should we think about the issue of belonging? The first thing to say is that we yearn to belong because God has created us to seek and find it in him. As Augustine once said, ‘our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.’ We see the biblical evidence of this in Genesis 1-3. Genesis 1 and 2 explain how God created us to belong to him and with him, finding rest in his good creation and living in perfect relationship with him and his people. But in Genesis 3, we read of how Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and how in judgement, God cursed the world and cast humanity out of his presence. As a result, we no longer feel at home in God’s creation, and on our own, can never get back to that restful sense of belonging we had with God and his creation before the Fall. Tragically, this means we often end up searching for it in all the wrong places.

Wonderfully, the gospel brings hope and offers us a message of true belonging. From Old Testament to New, the Bible tells the story of God creating and then redeeming a people who belong to him and with him. As those who trust in Christ, therefore, we belong to Christ and *with* his church. The Bible uses a variety of images to depict this. We have been adopted into his family, so now we have a Heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are members of his body, and so now Christ is our head and we are interdependent with others in the body. We are bricks in a spiritual house, so we belong together with those whom God is building into a temple in which he might dwell by his Spirit.

Significantly, all of this is true whether we feel like it or not. In other words, for those in Christ, belonging is an objective fact even if it is not always a subjective experience. To some degree, therefore, we must learn to live by faith rather than by sight. This side of heaven, we may never fully enjoy that pre-Fall experience of being perfectly known and loved by God, and at peace with others in his presence. But that doesn’t mean we should

¹⁹ This and all other quotes in this section come from Barnabas Piper, *Belong: Loving Your Church by Reflecting Christ to One Another* (Good Book Company: 2023), .

stop working towards it. On the contrary, the Scriptures constantly urge and command us to live out the implications of our belonging, both to God (1 Cor 6:19-20) and with one another. On one count, there are at least 59 ‘one another’ commands urging us to do this. We are to love, bear with, forgive, teach, rebuke, serve, build, pray for, submit to, and sing with one another, among many other things. The more that we give ourselves to these things in the power of the Spirit, the more belonging will be a lived experience for those in our church communities.

To help encourage a church in this direction, there are some practical things we can do in addition to teaching and preaching on this regularly. First, build contexts for belonging and encourage people to participate in them. We explored this in 2.5- *Recognise and leverage the benefits of different sized communities*. A good place to explain the significance of these communities for belonging is in your membership course. Second, disciple the discontent. A lot of discontentment is born out of unrealistic expectations. We often need to remind people that the church is full of sinners, and while this does not excuse bad or unloving behaviour, we are also commanded to ‘bear with’ and ‘forgive’ one another. It’s only a matter of time until others at church (both the members and leaders) let us down. This can be, and often is, very painful. But as long as the church is committed to pursuing Christ together, it’s exactly where God commands us to be, both for our good and joy, and for his glory.

Finally, we should not be afraid to call on the people in our churches to commit. Not necessarily to an individual leader's vision, or to the structures of how things operate, but to the local family, body and building to which they belong. Barnabas Piper writes, ‘When we feel like we don’t belong, we often live with a foot out the door and an eye on other possibilities. We hold back relationally, and we hold back our gifts, talents, and resources (or we give them elsewhere, in the places we have decided we more truly belong). We give less to the church and are unable to receive as much too. That, of course, becomes a self-perpetuating negative cycle: holding back means we feel like we belong less, so we hold back more, and so we feel we belong less... Here’s the stark reality: you can never truly find belonging at a church unless you commit yourself to it.’

5. The HOMOGENEITY landmine

Imagine Jack grows up at a suburban church. Most of his friends get married young, but Jack is one of a few people his age who remain single. After a while, he starts feeling disconnected and dissatisfied at his home church. Eventually he moves into the city to be closer to work. At the same time, he joins an inner city church plant full of single, young professionals, just like him. All of a sudden, Jack feels connected, loved and cared for. Before long, he's telling all his friends about the incredible Christian community that he's discovered and describing it as 'a foretaste of heaven.' Is Jack right? He certainly could be! Then again, it could also be that Jack is experiencing a *demographic* phenomenon rather than a *gospel* phenomenon. After all, people who share similar stories and life experiences tend to get on well and that's true with or without the gospel.

The example above is not supposed to demean the great work being done by inner city church plants. I happen to lead one! Furthermore, the same warning could just as easily be sounded with regard to ethnic specific churches, young family services, and even the traditional 8am service. It's not wrong that people enjoy spending time with those who are similar to them. It's only natural. The problem is, *Christian* communities aren't supposed to be natural, they're *supernatural*! Remember, God has 'created one new humanity out of the two' (Eph 2:15). Imagine if the first Christians had formed Jewish churches and Gentile churches. Or to bring it closer to home, imagine if all the Jews attended the 10:30am service at St John's and all the Gentiles attended the 6pm service. Would that be a strong Christian community? Even if they were all loving and caring for one another, we would have to say 'no'! Why? Because in their gatherings, they would be rebuilding the walls of division that Christ had destroyed in his death.

So is that what's going on in the inner city church plant (or the ethnic specific church, family service, or 8am traditional service for that matter)? Are we rebuilding what Christ has destroyed? We *may* be, and it's important to watch out for this, but there's also nothing inherently wrong with being demographically similar. After all, the location of the church may make this unavoidable. More important, therefore, is to ensure that the *primary* thing uniting people in our churches is what God has done in the gospel. That's not to say that it must be the only thing, but it should be the *primary* thing. In fact, if anything else (like race, age, education, affluence, subculture or marital status) becomes more foundational to our unity than Christ, we will no longer have a *Christian* community. We may be a community full of Christians, but we won't be a distinctly *Christian* community.

So how do we keep Christ at the centre of our communities? Do we need to cancel the kids and youth programs and only run one church service? Some may think so, but we don't

believe that is necessary. Rather, as we have indicated throughout this ebook, we need to constantly preach and teach on the beauty of Christian community. What's more, we should work hard not to segment people into demographic groups at church more than necessary. For example, if your services are demographically similar, try to have small groups with people from a variety of ages and stages, rather than always dividing them along demographic lines (like uni students, young married couples, and new parents). You may also like to host occasional combined services, or whole church weekends away, so that people get to rub shoulders with those who are different to them.

6. The FRIENDSHIP landmine²⁰

In his book *Gathered Together*, Karl Deenick writes,

What is precious, and what the New Testament models for us, is not simply hospitality but *spiritual* hospitality—that is, meeting together in each other’s homes not just for food, but for the explicit purpose of being built up in the faith through fellowship over the word and prayer.²¹

Paragraphs like this one, together with all our talk of *supernatural* community, can sometimes leave us wondering about the place of friendship in the Christian community. Through the gospel, we know that we are now brothers and sisters in Christ. We’re family! But can we also be friends? And if we are friends, do we always need to be quoting Bible verses to one another? Or can we just ‘hang out’? For example, what if we just go out for dinner with people, or invite them over to play board games, or go for a surf together? To what extent do these things build and/or contribute to Christian community?

The first thing to say is that human friendship is a good thing in and of itself. It doesn’t need any further justification or purpose, and there’s no need to feel guilty if we never get around to talking about God or the Bible. This is particularly true because, sadly, many people today are starved of the joys of human friendship. To invite people out for dinner or a surf, or to host them for a board game, therefore, is an act of genuine love. Strictly speaking, it doesn’t create Christian community or build the body of Christ, but it’s still an act of goodness and love.

The second thing to say is that friendship, and the regular ‘hanging out’ that often goes along with it, tends to create multiple contexts in which Christian friends can build one another up in love. For example, consider the transparent and personal contexts we explored in 2.5 - *Recognise and Leverage the Benefits of Different Sized Communities*. It is often when Christian friends spend time in these kinds of contexts that they are able to speak openly with one another and provide the encouragement or rebuke from God’s word that the moment requires. Again, they may not do this every time they meet, but it’s often the warmth and depth of their friendship that makes these kinds of conversations flow more easily.

²⁰ This section borrows heavily from Tony Payne’s article *Can We Just Hang Out?* May 25, 2022.

<https://www.twoways.news/p/can-we-just-hang-out#details> accessed 16.04.2023.

²¹ Karl Deenick, *Gathered Together: The beauty of living as God’s church* (Sydney, NSW: Matthias Media, 2022)

Finally, we should not underestimate the value of cultivating friendships with and simply ‘hanging out’ with people on our ministry teams. This goes for both employed staff and volunteer teams. For example, ministry team socials where you all go bowling together are not a waste of time! It may not be an activity that directly builds the Christian community of the church, but it’s an act of love and kindness that often helps to build a sense of togetherness and team cohesion. Needless to say, having a unified team that enjoys spending time together can be particularly helpful when it comes to engaging in work that more directly advances the Kingdom of Christ.

7. The STABILITY landmine

Gospel growth can often be seen as a threat to Christian community. For example, imagine a church that has such a compelling community that it grows beyond the seating capacity of its building. If moving to a larger facility isn't possible, then it really only has three options. Stop growing, start a new service or plant a church. The first option sacrifices gospel growth, and the last two options appear to sacrifice Christian community. After all, both of them involve splitting the community in two, or at the very least, sending a significant portion of the community elsewhere. The relational cost of doing this can be massive, and often leaves people mourning the loss of what was.

We often see the same thing play out on a smaller scale with small groups. In a growing church, it often feels necessary to start new small groups by splitting (although we're told to call it "multiplying") existing groups. No matter how well we cast the vision of gospel growth before our members, it only takes a few group splits (I mean, "multiplications") before some people are nursing bitterness and resentment. The issue is often intensified in churches where leaders tell their members to focus on building relationships with others in their small groups. 'OK', they say, 'But how do you expect us to build meaningful relationships if you keep shaking up our groups all the time?'

So how should we respond? The first thing to say is that the pain is real! We see this exemplified in the Apostle Paul, who often expressed deep affection for the churches he planted and a longing to be with them again (1 Thess 2:17-18). In other words, having a heart for gospel growth doesn't mean that we will be unaffected by changes in the community. Secondly, church leaders often make things harder than they need to be. For example, is it really necessary for people to change small groups every year? And what about starting new groups? Why not minimise the impact to the existing group by planting a new group with two leaders from the old group rather than dividing the group in two? Of course, there will still be some disruption, but doing it this way can at least minimise the impact.

But all of this raises a more significant question. Is gospel growth *really* a threat to Christian community? Gospel growth may well be a threat to our personal preferences, and perhaps even to stable relationships, but our definition of community needs to accommodate for gospel growth or else it will not be *Christian* community. After all, the gospel is the story of God, sacrificing himself, in order to welcome sinners into his family. Christian community is costly, and it often willingly sacrifices the stability of what *is* in order to welcome others in. Does this threaten Christian community? Of course not. That's exactly what a Christian community does!

At the end of the day, we must remember that a stable experience of community in the local church is not the end goal of the gospel. The glory of God and the salvation of his people is. As we have seen throughout this ebook, our communities exist with an eye to a watching world, and the hope and expectation is that as we live among the pagans, God will use us to draw many to himself. We explored some of this in *2.7- Embrace Change and Lead for Growth*. This does not mean that we should dispassionately ignore the legitimate grief of people in our churches, or move at a pace of change greater than what they can handle. Such an approach would not only be unloving, it would also be foolish. But it does mean that we should work hard to lead for gospel growth, calling on people to follow the example of Christ, who sacrificed not just his own comfort but even his life, so that people like us might be welcomed into the family of God.

CONCLUSION

Australia is in dire spiritual need.

To reach the 25 million people in this country, we must give ourselves to the work of leading healthy and growing communities that engage with God together, build one another up, and shine as light in a lost world. If this seems like too great a burden for us to bear, it is!

But we are not alone.

Jesus said, 'I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it' (Matt 16:18). So let us press on in God's strength, confident that Jesus is building his heavenly community, and let us rejoice in the privilege that we have as his fellow workers.

RESOURCE LIST

WEBINARS AND VIDEOS

Community and Integration Learning Labs [Part 1](#) (Tim Clemens) [Part 2](#) (Maddie Galea)

Workshop on Community and Integration from National Conference 2019 [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#) (Tim Clemens & Amy Townsend)

Church membership [Webinar](#) (Scott Sanders, Greg Lee and Mark Dever)

Evangelistic Pastoral Care [Workshop Recording](#) (Sarah Kinstead)

Pathways into Church Life [The One Thing Episode](#) (Scott Sanders, Derek Hanna and Greg Lee)

BOOKS

[Unmissable Church](#) (Richard Sweatman and Antony Barraclough)

[How to Walk into Church](#) (Tony Payne)

[Together in the Storm](#) (Sally Sims)

[The Compelling Community](#) (Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop)

[God's New Community](#) (Grahame Beynon)

[Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church](#) (Gary L. MacIntosh)

WORKBOOK

This is a companion workbook for the Gospel Growth and Christian Community ebook from Reach Australia.

These are questions you should consider in all the second part of the ebook. The questions are designed to help you think about where your weak spots in your community are. Ideally, if you have a team, each member of the team should answer the questions individually and then come together and discuss them. At the end of this workbook is a table for you to consider what your next steps will be.

Why are we writing out answers? Because often we think we know the answer until we need to write it out in detail. Doing this as separate members of the team and then coming together will highlight the assumptions, especially the team leader, about how well all of this is being communicated.

STIR THE HEART AND SET THE VISION FOR IN COMMUNITY

1. When was the last time that you heard the vision for community from the front?

2. In what ways do your services communicate ‘we are a family’ rather than ‘you are an audience’? (Think about implicit ways as well as explicit ways)
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 -
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3. When do you include stories of community in your Sunday service?

4. How have you considered using the sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Supper to communicate ‘community’²²?

²² This is not all they communicate, and may not be communicated every time.

TEACHING ABOUT MEMBERSHIP

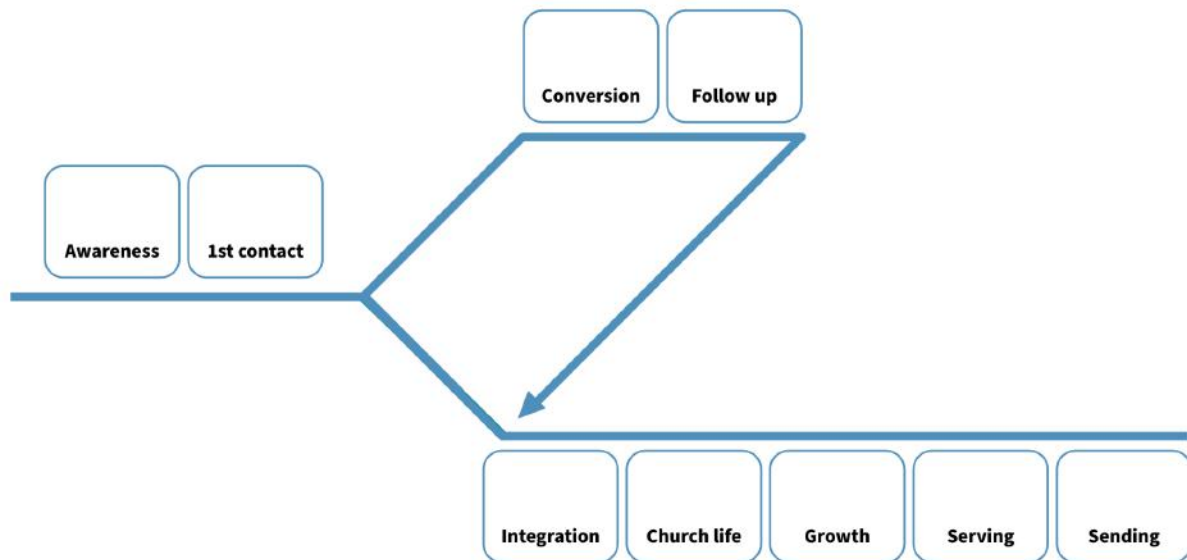
5. How are you helping non-Christians who come on Sunday to understand that church attendance and salvation are not the same thing (both implicitly and explicitly)?

6. How is church discipline exercised in your church?

7. What happens if an accusation is made against a member of staff (outline the process)?
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 -
 -
 -

CLARIFY AND COMMUNICATE YOUR PATHWAY

8. Consider the diagram below:



What are you doing at each step of the process and who is the key person responsible for that step?

Step	Structure(s) to help facilitate this	Person responsible for the outcome
Awareness		
1st contact		
Conversion		
Follow up		
Integration		
Church life		
Growth		

Step	Structure(s) to help facilitate this	Person responsible for the outcome
Serving		
Sending		

9. How are you communicating your next step?

- In Sunday announcements (are they a normal announcement)?
- Where is it on your website (you could get an outsider to assess how easy it is to find)?
- How is it communicated in your weekly communication (if you send out a weekly email, ask your members how easy, or if they can find the next step)?
- Where is it in your welcome pack? (If you have a welcome pack, what information is included about who you are, what the gospel is, and what their next step of connecting is?)
- How do people join a membership course (how do people know when they are on and how to enrol)?

OOZING HOSPITALITY

10. How are you priming your existing members to be hospitable?
11. What are you expecting your existing members to do in terms of being hospitable?
12. Are your facilities hospitable? Hint: Take a photo of the facilities and assess that.
Our eyes have been trained to be more critical of photos than real life.
13. What have you trained your welcoming team to do? Are they expecting handing out stuff at the door or hosting new people (ask them)?
14. Do you eat the food at the post-service part of church? Why? Why not?
15. Does MC or preacher regularly welcome new people (and set the tone for the regular members to be hospitable)?

RECOGNISE AND LEVERAGE DIFFERENT SIZED COMMUNITIES

16. What structures do you have for different levels of community²³?

More connections
More vulnerability



Context (People size)	Public (100+)	Social (20-70)	Personal (4-12)	Transparent (2-4)
Structures you have:				
Notes:				

²³ If you are in a small church, social and public contexts may be the same thing.

AN ECOSYSTEM OF CARE

17. What is the pathway of knowing who needs care?
18. What sorts of situations might you need to respond to? (e.g. An accident or illness that lands someone in hospital, a death of an elderly member of the congregation, a case of domestic violence, etc.)
19. In each case what is the immediate response, regular response, who should be communicated with and what is the follow up?

EMBRACE CHANGE AND LEAD FOR GROWTH

20. What is your integration ratio?

Number of people who **visited** your church in the last 12 months: _____

Number of people who **joined** your church in the last 12 months: _____

Integration Ratio =
$$\frac{\text{Number Joined}}{\text{Number of Visitors}}$$

21. What sorts of situations might you need to respond to? (e.g. An accident or illness that lands someone in hospital, a death of an elderly member of the congregation, a case of DV, etc.)

22. In each case what is the immediate response, regular response, who should be communicated with and what is the followup?

ASSESSMENT

What do you need to do next?

Urgently and simply (small changes for big impact)

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

In the next month

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

In the next year

- ☐
- ☐
- ☐
- ☐

