

COMMUNITY: THE GLOWING EMBER FACTOR



Just as a hot ember cools and dies when removed from a fire, so a person living outside community. We need to be in relationship with one another to generate warmth and influence on others.

Community: What Is It?

There are a couple different concepts of community.

One is of a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. There could be a shared context of proximity (like neighborhoods or nations); shared attitudes and moral values (like church communities); or affinity communities of shared interest or practice (like around sports, leisure, and professional interests.) There's a relatively durable social connection and one community can contain another.

If you want to go fast,
go alone; if you want
to go far, go together.
African Proverb.

The other part of the definition of community focuses on a feeling of fellowship or communion with others, because of sharing common attitudes, values, interests, goals, and especially compassionate understanding. The shared identity and sense of belonging is stronger, emotional connections are made at deeper levels, and needs are met. This type of community is usually experienced in the context of

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good friendship and is what human beings typically long for but often struggle to find, especially in western culture.

We were created for community and reflect our Maker, who perfectly embodies community as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's one reason why we don't function to our God-given potential when we aren't in community. We as God's image bearers are significant, created for significance. We were originally created good, without distortion; created to create, to solve, to rule, to manage. We were created to be in community, in relational harmony. As God's created image-bearers, we have a deep sense to achieve in community. This is reflected in the Trinity, Who worked together in making Creation. (Read Genesis 1:26-31) Each is unique but interdependent, not independent, or autonomous. The deep-rooted desire for accomplishing in community reveals itself through our longings, stories, and aspirations (think of inspirational stories of mentors-mentees-peers and successful teams accomplishing a mission.)

Community Illustrated- the Baseball

A baseball can be used as a loose illustration of the nuances of community and fellowship. The outer materials are your contextual community, like your school, extracurricular or affinity groups, neighborhood, nation, or maybe even church. It has lots of acquaintances and stuff going on and represents a lot more area than the core.

You can be in multiple contextual communities at the same time. You don't necessarily connect very deep relationally with most in the contextual community. You may share some contextual life experiences (like your city's sports team winning a championship, the loss caused by a disaster in your neighborhood, or the laws and economy that affect your profession.)



Photo: Rawlings

This is your outer circle.

Now let's move to the core. In the middle of the ball you have a relatively solid center. Though much smaller, the material is much denser than the materials that form around it. You share some contextual experiences, but more importantly, you are in closer proximity to those within your community and have more overlap in shared interests, values, and life rhythms. You have typically done a lot more laughing, working, crying, worrying, and celebrating with those you fellowship with versus those in an outer circle.

The core is your inner circle of close friends and is where you find fellowship within the bigger context of community. The effort required to develop the dense core is usually greater than relationships in the contextual community but are also the most solid and rewarding.

Note that you can be in community, but not have fellowship. But you can't be in fellowship without being in community. Jesus had the one, the three, and the twelve as part of his core or inner circle, and the seventy, and the five hundred as part of his contextual community of disciples. To get direction on the type of person you should have as part of your inner circle or core community, compare/contrast the types of people mentioned in Proverbs 10-15. You'll gain insight on qualities to look for or avoid and the benefits or consequences of your inner circle influencers.

Inner circle, outer circle expectations. Just because someone is in your inner circle doesn't mean that you're in theirs. Different seasons of life will also have different folks both in your contextual community and in your core community. And that's ok.

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People prefer acquiring knowledge in different ways- some through self-guided study or experiences, others in a group setting. But if a person wants to be transformed and mature, nothing replaces being in a loving, purposeful community of like-minded people encouraging and admonishing each other. Our Creator tells us in His Word, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing*, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV)

Practices for Developing Community

Here are some practices for developing community.

Mindset & Attitude

- Teachability. Be open to God’s vision for you and be teachable.
- Patience and intentionality. Manage your expectations about finding community and fellowship. It takes a lot longer after college. Be persistent!
- Develop Self-awareness: am I creating any of my own barriers? How can I get help to remove the barriers? What’s broken in me that I can bring to God to fix?
- Don’t let uncertainty about the future keep you from cultivating community and fellowship in the present.

Behaviors & Actions

- Look for community and connection in church small groups, professional organizations, affinity groups, continuing education or personal enrichment classes, and coworkers. Meetup.com is one way to meet people who have similar interests.
- Develop good face to face, life to life communication skills.
- Seek first to serve your community before being served.
- Be friendly. Discover what that means in your context.
- Respond to text messages.
- *Find a mentor...* Cultivate meaningful, intergenerational relationships. Marketplace ministries, church, Christian associations, campus ministry alumni organizations, Christian college alumni associations, mentoring organizations and referrals from friends are all potential places to look for mentors. Psalm 145:4; Proverbs 13:20
- *Church Community.* Identify and plug into a Bible-Believing church community within a couple of months of moving to a new location. Do your homework on church possibilities before you even move to your new location or make your transition. Prepare to serve within a church as quickly as possible (within a few weeks)- you’ll develop relationships faster and be less self-absorbed with the difficult transition. Engage in counter-cultural mission to curb entitlement and self-centered tendencies. Know that no church is perfect (it’s made up of imperfect people like you.) Ask God how you can bloom and be fruitful for others where you are planted. Jeremiah 29:1-11.
- *Core Travel Companions.* How you see the world will influence how you feel, so your worldview matters. Cultivate a core group of friends who “spur one another on toward love and good deeds, *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...*” Choose your core community from those who are going in the direction that you want to go. Hebrews 10:24-25; Proverbs 17:17; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Choose friends and community wisely. The Proverbs talk a lot about the kinds of friends to choose.
- *Hospitality* Practice hospitality. It’s a good way to get to know people better and develop a community. 1 Peter 4:9; Titus 1:8

Finding community and fellowship in your 20s won’t likely be as easy as college and may take longer. But don’t give up. Press into your fellowship with Jesus. Trust Him. Focus on serving and becoming the

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right person rather than finding the right church and the right friend. Also, remember that you can't find fellowship without being in community. Be persistent. Be intentional.

Live embers produce heat and light. Keep yourself in among the (m)embers of Christ's Body so that you don't grow cold, but that you are warmed by others, warm others, and shine the light of Jesus.

Ask Your Mentor

1. How would you define community and fellowship?
2. Who is your community? Describe it. How did you get plugged in?
3. What's the hardest part of community? The benefits?
4. What should one look for in a healthy community?
5. Hunter Baker, author of the article, *The Secret of Appreciating Church*, says that "A failure to find a church and invest yourself in it is a sign of spiritual immaturity." What do you think?

Go Do

1. If you aren't in community, what's your action plan for finding one?
2. If you are in community, what will you do over the next few weeks to make it stronger for yourself and those in it?

Go Deeper: Further Conversation & Study

1. Have you ever been hurt by church community? If so, what happened? Describe your journey toward forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Where are you on that journey? What helped?
2. What are common barriers to finding community?
3. What are common barriers to me being good community?
4. Choose friends and community wisely. The Proverbs talks a lot about the kinds of friends to choose. You eventually become like who you fellowship with. Who do you want to become?

Sources & Resources

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