

Encouraged by books like *The Irresistible Revolution*, experiences of deep community in college, and the desire to radically follow Jesus, people are forming hundreds of intentional Christian communities across the United States and world. These communities of Christians living in proximity to one another seek to boldly bring the Kingdom of God through such key practices as redistribution, reconciliation, hospitality, simple living, peacemaking, and most importantly love. Unfortunately, I have personally seen community after community emerge with great vision and hope only to drown in the details of day-to-day life together. The purpose of this series of white papers is to help people form and “live into” healthy and vibrant Christian communities by developing a strong foundation and practice of community while avoiding the common pitfalls of community formation and life together.

Conflict and Community (Draft, revised 4-6-2011)

I know it sounds clichéd, but while community is a lot of fun, community is also really hard. I mean incredibly difficult! Community is a lot like marriage in this respect: we fall in love with all the good things about community, but then discover that it involves a ton of tears and pain. It takes a lot of hard work and perseverance—something we’re not used to. That’s not to say that community is not a ton of fun, it is, it’s just not always fun.

Like it or not, most of us have never actually learned how to be good friends. We avoid conflict and are awful at communication. We’re afraid to trust others because deep down, we know how untrustworthy we are ourselves. We came to community thinking we would get to ride a white horse, but instead have to muck out the stalls. While community sucks some of the time, perseverance brings incredible transformation.

Your life in community will likely simultaneously bring much joy and much disappointment. As one of my friends has said, one of the important purposes of community is “refining fire.” Enter into community with the expectation that it will not be what you were hoping. Take time to mourn your vision and then seek to fully embrace that which God is doing in and through your community. Seek to understand the struggle in your community as part of what God is doing, rather than failure.

Framework

In community we must dedicate ourselves to truth-telling. The uncomfortable truth is that many of us, including myself, are conflict avoiders and few of us have been taught to lovingly speak truth.

If you are a functional community you will have conflict. It is not to be feared or hidden, but rather dealt with. Commit to one another neither avoid conflict nor keep a long list of wrongs. As you have agreed not to keep a long list of wrongs

Thankfully, scripture provides an excellent framework for conflict resolution in Matthew 18:15-20:

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and

whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

These verses provide a framework for escalation and resolution specifically of issues of sin in community, however much of our conflict in community is not simply a matter of sin, but of needs, desires, hopes, and preferences. While Matthew 18 is certainly helpful in most conflict situations, we find in scripture and the life of Jesus an overarching posture for loving one another through conflict.

Receive as love not entitlement

Nothing will kill a community or relationships quicker than expectations. Expectations often rob us of joy and thanksgiving. It is healthy to set high expectations for one another, but take care to receive the articulation of the expectations as love. For instance, one of Sue's responsibilities in our community is to vacuum each week. If I receive it as an expectation, when Sue vacuums I accept it as an entitlement—she's just doing her part. If I receive it as an act of love, I can find joy and thanksgiving in the gift she has given us as a community. If Sue doesn't vacuum, and I view it as an expectation, my response is anger and negatively towards Sue not doing her part or commitment. I may still feel disappointed, but receiving everything in loves allows me to be disappointed in my desire not being fulfilled rather than in the person. The simple reality is that if I've previously received it as an act of love, I can much more easily approach Sue in love.

Justice or fairness

What is just is often unfair and what is unfair is often unjust. We each have unique personalities, temperaments, issues, and gifts. Some of us thrive in small bedrooms, while others smother. Some of us are healthy, while others are sick. Some of us gain energy through others, while some of us gain energy through solitude. Life together must acknowledge and adjust for these individualized differences. Sometimes that means allowing situations that seem unfair, one person gets a larger room or we have to buy more expensive food for someone to address their allergies. We must avoid choosing fairness or equality over justice.

As an extrovert, I desire to spend most of my time in public spaces so I have the smallest room in the house. It may not be fair or equal that I have a smaller room, but it is good and just for our community as Tim needs more time in his room alone.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of logistics. Karen gets the larger downstairs room because she needs to get up early for her job at the bakery and it enables her not to disturb the rest of the house who is sleeping.

Examen yourself

Seek to sort out your own feelings. Seek to be self-aware. What is your root issue? Is it an issue of personality, sin, needs, desires, disappointments, fear, missed commitments, or something else? The answer to this will be key in helping shape possible resolutions. How have you contributed to the issue?

Search yourself. What do you need to confess and repent of? How are you a part of the solution? What steps are you willing to take to help resolve the issue? Pray and then pray some more.

Approach and receive with humility

When you approach someone, do so in a spirit of love (and the other fruits of the spirit). If you are unable to do this, continue to examine yourself and pray.

When you are approached by someone else, assume that they are doing so in a spirit of love. If it is unclear that this is the case, ask them.

When talking with one another, assume others are seeking to be good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and loving (but the most of these is loving) and that it is your own ignorance standing in the way of seeing this. That is to say, approach one another with humility assuming the best of them. Understanding that this is a brother or sister who loves you, request rather than direct or demand. Seek to understand the differing perspectives and experiences that contribute to the issue.

Truly Ask

If you would like someone to do something, it is always better to ask rather than command. And even better if you explain how their doing so will be a blessing to you. Oddly enough, directing or commanding (even if you have the power to do so) is less effective than directly, clearly (don't hint, but actually say what you want), and authentically (they have to know that they can say no) asking a person for or to do something.

Seek to learn (not win)

Seek to inquire and understand. Open yourself to the possibility that you are wrong. Make your posture that of learning, not winning. As soon as you find yourself seeking to win, you are to stop talking and listen.

Phrases to avoid

Why? It's seldom possible to ask why without sounding like you are making an accusation. Instead to use more open and probing questions: how did that make you feel? How did you go about that? What was happening?

You always... You never... and other absolutes in reference to others should be avoided. Instead cite specific occasions or use phrases that qualify what you are saying: When you x, I think x. It hurts when you x. I don't feel like x, when you x.

That will never happen. Well that's stupid. You should avoid phrases that shut down conversation and instead choose phrases and open and invite such as: Would you tell me more about that? Wow! I really love that. I'm having trouble understanding.

In *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman provides an excellent framework of language that seeks reconciliation and provides soft starts to difficult conversations.

Reschedule if necessary

If you are unable to have the conversation without entertaining the possibility that you are wrong, assuming the others are seeking to be good, faithful, intelligent, wise, and loving, or without seeking to win, then you must confess this fact and request that you reschedule the conversation so that you may examine yourself. Reschedule it for a time that is sooner rather than later and consider inviting one or two others to help you with the conversation.

Confess and Forgive

As you grapple with the issue, eagerly confess the role you have had in the conflict. Request forgiveness and seek reconciliation. Seek to freely forgive one another for the ways they have confessed to falling short.

Confession is a messy and difficult thing. Though we seek to forgive one another, it is never guaranteed. This too is a part of the refining process of community, learning to authentically confess and forgive.

Holy Assumptions

There are things in our lives that we consider “normal” or just how a certain thing is done. Typically these are things which have developed through our culture or specific family’s functioning. In community (as in marriage) you will discover that many of these perceived universalities are in fact not.

A couple of examples:

The rhythm of John’s family growing up was to wash the walls with the changing of the season, while the rhythm of Jan’s family was to never wash the walls.

In Trey’s family, it was necessary to be highly aggressive in order to be heard. Trey is continually aggressive and loud at house meetings.

We must recognize that for most things there are a myriad of ways to do them. Also that compromise must be found.

In one of my previous communities, Sally cares a lot about the stove being cleaned every evening. Many of us feel that we should clean the stove less often, but more often than not it is cleaned every evening for two reasons.

One, Sally recognizes that cleaning the stove every night is one of her peculiarities and often takes responsibility for it getting done.

Two, others recognize that cleaning the stove every evening is important to Sally and, even though they don’t see the need, they clean the stove because it is the loving thing to do for Sally.

Resolution

Resolution seldom looks the way we expect. Sometimes the best resolution is to in fact not resolve the issue (Gottman).

Be mindful of needs versus desires. Realize that needs are more important than desires and seek resolutions in accordance.

As with the example of Sally and the stove, if it's simply a preference or desire, realize that you will have to go more than half the way in making it a reality in your community.

In another community, a carpet washer was donated to us so we spent an afternoon washing the carpets. The next morning Greg comments that he woke up without symptoms from his allergies. We immediately make plans to wash the carpets more regularly in order to make Greg's life better. Clean carpet fulfills a need for Greg.

Other Helpful Tools

Listening Wheel

The listening wheel is a tactile tool that enables you to concentrate on listening and observing rather than analyzing and defending. It is helpful in more fully understanding one another. Learn more and get resources for this tool at <http://www.i-skillszone.com>

Friendship is the best foundation for Conflict Resolution

There are some core skills that will enrich your life together. Community is a lot like marriage. A book that I recommend to communities is in fact a marriage book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman. While Gottman writes from a context of marriage, the tools he provides are more about having effective friendships in general (page 19). While all the tools are extremely helpful in conflict resolution, in conflict pay particular attention to the sections on solvable and unsolvable problems (pages 129-241).