

2-2019

A New Koinonia: Rediscovering Community Through Online Communities of Practice

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A NEW KOINONIA:
REDISCOVERING COMMUNITY THROUGH
ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
CHRISTAL M. N. JENKINS

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2019

Portland Seminary
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Portland, Oregon

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture passages come from the New International Version.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must begin my acknowledgments by thanking my parents Christopher and Dr. Debra Jenkins, I am because you are! Thank you to my siblings: Christopher (II), Christian, and Christina, you are the iron that keeps me sharpened. To my family, dear friends, I sincerely appreciate your continual encouragement, motivation, and inspiration. To those who are near to my heart but resting in God's presence: my grandmother Lillian Jenkins, godmother Dr. Edna Marie McCree-Weekly, Aunt Cynthia Gail Jenkins, and Dr. Samuel E. Kelly.

I want to give a special thank you to Dr. Diane Zemke, Dr. Jason Clark, Dr. Loren Kerns, Dr. Cliff Berger, and Heather Rainey for your guidance and support through this journey. To my amazing cohort “The Sevens”—Stu Cocanougher, Jennifer Dean-Hill, Lynda Gittens, Kristin Hamilton, Katy Lines, Jim Sabella, Chip Stapleton, and Mary Walker, we formed a bond that will last a lifetime. Last but not least, to my ancestors whose sacrifice and shoulders I stand on, I honor you with this work.

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century American church sits in the crux of a paradigm shift. The shift is driven by the decline in community and the need to evolve in the manner and methods used to maintain fellowship with believers who are seeking community. The loss of community presents both a challenge and an opportunity. One way in which we, as the church, can expand our connection with one another is through incorporating communities of practice. Communities of practice consist of three main components: domain (shared interest), community, and practice. The conceptual framework of communities of practice can foster community and discipleship within American church communities because it extends into online media.

Online communities of practice can be used to facilitate connection and the practice of meaningful community without the limitations of time and place. Section 1 addresses the problem of declining community faced by American church leaders and the importance of community in the life of the church. Section 2 evaluates the history, the establishment of, and the existing issues with current practices used by the local church (Sunday school, Bible study, and small/home groups) to foster community among members and those on the margins. Section 3 argues for online communities of practice in conjunction with a circle of praxis as a new solution that allows for community to be rediscovered and supports faithful discipleship. In addition, I argue that the theological framework of *koinonia* and the conceptual framework of online communities of practice collectively are a practical model for rediscovering community in the American church context in the 21st century. Sections 4 and 5 provide information on a web-based resource

that will support ministry leaders to establish communities of practice within their church context. Section 6 focuses on areas for further research.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

The 21st century church sits in the crux of a paradigm shift. The shift is driven by our need to evolve in the manner and methods used to maintain fellowship among believers and with those who are seeking community among them. The reality is that our places of worship and our understanding of what it means to have fellowship with one another have presented both a challenge and an opportunity. Extending the local reach and connecting with those who identify as Christians but who do not have a core connection with the local church remains a challenge. Despite the decline of connection within the local church, there is an opportunity to rediscover what it means to be communal and put into practice new ways to bring connection and community within the American church context.

As the world continues to birth innovative ideas, people are finding new ways to connect with one another. The ability to physically travel within short periods of time has led to the sprawl and dispersal of what was once the “local community.” People do not need to live within the community to be a part of the community. What is now deemed as the local community has taken on a nuanced definition as it relates to how people identify, connect, and grow with others.

However, considering all the innovation and evolution of community formation, what has not changed is the human desire for community. Jeremy Oddy asserts that “the contemporary hunger for community ought, on the face of it, to present the church with a

major opportunity, for the church embodies the promise of the renewal of man in communion with God and his neighbor.”¹ There are a few questions that begin to surface when contemplating the mission and purpose of the church in the 21st century. How then should the church respond to this opportunity? What are the ways in which the world seeks community with one another? How does the practice of fellowship evolve within the church?

In discerning and seeking out answers to these questions, the opportunities to live out the mission of God and embrace some new methods in conjunction with the work the church is already undertaking are greater than they have ever been before. *Communities of Practice* present an opportunity that supports the extension of our connection with one another and integrates those on the margins.

Communities of practice are a fundamental practical framework based on an established domain (shared interest), community, and practice. This framework has been implemented in the education, technology, and government sectors. “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”² The regular interaction within the conceptual framework of communities of practice extends beyond face-to-face interactions into online media. *Online communities of practice* can allow for communities

¹ Jeremy P. Oddy, *Christian Fellowship: A Theological Study of Koinōnia in the Local Church* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009), 4.

² “Étienne Wenger,” *Wikipedia*, last edited August 31, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Étienne_Wenger.

³ Étienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 134.

to grow both locally and globally. Online communities of practice can foster community and discipleship within church contexts.

Étienne Wenger, educational theorist and practitioner of communities of practice stated “communities of practice should not be reduced to purely instrumental purposes. They are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human.”³ The challenge at hand is not a simple one; it requires believers in Jesus Christ to return to doing life together in community with one another. The essence of communities of practice supports the mission and intent of the church as a body of believers. As the church evolves, we must continue to foster meaningful community for practitioners through a shared interest of maturity in the faith until Jesus Christ returns.

The Challenge of the Small-Mid Sized American Church Leader

The challenge of the American Church and its leaders is demonstrated in many different forms. The need to further establish communities that extend beyond local face-to-face ministry opportunities is a growing necessity. There are many examples of the manifestation of this plight in the small to mid-size local American church. These two examples provide a relatable depiction of the problem faced by American church leaders.

Pastor Joy grew up in the western part of North Carolina. She relocated to Greensboro, NC twenty years ago. Pastor Joy has been serving her small Greensboro, NC community church for the past 15 years. As the city continues to grow through

³ Étienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 134.

revitalization, she has seen gradual growth of young families moving to the area seeking out community and connection. During each school year, her church serves as a church home for many college students in the community. In addition to the growth drawing a younger group, she has noticed that within her own congregation many of the baby boomers, who are now empty nested, are seeking out new ways to connect with other believers outside of their community on a consistent basis.

Her desire is to find a way, in conjunction with her face-to-face ministry opportunities, to establish online communities as a ministry resource. In doing so, she hopes to not only engage her members but connect with those outside of her local community who actively seek knowledge and spiritual growth through discipleship in community with others.

Chris and Anna are a young couple from Chico, CA. They are ministry leaders within their local church. They share a passion for faith and music. Recently their music opportunities outside their local church have grown. As they have traveled throughout the state and the country, they have discovered that there are others who share their passion and are not a part of a church community. However, they long for community and want to be able to remain connected to others who share in their same domain. Chris and Anna want to find a way to bring this community together no matter where they are currently located.

In both scenarios, these leaders are looking for something that is sustainable and allows their community members to take an active role and responsibility in sharing daily in their domain. Whether it is biblical teachings, worship practices, or doing life together, they want to seek out opportunities that extend beyond relying on face-to-face ministry

engagements. They are all aware of how integral technology has become in connecting people together through a variety of online media. For these leaders, their need provides them with an opportunity to understand how best to incorporate technology and leverage a proven online framework to establish sustainable communities.

The challenge that these leaders are facing is one that speaks to the plight many ministry leaders face weekly in America. Within the last few decades, there has been an increase of people who identify as Christians detaching and disconnecting themselves from traditional forms of church community.⁴ In the “National Congregations Study,” over 80 percent of the congregations surveyed showed less than 250 people participating on a regular basis.⁵ In the last few decades, attendance and engagement within American church communities has been on a steady decline. In a 2014 Pew study, out of 35,071 Americans surveyed, only 36 percent attended church on a weekly basis and 33 percent attended church once or twice a month.⁶ Considering this challenge, ministry leaders are seeking opportunities to continue to engage in meaningful community that also fosters faithful discipleship.

The State of the American Church in the 21st Century

Studies conducted on the American church have shown that, while many in America may identify as Christian, there is a decline in church attendance and activity

⁴ “The State of the Church 2016,” *Barna Group*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016/>.

⁵ Mark Chaves, Shawna L. Anderson, and Alison Eagle, *National Congregations Study: Cumulative Data File and Codebook* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2014), 24.

⁶ Benjamin Wormald, “Religious Landscape Study,” *pewforum.org*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>.

engagement. Research by the Barna group,⁷ in a study called “The State of the Church 2016,”⁸ collected data from 5,137 people between January and April 2016.⁹

The focus of the study was to understand how people identify with faith and Christianity in America. The study found that 73 percent of those surveyed identified as Christians (52% strongly agree and 21% somewhat agree). Those who identified as no faith (i.e. atheist or agnostic, etc.) made up 26 percent. Other faiths including Muslim, Judaism, Buddhism, made up 6 percent. Only 1% of those surveyed noted that they were not sure.

A survey was done with the same data sample on church attendance based on size of congregation. The results showed the following breakdown of church attendance in America:

Table 1. Church Attendance

| Church Attendance | % |
|-------------------|-----|
| Less than 100 | 46% |
| 101-499 | 37% |
| 500-999 | 9% |
| 1000 or more | 8% |

Source: “Church Attendance Trends Around the Country,” *Barna Group*, 2016.

⁷ Barna research is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors since 1984. As stated by Barna on Barna.com.

⁸ “Church Attendance Trends Around the Country,” Barna Group, May 26, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

⁹ The Barna Group interviewed 5,137 random US adults of 18 years and older, in online and telephone interviews over the course of four months, beginning in January 2016 and ending April 2016.

According to the Barna research, the majority of Americans surveyed attended small to mid-sized churches (499 or less). While churches identified as large or mega churches (500 or more) have large congregations, they tend to be in the minority based on the percentage of most attended churches in America. In further evaluating church attendance and participation from the perspective of ministry leaders, the National Congregations Study conducted by Mark Chaves et al. from Duke University Sociology department surveyed over 4,000 cases of American congregations collecting data from 1998, 2006-2007, and 2012.¹⁰ One of the survey questions asked about regular participation and attendance of congregants within their congregation. Question #12: “How many persons—counting both adults and children—would you say regularly participate in the religious life of your congregation; whether or not they are officially members of your congregation?”¹¹ The results were:

Table 2. Church Participation

| Church Participation | # | % |
|----------------------|-----|-------|
| 50 or less | 568 | 42.7% |
| 51-100 | 320 | 24.1% |
| 101-250 | 274 | 20.6% |
| 251-1000 | 136 | 10.2% |
| More than 1000 | 32 | 2.4% |

Source: Mark Chaves, Shawna L. Anderson, and Alison Eagle, *National Congregations Study: Cumulative data file and codebook* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2014), 24.

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the congregations surveyed showed less than 100 people participating on a regular basis.

¹⁰ Chaves, Anderson, and Eagle, 1-452.

¹¹ Ibid., 24.

Iddo Tavory, in his review of Chaves' research, describes how there was a group of respondents that identified as "none" when it came to religion. He noted "'none' does not always denote loss of faith but, rather, a change in what the category 'Christian' means, so that 'Christian' now connotes, for a growing slice of the population, a right-wing Evangelicalism from which they want to distance themselves."¹² As it relates to the decline of connection and community within the American Protestant church context, this distinction of the "none" vs. "Christian" gives us a different perspective as to how believers identify and associate with others in the faith. For ministry leaders, this perception of what it means to be "Christian" can provide some insight into what has caused many to want to isolate or distance themselves from traditional "Christian" community in America.

The Barna group, in a study on church attendance trends, looked at how Americans engaged in church activity over a span of 16 years. The research study was conducted with 78,505 Americans between 2000 and 2016. The study formulated three groups: active, unchurched, and dechurched churchgoers. Active is defined as Americans who have been to church in the last seven days. Unchurched is defined as Americans who have not been to church in the last six months. Dechurched is defined as "either very, somewhat or minimally active churchgoers, but have not attended a church service in the past six months, excluding a special event such as a wedding or a funeral."¹³ The study found that almost 4 out of 10 Americans are active churchgoers amounting to 38 percent.

¹² Iddo Tavory, book review "Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*," *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 1 (2013): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669846>.

¹³ "Church Attendance Trends."

Forty-three percent of Americans are unchurched. Thirty-four percent of Americans are dechurched.¹⁴ The three groups are displayed in distinct tables that show some overlap as to how, within the random sample, people in America identify as Christian.

Table 3. Top 20 Most Churched Cities in the Barna Study

| Rank | Market | % |
|------|---|-----|
| 1 | Chattanooga, TN | 59% |
| 2 | Salt Lake City, UT | 59% |
| 3 | Augusta-Aiken, GA | 57% |
| 4 | Baton Rouge, LA | 57% |
| 5 | Birmingham-Anniston-Tuscaloosa, AL | 56% |
| 6 | Jackson, MS | 55% |
| 7 | Paducah, KY-Cape Girardeau, MO- Harrisburg-Mt. Vernon, IL | 54% |
| 8 | Montgomery-Selma, AL | 53% |
| 9 | Greenville-New Bern-Washington, NC | 52% |
| 10 | South Bend-Elkhart, IN | 52% |
| 11 | Wichita-Hutchinson-Dodge City-Salina-Manhattan, KS | 52% |
| 12 | Sioux-Falls-Mitchell, SD | 52% |
| 13 | Charlotte, NC | 52% |
| 14 | Greenville-Spartanburg-Anderson, SC- Asheville, NC | 51% |
| 15 | Roanoke-Lynchburg, VA | 51% |
| 16 | Little Rock-Pine Bluff, AR | 51% |
| 17 | Savannah, GA | 51% |
| 18 | Lafayette, LA | 50% |
| 19 | Monroe, LA-El Dorado, AR | 50% |
| 20 | Greensboro-High Point-Winston Salem, NC | 50% |

Source: "Church Attendance Trends Around the Country," Barna Group, May 26, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

¹⁴ Barna performed 78,505 random online and telephone interviews over the course of seven years beginning in 2000 and ending on April 26, 2016.

Table 4. Top 20 Most Unchurched Cities in the Barna Study

| Rank | Market | % |
|------|-------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA | 60% |
| 2 | Reno, NV | 59% |
| 3 | Springfield-Holyoke, MA | 57% |
| 4 | Boston-Manchester, MA | 56% |
| 5 | Las Vegas, NV | 55% |
| 6 | Portland-Auburn, ME | 54% |
| 7 | Chico-Redding, CA | 54% |
| 8 | Seattle-Tacoma, WA | 52% |
| 9 | Orlando-Daytona Beach-Melbourne, FL | 51% |
| 10 | Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY | 51% |
| 11 | Burlington-Plattsburgh, VT | 51% |
| 12 | Phoenix-Prescott, AZ | 50% |
| 13 | W Palm Beach-Fort Pierce, FL | 50% |
| 14 | Monterey-Salinas, CA | 50% |
| 15 | Tuscan-Sierra Vista, AZ | 49% |
| 16 | New York, NY | 48% |
| 17 | Portland, OR | 48% |
| 18 | Los Angeles, CA | 47% |
| 19 | Philadelphia, PA | 47% |
| 20 | Denver, CO | 47% |

Source: "Church Attendance Trends Around the Country," Barna Group, May 26, 2017,
<https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

Table 5. Top 20 Most Dechurched Cities in the Barna Study

| Rank | Market | % |
|------|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 1 | San Francisco-Oakland-San Jose, CA | 47% |
| 2 | Boston-Manchester, MA | 46% |
| 3 | Seattle-Tacoma, WA | 45% |
| 4 | Portland-Auburn, ME | 45% |
| 5 | Springfield-Holyoke, MA | 43% |
| 6 | Orlando-Daytona Beach- Melbourne, FL | 43% |
| 7 | Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY | 43% |
| 8 | Reno, NV | 42% |
| 9 | Las Vegas, NV | 42% |
| 10 | Medford-Klamath Falls, OR | 42% |
| 11 | Chico-Redding, CA | 41% |
| 12 | Phoenix-Prescott, AZ | 41% |
| 13 | Portland, OR | 40% |
| 14 | Traverse City- Cadillac, MI | 40% |
| 15 | Burlington-Plattsburgh, VT | 39% |
| 16 | Philadelphia, PA | 39% |
| 17 | Denver, CO | 38% |
| 18 | Binghamton, NY | 38% |
| 19 | Tuscan-Sierra Vista, AZ | 38% |
| 20 | Rochester, NY | 38% |

Source: "Church Attendance Trends Around the Country," Barna Group, May 26, 2017,
<https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-trends-around-country/>.

Many of the cities noted above in Table 3 (churched) fall in the southern region of the United States. This region has been known to hold traditional, conservative, political and religious views. In addition to the southern region, this table includes a high percentage related to Salt Lake, UT. Traditionally, this city is known to have a high Mormon population that identifies as Protestant Christian. While this discussion does not address other protestant religious sects, this is an important notation when discussing these results.

The cities listed in Table 5 (dechurched) fall primarily in the Western region of the United States. This region is known as holding strong liberal political and religious views. Many of the dechurched cities overlap with the cities listed in Table 5 (unchurched) which are primarily made up of the northeast and the west coast areas of the United States. It is apparent that there is a divide between Americans on how faith and Christianity are viewed and practiced.

These research studies give insight into the plight faced by American churches. The trending decline in regular church attendance reveals the lack of connection and community that extend beyond the current ministry options offered each week within the local American church context. The segmentation presented in the research allows for us to see how believers in the 21st century identify themselves within the Christian community. As individuals, some believers prefer to not be associated with American evangelicals. The disassociation of the “nones” brings light to the challenge of how meaningful community can be restored among those who are believers in the faith.

However, they continue to exist on the margins and not in communion with other believers.

As we take into consideration the various research studies conducted on the welfare of the church in America, we must ask ourselves some pertinent questions as it relates to community in the life of the church. First, what does that say about the importance of fellowship and community among those who identify as believers? Second, is it still important to the life of the church in the 21st century?

Importance of Fellowship and Community in the Life of the Church

Fellowship and community are a part of the human condition. Within the creation narrative in Genesis,¹⁵ it is evident that communion with God and others was foundational to God's purpose and divine plan for humanity.¹⁶ That divine plan includes fellowship with humankind and with God, that was fulfilled through Christ and His work, reconciling all believers to God. From the early church to the 21st century church, the understanding of fellowship and community has been integral to spiritual formation throughout the Christian life.¹⁷ This understanding is based on the discussion of fellowship that is expressed in the New Testament.

The New Testament expresses 'fellowship' as the Greek word *koinōnia*. The secular Greek understanding of *koinōnia* had many uses and derivatives, some of which translate into various forms. Aristotle used the term *koinōnia* to relate to human

¹⁵ Genesis 1:1-2:3

¹⁶ Genesis 1:28-30, 1 Corinthians 15:28, Colossians 1:16, 20.

¹⁷ Acts 1:14, 2:42, Philemon 1:6, Hebrews 13:16.

connection in marriage.¹⁸ Greek Stoics would use the term to express friendship and marriage. Plato asserted that there can be no friendship without *koinōnia* as it relates to commonality in the context of human society.¹⁹

Koinōnia was a notable mark for Christian identity among believers in the early church.²⁰ Since the early church began the understanding of fellowship, the understanding of association, participation, and community of believers has evolved. In the book of Acts, Christ followers would meet in their homes to fellowship, teach the gospel, commune through the breaking of bread and have prayer with one another. In addition, their communion extended to the common sharing, giving, and receiving among believers of their personal possessions.²¹ This was to ensure no lack existed within the community. This exchange showed the world that they had something unique and special between them. Jesus said that it is by showing love to one another that others will know we are his disciples.²² *Koinōnia* for the early church was centered on doing life together through a Christocentric fellowship and communion.

New Testament Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson proposed four aspects of the early church that were associated with their practice of *koinōnia* —fellowship with one

¹⁸ Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Koinōnia, The Greek Antiquity,” *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 432.

¹⁹ Ibid., 432.

²⁰ John 13:35.

²¹ Acts 2:45.

²² John 13:34-35.

another, in writing, in material resources, and in conviction.²³ The expansion of the gospel across the world was supported through the apostles' ability to put it into writing. The Christian writings noted in the letters of Paul to the various churches allowed for the message to be shared more broadly with the practice of discipleship expanding into multiple communities all over the geographic landscape.

A Theology of *Koinōnia*

The 21st century church is facing the challenge of how to engage believers in an environment that fosters community and faithful discipleship. The decline of community within the church has impeded its ability to have *koinōnia*. This section first explores the problem faced by 21st century ministry leaders and examines the theology of *koinōnia* as it is presented in the New Testament. Second, it will examine *koinōnia* and its role in the discipleship of believers. Finally, it will conclude that *koinōnia*, theologically and in practice, remains fundamental to the mission, formation, and growth of the Church within the 21st century and beyond.

Theologically, *koinōnia* in the New Testament is expressed in three different ways within the Pauline Epistles and the Johannine Epistles. Jeremy Oddy summarizes the variances in expressing fellowship in the New Testament.

²³ Daniel P. Horan, "Koinonia and the Church in the Digital Age," *Review for Religion* 69 no. 3 (2010): 231, <http://cdm.slu.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/rfr/id/434/rec/8>.

First in Acts 2:42 Koinōnia ‘can be taken in an absolute sense as an essential part of the life of worship.’ In addition, it is ‘an abstract and spiritual term for the fellowship of brotherly concord established and expressed in the life of community.’ The second area is in the Pauline Epistles. Paul uses koinōnia ‘for the religious fellowship of the believer in Christ and Christian blessings, and for the mutual fellowship of believers.’ Third, the First Epistle of John describes koinōnia as a living bond in which the Christian stands: To be a Christian is to have fellowship with God.²⁴

Koinōnia is expressed in the Greek language as *Koinōnía*. “Κοινωνία means

community, association, communion, participation, joint ownership, business, common

interest; sharing, intimacy, intercourse; the share one has in anything; a gift jointly

contributed, a collection, a contribution, alms, etc.”²⁵ In addition to the frequent use of the

term *κοινωνία*, there are two other Greek words that are cognates to the term koinonia:

κοινωνέω and *κοινωνός*. “κοινωνέω means to share with someone in something s/he has,

to take part, to partake in, to participate, to possess together. κοινωνός in classical Greek

means a companion, a partner or a joint owner, and *koinōnia* can imply an association,

common effort, or partnership. This creates a relationship or fellowship.²⁶ These terms

can be seen in the Pauline epistles and the Johannine epistles to describe relationship with

God, Christ, Holy Spirit, and with other believers.²⁷

²⁴ Oddy, 7.

²⁵ Ramelli, 432.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Julien Oregeau, “Koinōnia, New Testament” *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 434. Also see Romans 15:26, 1 Corinthians 1:9, 10:16, 2 Corinthians 6:14, 8:4, 9:13, 13:13, Galatians 2:9, Philippians 1:5, 2:1, Philemon 6, 1 John 1:3.

Koinōnía with God

1 John 1:3 says, “we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” Fellowship in the Christian life is both vertical and horizontal. Oddy notes, “Fellowship with the triune God, then, is the source from which fellowship among Christians springs; and fellowship with God is the end to which Christian fellowship is a means.”²⁸ It is only in this Johannine epistle where *koinōnia* is associated with God as father as well as Christ the son. John’s assertion of fellowship with the Father is experienced by God being manifested through the Word of God made flesh which according to the gospel of John is Jesus Christ.²⁹ Jesus Christ came as a savior to the world.³⁰ Therefore, through accepting Christ, our salvation allows for us to be able to share in fellowship with the Father.

This is further supported as expressed in John chapters 16 and 17. Jesus in his words to the disciples lays out the fact that he is our connector to the Father through his Spirit. Our relationship with the Father is established with our relationship with his Son Jesus Christ. In John 16:23-28 Jesus says:

²⁸ Oddy, 10.

²⁹ John 1:1-14.

³⁰ John 3:16.

Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. “Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

In John 17:8, Jesus goes on to say that the words sent by God were accepted by the disciples through Jesus Christ. “For I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me” As witnessed in the writings of John, our *koinōnia* with God is affirmed in our belief in God through Jesus Christ.

Koinōnia with Jesus Christ

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 1:9 that “God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Throughout the Pauline epistles, which mention *koinōnia*, Paul comes from a highly Christocentric view. Our fellowship with Christ is at the core of our fellowship with other believers. George Panikulam affirms that “the wealth and richness of the NT *koinōnia* emerges from the fact that the person of Jesus Christ stands at the centre of man’s fellowship with God and man’s fellowship with his fellow man.”³¹

Paul’s letter to the church of Corinth is one that seeks to affirm God’s faithfulness while exhorting them to remain faithful to their fellowship within their community in

³¹ George Panikulam, *Koinōnia in the New Testament: A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life* (Rome: Pontifical Bible Institute, 1979), 6.

light of praising God's faithfulness towards us. Christ is the domain by which the community is centered. We have true fellowship with God because of our fellowship with Jesus Christ. According to Paul, fellowship with Jesus Christ is the purposeful intent of our call because by sharing in fellowship in Christ it is the foundation of the spiritual blessing that is shared in our communion as believers.

Koinōnía with the Holy Spirit

Paul in his second letter to the church of Corinth writes about our fellowship with the Holy Spirit. "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). Furthermore, in Philippians 2:1, Paul states "therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion" Both of these scriptural contexts affirm a few ways in which we fellowship with the Spirit in tandem. The first is expressed individually with the fellowship a person has with the Holy Spirit. Next is the fellowship that exists between believers because of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Last, there is an acknowledgment of the fellowship of believers through common sharing that is experiential. Oddy asserts that "the Holy Spirit not only creates the new community, but he also sustains it by empowering individual Christians to work together towards a communal formation ... *koinōnía* can only be a reality when the Holy Spirit by his sovereignty grants the power and gifts necessary to the church."³² The binding of the *koinōnía* through the Spirit bears

³² Oddy, 18.

witness to the eternal mission of God as an active presence in the midst of Christian fellowship in the world.

Koinōnía with Other Believers

The *koinōnia* with the Godhead is essential to all aspects of fellowship that exists among believers in community. Luke, in Acts 2:42, affirms the fellowship within the community of believers in Jerusalem, stating “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Friedrich Hauck notes that the term *koinōnía* seen in this text is not reflective of the formation of a Christian society but rather it denotes a spiritual understanding of fellowship of human concord that is affirmed and witnessed in the life of the community.³³

As previously noted, the multiple variances of the use of the term *koinōnia* in Greek society, when translated, give way to other English terms. In conjunction with the meaning of fellowship, another meaning of the Greek translation of *koinōnia* is the word *participation*. In this manner, *Koinōnía* can also be expressed as *κοινωνέω*. This definition of the term affirms participation in a common sharing and engagement with someone. It is a willing and faithful devotion to share in the practice of doing life together. It is also with this notion of *koinōnia* that the witness of Christ is affirmed. As we share in communion with Christ, we share in the community of faith with others, which according to scripture, bestows a blessing.³⁴

³³ Friedrich Hauck, “κοινωνός” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 809.

³⁴ Psalms 133:1-3.

Koinōnia, as expressed in the New Testament through the Johannine and Pauline epistles, connects all believers to God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and to one another. As we gain an understanding of *koinōnia* in the life of a believers, we must then seek to understand its role in how we live out the great commission. The manner by which we live out *koinōnia*, in participating in the mission of God through our connection to the Godhead and to one another, gives way to how we participate in shaping the spiritual maturity that is formed in the lives of new believers.

The Role of *Koinōnia* in Discipleship

With the understanding that *koinōnia* is both vertical and horizontal our horizontal relationship with one another is rooted in what it means to be a faithful disciple. The New Testament gives a picture of a disciple as a person who follows the Holy Scripture and teachings of Jesus Christ.³⁵ Included within the New Testament are indicators that should be noted and exemplified in all disciples:

- A disciple is a person who has confessed Jesus Christ and believed in their heart that he is their savior and lord.³⁶
- A disciple is a person who has made a public affirmation of their confession through baptism.³⁷

³⁵ Matthew 4:19, Matthew 10:38, Matthew 16:24, Mark 3:34-35, Luke 14:27, John 14:15, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 1 Peter 2:21. Also, <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/topics/Disciples,-Characteristics-Of>

³⁶ Romans 10:9-10.

³⁷ Mark 16:16.

- A disciple is a person who forsakes all to follow Christ³⁸ and bears witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ by sharing it with others to bring them into the community.³⁹

The horizontal aspect to true fellowship has an inherent purpose and mission. Fellowship is at the core of the mission of the church. Oddy notes that:

Fellowship of Christians is an integral part of the mission of the church. As the church lives the life of Christ in the world. It shows a fellowship that is uniquely its own. This fellowship ... is a feature that attracts to Christ and witness of the Christian experience. Consequently, mission would fall flat without fellowship. Thus, fellowship is the source of mission.⁴⁰

Our fellowship is to be with believers and is intended to foster and shape our spiritual formation. The community of believers is not a static collection of individuals but a dynamic and flourishing community.⁴¹ This community provides the framework for how discipleship is fostered and established. The act of discipleship or rather the making of disciples is a common effort among believers.⁴² It is a partnership in the Spirit to accomplish a common goal.⁴³ Thus, discipleship is reflective of the second cognate of *koinōnia* which is κοινωνός.⁴⁴ *Koinōnia* expressed as partnership is reflected in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke when Jesus chose his disciples, both the twelve⁴⁵

³⁸ Matthew 16:24-26, Mark 8:34-37, Luke 9:23-25.

³⁹ Romans 10:14-17, Matthew 5:15-16.

⁴⁰ Oddy, 28.

⁴¹ Romans 12:3-13.

⁴² Hebrews 10:24-25.

⁴³ Ephesians 4:2-6.

⁴⁴ κοινωνός in classical Greek means a companion, a partner, or a joint owner, and *koinōnia* can imply an association, common effort, or partnership. This creates a relationship or fellowship. Ramelli, 432.

⁴⁵ Matthew 10:1-4, Mark 3:13-15, Luke 6:12-16.

and the seventy two,⁴⁶ and sent them out two-by-two to various cities to do the work of the ministry.⁴⁷ Ministry in this context was done as a common effort by disciples of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 28:18-20 is a familiar passage of scripture that gives an account of what took place after Jesus had resurrected from the dead. Matthew describes how Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples on the mountain of Galilee. This appearance is where Jesus speaks to his disciples and gives what is known as the “Great Commission.” Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:19-20) The commission was not given individually but collectively as a mandate to all of his disciples.

The collective mandate reinforces the importance of *koinōnia* in faithful discipleship. In 1 Peter 2, Peter reminds believers that we are living stones built upon the cornerstone which is Jesus Christ. As a collection of living stones, we have been chosen by God to be his people and an example, not only to other believers but to the world. Discipleship exemplified through faithful partnership allows for believers, who are a part of the community, to grow and mature in their faith and bear the responsibility for the building up of the body of Christ together.⁴⁸ Acts 2:42-47 gives us a practical blueprint

⁴⁶ Luke 10:1.

⁴⁷ Matthew 10:5-15, Mark 6:7-12, Luke 9:1, 10:1.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 4:12.

that supports edification of believers through fellowship in community and lends itself to intentional spiritual formation. This formation not only nurtured those at the core but drew in those who were at the margins, adding to the growth of the church community daily.

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.⁴⁹

This passage demonstrates the value of fellowship in the process of forming a partnership. The idea of doing life together was foundational in the vibrancy and growth of the early church. The act of making disciples was interwoven into the way they practically engaged in *koinōnia* as a collective whole on a daily basis. Furthermore, Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT), encourages partnership as an act of love and faithful stewardship together: "let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near."

Koinōnia as partnership allows for the work of discipleship to be ongoing. The community is sustained by the devotion of its disciples and continues forward adding new disciples along the way. The Apostle Paul affirms that "this [work] will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be

⁴⁹ Acts 2:42-47, NLT.

mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ” (Eph. 4:13 NLT).

The New Testament provides a picture of how discipleship is shaped and formed through *koinōnia*. Discipleship is shaped and matured by the Spirit through fellowship, participation, and partnership among believers. Therefore, it becomes integral to the mission of the church to remain faithful to the biblical understanding of community. In doing so, disciples who desire true authentic relationships with other believers can continue to live out the mission of God in this earth as it was designed in communion with one another.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The desire for community and connection are inherent human needs. Despite the need for connection there remains a challenge, in the local American church, to continue to engage people in fellowship with one another on a regular basis. In the last few decades, there has been an increase of people who identify as Christians, detaching and disconnecting themselves from engaging in traditional forms of church community.⁵¹ As a result, attendance and engagement within American church communities has been on a steady decline. As the trend continues, the numbers of those who identify as unchurched or dechurched are growing and these people now find themselves on the margins within the Christian community.

⁵⁰ Oddy, 3.

⁵¹ “State of the Church.”

Fellowship is at the core of the mission of the church. The importance of fellowship and communion with the Godhead, believers, and those on the margins must be held in tandem as we seek solutions to the challenge faced by 21st century ministry leaders. *Koinōnia* in the New Testament, as expressed in the Johannine and Pauline epistles, provides a theological framework for the establishment of the church. As in the early church, *koinōnia* was at the core of the mission, daily growth, and formation of discipleship in conjunction with spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. As believers we are called to do life together and share in the spiritual growth and formation of one another as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The decline of fellowship within the local church presents a challenge for ministry leaders, who desire to embody the fundamental mission of the church. This challenge is complex, not straightforward. Yet, complexity in this case lends itself to opportunities to seek out new solutions that, when practiced, can work in conjunction with current methods to foster meaningful community and faithful discipleship.

The next section will address the meaning of community and how it has evolved in the 21st century. Furthermore, it will evaluate current community practices that exist within the American Christian context. Section 2 will explore the historical significance and address the limitations of the current models, as they relate to the formation of American church community. In order to maintain faithful discipleship, community must foster meaningful engagement and commitment among members and those on the margins seeking to be a part of the community. By leveraging new methods alongside current methods, we can continue to support the rediscovery of community.

SECTION 2:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Section 1 addressed the problem that ministry leaders are facing with the trending decline of local engagement, community, and discipleship. Despite the need for connection there remains a challenge, in the local American church, to continue to engage people in fellowship with one another on a regular basis. Fellowship and community are fundamental to the mission of the church. In turn, community becomes vital to establishing faithful discipleship. American sociologist Robert Wuthnow noted that:

Many people in our society are so withdrawn into themselves that they find it difficult to seek help from others when their convictions start to unravel. They may find it equally difficult to give support when other people seek answers. The result is a privatized faith that may leave the individual feeling alone and alienated.⁵²

The decline of emotional well-being and loneliness as a result of lack of community engagement is not only found in the church context. It has become a national, cultural issue.⁵³ As communities disconnect and work demands increase, individuals are finding themselves feeling more and more isolated and less connected.

⁵² Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and Americas New Quest for Community* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1994), 40.

⁵³ Shainna Ali, “What You Need to Know About the Loneliness Epidemic,” *Psychology Today*, August 12, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/modern-mentality/201807/what-you-need-know-about-the-loneliness-epidemic>.

Former US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy discusses how loneliness is a public health epidemic.⁵⁴ He writes “our social connections are in fact largely influenced by the institutions and settings where we spend the majority of our time.”⁵⁵ He argues that people spend most of their time in the workplace. A workplace, historically, has not been a place where people make deep connections with their colleagues and have intimate friendships that are meaningful to their lives. While the workplace is an institution for community it is not set up to foster deep relationships in the manner needed to fulfill the human need.

Murthy asserts that the loneliness of one individual, like an epidemic, has an impact on the loneliness of another individual. It impacts all people from all backgrounds and walks of life. Loneliness is a threat to the human desire to have connection. He proposes that leaders find ways to create opportunities for deeper connections in the workplace. “When people have strong connections with the people they’re working with, that can not only improve productivity and the overall state of the company, but it can also improve their own health.”⁵⁶

Dr. Shainna Ali discusses the impact of loneliness as an epidemic. Ali states that is not about the quantity of connections that matter but about the quality of the connections that make life meaningful. Quality allows for a deeper connection to form

⁵⁴ Jena McGregor, “This Former Surgeon General Says There’s a ‘Loneliness Epidemic’ and Work Is Partly to Blame,” *The Washington Post*, October 4, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/10/04/this-former-surgeon-general-says-theres-a-loneliness-epidemic-and-work-is-partly-to-blame/?utm_term=.ced3a7eec43f.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

and have a positive impact on a person's emotional well-being.⁵⁷ Psychologist Dr. David W. McMillan also affirms "each of us needs connections to others so that we have a setting and an audience to express unique aspects of our personality. We need a setting where we can be ourselves and see ourselves mirrored in the eyes and responses of others."⁵⁸

Decline in emotional well-being and loneliness, as an outcome of lack of community, is an issue that continues to extend into the American church context. Dr. Lynn Baab writes "in the light of the loneliness and isolation so frequently described in the media, communities of faith have wonderful opportunities to offer relational connections in a variety of ways, connections that will empower individuals and groups to look beyond themselves and see the places where God is already working in the world."⁵⁹ Robert Wuthnow further asserts that "religious leaders, sensing the dysfunctional behavior and pain that come when people lack the care and support they need, increasingly are pointing out how desperately the American public needs to rediscover community."⁶⁰

Rediscovering community, for church leaders, begins with understanding what it means to be communal. The manner in which spiritual connection exists through community practices must be further evaluated and evolve. Furthermore, In order to

⁵⁷ Ali.

⁵⁸ David W. Mcmillan, "Sense of Community," *Journal of Community Psychology* 24, no. 4 (October 1, 1996): 315, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6629\(199610\)24:4<315::AID-JCOP2>3.0.CO;2-T](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6629(199610)24:4<315::AID-JCOP2>3.0.CO;2-T).

⁵⁹ Lynne M. Baab, *Reaching out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregations Heart and Soul* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 23.

⁶⁰ Wuthnow, 36.

maintain faithful discipleship it will be imperative to leverage new methods that foster meaningful fellowship and intentionality in connecting with others on a regular basis.

Defining Community

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines community as a group that shares geographical location or shares common characteristics.⁶¹ In 2001, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), in an attempt to define community as it relates to public health, proposed the definition, “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings.”⁶²

Within the Public Health study conducted by MacQueen et al. found that while study participants identified the characteristics in this definition, the way in which they experienced it through collaboration varied by each person’s experience.⁶³ In the area of public health, demographics and geographic location play a large role in how community is defined.⁶⁴ While the definition of community can be explained through geographical location and similar characteristics, within sociology, community is defined as the

⁶¹ “Community,” merriam-webster.com, accessed November 24, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community>.

⁶² Kathleen M. MacQueen, Eleanor McLellan, David S. Metzger, Susan Kegeles, Ronald P. Strauss, Roseanne Scotti, Lynn Blanchard, and Robert T. Trotter, “What Is Community? An Evidence-Based Definition for Participatory Public Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 91, no. 12 (2001): 1929-1938 <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.91.12.1929>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

intersection between social institutional structures and individual needs.⁶⁵ For this discussion, I will use the sociology definition.

The social institutional structures of community have evolved over the past few centuries. Yuval Noah Harari, Israeli historian and philosopher, noted that “It takes a tribe to raise a human. Evolution thus favoured those capable of forming strong social ties.”⁶⁶ There was a time when community existed within tribes, villages, and farms. Every aspect of daily life was shared with the same group of people whether it was in work, church, or social organization. Furthermore, what was available within those communities defined what you did as an occupation and as a member of the community. Interactions with members of your immediate community were more intimate.⁶⁷ Shared values and norms were reinforced through community.

With the advancement of technology and infrastructure, people were able to exist outside of traditional community structures such as the small villages and farms. From 1800 - 1990 the percent of people living in rural areas decreased from 94 percent to 25 percent.⁶⁸ In comparison, The World Health Organization reported that only 40 percent of the population was living in urban areas in 1990.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Wuthnow, 15.

⁶⁶ Harari Yuval Noah, *SAPIENS: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York, NY: Penguin House, 2018), 10.

⁶⁷ Wuthnow, 10.

⁶⁸ “1800-1990: Changes In Urban/Rural U.S. Population,” SeniorLiving.org, April 19, 2018, <https://www.seniorliving.org/history/1800-1990-changes-urbanrural-us-population/>.

⁶⁹ Dave Levitan, “Just How Far Will American Urban Sprawl Spread?” *theguardian.com*, August 5, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/aug/05/just-how-far-will-american-urban-sprawl-spread>.

American Sociologist Robert Bellah writes,

The most distinctive aspect of twentieth-century American society is the division of life into a number of separate functional sectors: home and workplace, work and leisure, white collar and blue collar, public and private ... All this is in contrast to the widespread nineteenth-century pattern in which, as on the often-sentimentalized family farm, these functions had only indistinct boundaries. Domesticity, love, and intimacy increasingly became “havens” against the competitive culture of work.⁷⁰

In the 21st century, those traditional community structures are becoming more and more obsolete. While many neighborhood communities are still collated by ethnic groups, class, and economic status, it is not as clear cut as it once. Wuthnow asserts “at one time, urban neighborhoods—reinforced by a common ethnic heritage, language, customs, local shops, and schools—provided community, but these, too, mostly have been lost. People now live anonymous lives in suburban housing developments or in high-rise apartment buildings. Instead of feeling a common bond with our neighbors, we fear them.”⁷¹

Author Marc Dunkelman discusses how “communities have been replaced with networks in which you keep in touch with only your closest friends and family; gone is the age of the township.”⁷² Population growth, urban sprawl, industry and technology advancements, evolution of information age, and work demands have led to the cultural shift overtime in social institutional structures of community: family, church, education

⁷⁰ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 43.

⁷¹ Wuthnow, 33.

⁷² Naomi LaChance, “So Long, Neighbor,” USNews.com, August 21, 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2014/08/21/america-is-losing-its-sense-of-community-says-marc-dunkleman>.

and occupation. Despite the changes that have occurred from the 19th century until the 21st century, what has remained consistent is that there remains an interdependence of spirituality and community.

Spirituality and Community

Spirituality was fostered and encouraged through traditional means within the community context. Strong ties to family and community were reinforced in church, work, and relational engagements with members in the community. In his book *Sharing the Journey*, Wuthnow discusses the human quest for community and how spirituality sits at the crux of the formation of community. He writes, “The fragmented lives that many of us lead provide an incentive to seek community in support groups. But the religious traditions that are so much a part of American culture legitimate this quest by telling us that community is important, and, indeed, by leading us to believe that community is also the way to find spirituality and transcendence.”⁷³ He further asserts,

Spirituality went hand in hand with group life for historic, theological, and practical reasons. The historic reason was that personal piety had been expressed in this way for as long as anyone could remember. Even the earliest Christians met in groups, forming churches in their homes and subjecting their interests in spirituality to the authority of their fellow believers ... the theological reason was that Christianity encouraged believers to come together and form bonds of love and fellowship like those taught by their Lord. The practical reason was that believers found they needed one another for support. Without the affirmation of others, their faith was weakened.⁷⁴

Community is a place where spiritual practices are lived out among the members.

Spiritual attributes like love, trust, belonging, and accountability among others are at the

⁷³ Wuthnow, 31.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 32.

core of communal formation. The idea that each person in the community can mutually support the growth of another is a reflection of the biblical principle in Proverbs 27:17 of “iron sharpening iron.” These spiritual ideals reinforce the commitment to family and loving fellowship with others. The morality and values that are upheld within the American culture are derived from the historical importance given to Christianity and spirituality in America.⁷⁵ Therefore, it is in community where we come to understand what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.⁷⁶

The shift of spirituality in America in the late 20th century and 21st century, to be practiced as a personal endeavor and not a communal endeavor, allows for the interdependency between spirituality and community to become weakened.⁷⁷ Lynne Baab affirms this shift, “Communities of faith are no longer central to the communal life of towns, cities, or rural areas. People no longer feel loyal to the religious institutions of their childhood.”⁷⁸ Personal spiritual quests can alienate individuals and lessen the need for accountability as an inherent characteristic of spiritual growth and faithful practice.⁷⁹ While this has become evident over the last few decades, the desire for community and spiritual connection still remain in American society. The way in which we engage in community and spirituality will need to evolve from the way in which we have practiced traditional methods as Christians in America.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁶ Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27, John 13:34.

⁷⁷ Wuthnow, 37.

⁷⁸ Baab, 3.

⁷⁹ Wuthnow, 36.

Community Practices

In the section above, I discussed the shift in American society around the dissemination of collated neighborhoods in geographical locations and industrial advancements contributing to occupational changes. The impact these changes have had over time are significant to the way in which our society engages in community. As this definition of community evolves, the community practices that are established must also be evaluated as to how they will continue to be useful in developing spiritual growth and faithful practice.

Church History of Traditional Community Practice Activities

The early church provided a blueprint for community and discipleship, making them fundamental to the foundation of the life of the church. The early church's model of doing life daily together sustained and nurtured community. Members were committed to one another and everyone shared ownership.⁸⁰ This allowed for people to have a safe place to wrestle with their questions and faith. It provided opportunities to openly share and engage in the life of others.

Throughout the life of the church, a variety of methods – Sunday school, Bible study, small/home groups – have been implemented within the local church context to support the spiritual formation and growth of the community of believers. In many cases, these methods have become pivotal in how we perceive what defines the church. To

⁸⁰ Acts 2:42.

expound upon this further, I will provide an overview of each of these methods and further assert how each method falls short in its approach to foster community.

Sunday School

Historians have noted that Sunday school first began in 1769, organized by Hannah Ball in England.⁸¹ The establishment of faith-based education as a systematic framework was formed by Robert Raikes in 1780. Raikes, a publisher and editor of the *Gloucester Journal*, used his newspaper to promote his Sunday school. He established the school for poor children whose parents worked in the factory on Sundays. Sunday school promoted moral values and literacy. Raikes' model continued to become popular and was adopted by many in England.

It was the Raikes' model that became influential in the United States. Gaining its start in the New England states, Sunday school became formalized in the 1790s by Samuel Slater. Samuel Slater was known as the Father of the American Factory System.⁸² He held Sunday school in the afternoons in his textile factory mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It was noted that by the 1800s the majority of the people who attended church were introduced to church through Sunday school.⁸³

⁸¹ "The Sunday School Movement," *encyclopedia.com*, accessed November 11, 2018, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/sunday-school-movement>. See also, "Sunday School," *Wikipedia*, accessed October 17, 2016, https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Sunday_school.html.

⁸² "Samuel Slater," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 30, 2016, https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Samuel_Slater.html

⁸³ "Sunday School Movement," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (New York, NY: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 1147.

Sunday school in the U.S. was held in the afternoons. It was not until the 1930's that it transitioned into a Sunday morning activity. Wuthnow notes "the most common format for these classes was the teacher-student model in which a single individual led the group, gave didactic instruction, and often followed one of the popular standardized "international" lesson plans that provided members with something to read beforehand and a short list of questions for discussion."⁸⁴ Sunday school lasts about an hour and is used to promote Christian doctrine from varying denominations for both children and adults. While usually taught by lay members, Sunday school teachers are selected by church leaders.

During the 20th century in America, Sunday school transitioned to being held in conjunction with church services. In the late twentieth century, the popularity of Sunday school within the American Church context began to dwindle. Since youth attendance primarily depends on their parents to bring them, unless the parent also attended Adult Sunday school classes the family would not be attending Sunday school on a weekly basis.⁸⁵ Some churches have abandoned Sunday school all together while others have shifted to other ways to teach children and youth through Children's and Youth church services that occur during regular weekly church services.⁸⁶ This shift replaced volunteer lay member teachers with church staffed age group pastors: children's pastor, youth pastor, college pastor, etc.

⁸⁴ Wuthnow, 42.

⁸⁵ Ivy Beckwith, "The Sunday School," in *Encyclopedia of Christian Education*, ed. George Thomas Kurian and Mark A. Lamport, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 1232.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

As prominent as this method has been over the centuries, there has been a decline in weekly attendance due to busyness of life, shifts in weekly demands of families (e.g. child sports), work, etc. Sunday school, while it continues to promote religious education is no longer at the core of establishing and maintaining community.

Bible Study Groups

Small groups and Bible studies have been very influential in the growth of the early church (home groups) and throughout Protestant church history. Similar to Sunday school, Bible study is a place for biblical studies to occur in a group setting. Based on the teacher-centered model,⁸⁷ these groups are led by someone who is selected by leaders of a church. The leaders in Bible studies are teachers who are responsible to provide scripture reading in conjunction with life application for members. In many groups this is a time for singing, prayer, and sharing in meals together.⁸⁸ Bible studies, while sharing similarities with Sunday school, tend to attract a younger demographic. They also have become a typical means by which new people enter into the community.⁸⁹

In some denominations, Bible study is a weekly meeting that varies in size and groupings. Some organizations have established age and gender-based bible studies, i.e. Women's Bible study, Singles Bible study, Couples Bible study, etc. These can be seen as small groups. In many cases, these groups have become their members' primary

⁸⁷ "Teaching Methods," Teach: Make a Difference, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://teach.com/what/teachers-know/teaching-methods/>.

⁸⁸ Wuthnow, 67.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 70.

spiritual and emotional support.⁹⁰ Wuthnow notes that in those he studied, forty-two percent of the women stated that they attend Bible study.⁹¹ One of the most well-known bible study groups for women, in existence for almost 60 years, is Bible Study Fellowship.

Bible Study Fellowship, now headquartered in San Antonio, TX, was started in 1959 in San Bernardino, California by former China missionary Audrey Wetherell Johnson.⁹² It began as a Bible study for women and has expanded into classes for a variety of age and gender groups: Women, Men, Youth, as well as School and Preschool programs.⁹³ Since its beginning it has grown to have 350,000 bible study class members in more than 40 nations across six different continents.⁹⁴

Wuthnow states “Sunday school classes and Bible study groups in which the dissemination of information is an explicit goal are more likely to include members who look to leaders for answers than groups aiming simply for open discussion among all participants.”⁹⁵ The teacher centric model, frequently used for Sunday school and Bible study, is in many cases a contrast to Small groups. Small groups tend to emphasize and value the input of the group members in their facilitation of open discussions.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 68.

⁹¹ Ibid., 82.

⁹² “Our History,” Bible Study Fellowship, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://www.bsfinternational.org/about/history>.

⁹³ “Our Programs,” Bible Study Fellowship, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.bsfinternational.org/classes/programs>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Wuthnow, 267.

Small and Home Groups

Small groups and home groups are led by facilitators that serve the group through guided spiritual questions and answers provided by the bible study lesson or presented by members of the group.⁹⁶ One early example of a small group is the Methodist class meetings. In the article entitled “The Relevance of the 18th Century Wesleyan Class Meeting in the 21st Century Church” in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Louisa Thomas described the class meetings established by John Wesley:

Class meetings were intentionally limited to a small group; composed of only ten to twelve members, the group met once a week for an hour with the aim of maintaining personal supervision of the group's spiritual growth. Each member frankly and honestly shared his or her victories and struggles with the others. The groups were coeducational in composition and often were a curious mixture of age, social status, and spiritual maturity. Within each class Wesley intended a blending of the seasoned saints with babes in Christ as a means of educating and encouraging the newest converts.⁹⁷

In the late 20th century, traditional Bible study groups began to evolve as the small group movement continued to make inroads in American society. One of the most popular small group models in America was established by the Willow Creek Community Church. This successful small group model was adapted by many protestant churches in America.⁹⁸ Willow Creek Community Church in the 1990's had a strong

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Louisa Thomas, “Cell Group,” *Wikipedia*, last updated September 05, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cell_group#cite_note-Thomas2018-10.

⁹⁸ David Hunsicker, “John Wesley: Father Of Today's Small Group Concept?” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (1996): 192, ATLA Religion Database.

emphasis on establishing community and connection. They decided to become a church that was made up of small groups. Their groups fell into the follow categories:⁹⁹

- Discipleship groups - two-year cycles that consists of six week curriculum units.
- Service groups - task functional groups based on program activities.
- Seeker small groups - up to eight people responsible for reaching non-Christians.
- Community groups - up to 15 people that meet once a month. People who have not yet found a service group to be a part of in the ministry.

While the church was made up of many groups, they still maintained regular weekly activities to meet the needs of the church communities. During the late 20th Century and into the 21st century, small groups were a way in which churches, like Willow Creek, reached those on the margins seeking community.

Small groups do not just support biblical studies but also address practical life needs. Beyond forming small bible study groups, another well-known American church, Saddleback, founded by pastors Rick and Kay Warren in 1990, developed one of the largest small group recovery support programs: Celebrate Recovery. CR was established by a Saddleback staff member John Baker, a recovering alcoholic. This group is one of the seven largest twelve step groups in America.¹⁰⁰ To date this group has had 3.5 million participants in over 29,000 churches.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Joel Comiskey, "Willow Creek Community Church," *Willow Creek Community Church*, 2, <http://docplayer.net/21352493-Willow-creek-community-church.html>.

¹⁰⁰ "Celebrate Recovery," *Wikipedia*, May 30, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celebrate_Recovery.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Parachurch Organizations

The discussion on small groups would not be complete without noting the presence of parachurch organizations in America. Parachurch organizations are an addition mentoring model to Sunday school, Bible studies, and small/home groups. Parachurch faith-based organizations do not conduct themselves based on oversight of governance of a church organization.¹⁰² While they support primarily evangelically based communities of faith, they do not align with any specific church denomination.

Parachurch organizations date back to the 1800's and have continued on until this present time.¹⁰³ Some of the more well-known groups in America are Awana, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, CRU (formally Campus Crusade for Christ), MOPS International, Promise Keepers, World Vision International, Young Life, Youth for Christ, and Youth With a Mission (YWAM).¹⁰⁴ Like the other models, these organizations are primarily dependent on face-to-face meetings. Membership involves individual commitment and willingness to invite new members to join. While they may have some similarity with the other methods noted in this section, these groups strive to differentiate themselves from the traditional forms of church community and connection, in order to appeal to and expand their reach to a broader group of people.

¹⁰² "List of Parachurch Organizations," *Wikipedia*, October 18, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_parachurch_organizations.

¹⁰³ Jon Saunders, "The Place and Purpose of Parachurch Ministries," thegospelcoalition.org, November 27, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/parachurch-ministry/>.

¹⁰⁴ "List of Parachurch Organizations," *Wikipedia*, October 18, 2018.

In evaluating the history and influence of Sunday school, Bible study, small and home groups, and Parachurch organizations, each of these methods have been fundamental to shaping and forming the community within the church. However, as the notable decline continues to plague the American church community, the impact of these methods has been dependent on the commitment of attendance shared by its community members.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges with each of these approaches. The first challenge is that they are timeboxed and limit community engagement to a brief face-to-face interaction. Second is that the curriculum and discussions are limited by the series or lessons selected for that group. There are outside spiritual interests (i.e. monastic practices) and/or subject matters (social justice and faith) that are not traditionally included in these approaches. Third, the traditional, top down approach to these methods places limitations on group members' ability to have egalitarian value to what they can contribute to the community. The emphasis is on the leader to provide additional insights and answers to spiritual questions instead of each member being able to engage and provide spiritual leadership and influence.

Many of these challenges I have presented have led to the decline of attendance in church community in America. As previously stated, the shift in spirituality and community in society has continued to influence the church's ability to increase their reach and growth. In the next section, I will further explore the decline of church attendance within these traditional approaches and shifts in preferred spiritual growth methods.

Attendance in American Church Services

In August 2018, the Pew Research Center published their report of an online survey conducted in December 2017 with 4,729 adults.

Americans who give reasons other than nonbelief for eschewing religious services are fairly religious

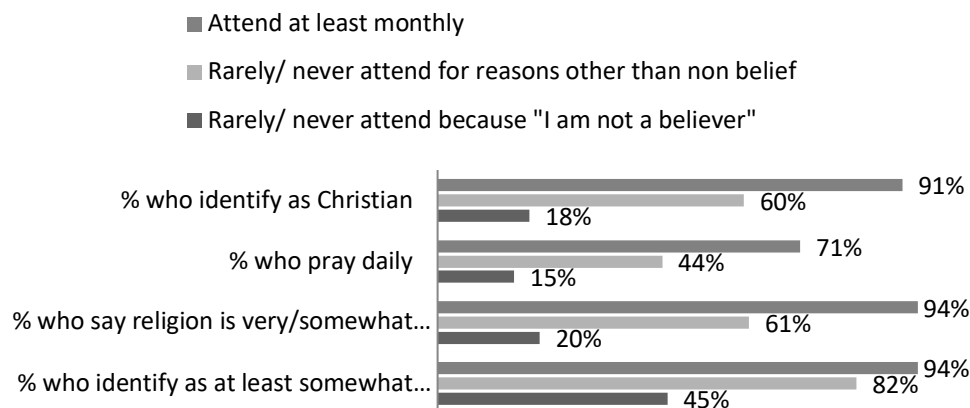


Figure 1. Nonattendance Other Than Nonbelief^{f105}

This study contacted their American Trends Panel to find out people's reasons for not attending religious services other than nonbelief. Figure 1, shows that the majority of those who identified as Christians in America attend services at least on a monthly basis. This is a shift from the expectation of faith communities to gather locally on a weekly basis. This excludes the attendance at other activities which include but are not limited to Sunday school, Bible study, and small groups. These activities require a commitment beyond the weekly Sunday corporate worship service.

¹⁰⁵ "Why Americans Go to Religious and Church Services," [pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/), August 1, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services/>.

There is a growing number of Americans who do not regularly attend services but maintain their faithful practice of daily prayer.¹⁰⁶ For them, this practice is an important part of their expression of faith in their lives. It can be inferred based on research that lack of attendance does not provide a direct correlation to lack of faith.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, there is a growing number of Americans who do not attend because they do not consider themselves to be “believers.” In the 21st century there has been a growth in those who maintain some form spirituality other than Christianity. Many have taken the inward faith approach and see engagement in faith activities as not necessary to maintain their faithful practice.

Furthermore, in Figure 2, the study revealed results that indicated the breakdown by gender, education, and political party. These results did show that there is a lack of regular attendance to religious services among those 49 and younger, Democrats, and men. For ministry leaders in an American local church context, these results may reflect the demographic of individuals that are a part of their faith community.

Forty-five percent of those who attend church at least once a month are Democratic or tend to lean toward that political direction. It also evident, in the results, that regular attendance is made up primarily of those who are 50 and older. However, there are similarities within the percentages (34% 50+ and 38% college graduates) of those who do not identify as a believer when as it relates to rarely/never attend religious

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

services. While this research only captures the views of a few Americans, it does speak to the shifts and research trends of the decline in traditional church engagement in America.

Americans who do not attend religious services due to lack of belief are younger, more highly educated, largely male and Democratic

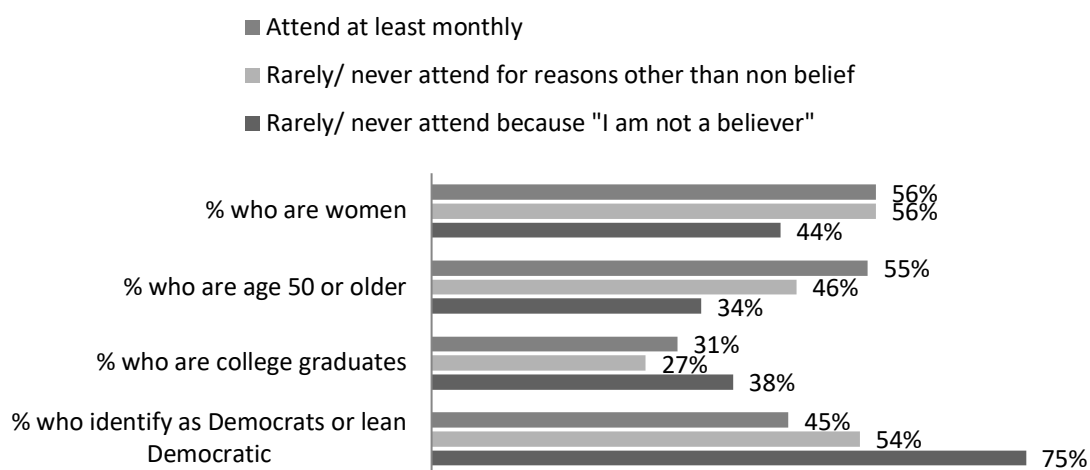


Figure 2. Nonattendance Due To Lack of Belief ¹⁰⁸

In addition, these results bring to the surface questions as to how Americans view and practice their faith outside of their local church context. How do those views relate to their individual spiritual growth? Do they see their growth occurring in community or as an isolated activity? These questions identify key gaps and issues with the emphasis placed on traditional community practices. The answers to these questions may provide a deeper understanding of how faith is perceived and practiced in the American church context.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

A 2015 Barna Research study on discipleship indicated that “self-reported participation in [these] activities (Sunday school, spiritual mentoring, group Bible study, or Christian book study) is weak—as low as 20 percent—indicating that church leaders’ assessment of effectiveness may be more accurate than their parishioners.”¹⁰⁹ Christians who found spiritual growth to be important were asked about their participation in these activities. The results, in Figure 3, showed that even among practicing Christians only 43% attended Sunday school or a fellowship group. The trend shows even greater decline when it comes to bible study, Christian book groups, and one-on-one spiritual mentoring.

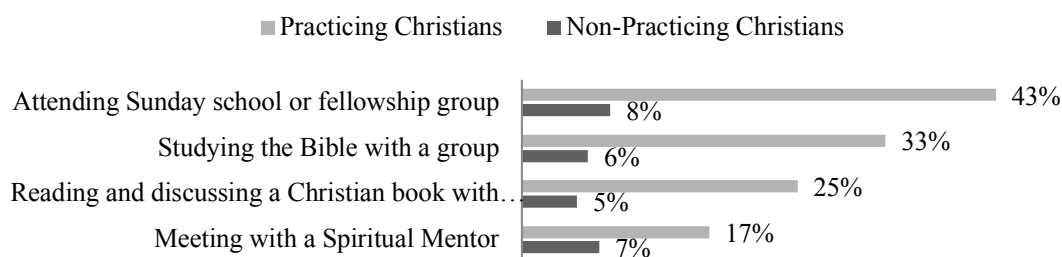


Figure 3. Participation in Spiritual Activities¹¹⁰

In addition to showing the difference between practicing and non-practicing Christians, the study revealed a difference in perception among ministry leaders as to which activities they felt were most significant. When church leaders were asked, “Among each of the following methods for spiritual growth, which do you think will

¹⁰⁹ *The State of Discipleship: Research Conducted among Christian Adults, Church Leaders, Exemplar Discipleship Ministries and Christian Educators* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015), <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

have a significant impact on developing disciples?”¹¹¹ results showed that Bible study was still at the top of their list, next to one-on-one conversations and weekly services.

Table 6. Current Methods That Make Significant Impact

| Responses | All Church Leaders |
|--|--------------------|
| Personal Bible study | 92% |
| Small group Bible study | 88% |
| Regular one-on-one conversations about discipleship issues with a more mature believer | 83% |
| Teaching the Word in weekly services | 81% |
| One-on-one study with a more mature believer | 76% |
| Memorizing Scripture | 65% |
| Reading Christian books and publications | 58% |
| Listening to media (i.e. radio, podcasts, recorded sermons) | 45% |

Source: *The State of Discipleship: Research Conducted among Christian Adults, Church Leaders, Exemplar Discipleship Ministries and Christian Educators*. Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>

If those are indeed the most impactful methods, it can be determined that many Christians are not truly engaging in community within their local church context. Bible study and mentoring are the least practiced activities by non-practicing Christians and are low in percentage for practicing Christians. When the laity was asked about their preferred method, the number one response was “on our own.” This shows that the shift in communal spiritual practices towards individual spiritual growth has made faith a personal effort and not a collective practice. Personal Bible study has become the primary means by which Christians in America are choosing to develop their spiritual lives.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

In Table 7, Christian respondents were asked “Which of the following is your preferred method of discipleship?”¹¹² There were four responses that were given to the respondents to select from: on your own, with a group, one-on-one with another person, and a mix of these.

Table 7. Preferred Methods

| Responses | Respondents by Classification | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| | All Christians | Practicing Christians | Non-practicing Christians |
| On your own | 37% | 30% | 53% |
| With a group | 25% | 29% | 17% |
| One-on-one with another person | 16% | 18% | 13% |
| A mix of these | 21% | 23% | 16% |

Source: *The State of Discipleship: Research Conducted among Christian Adults, Church Leaders, Exemplar Discipleship Ministries and Christian Educators*. Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2015.
<https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>

While *with a group* or even *a mix* still remains close in percentage for practicing and non-practicing Christians, although the percentages are low, still show that community practices involving groups are important to maintaining spiritual growth. The lack of commitment to attend these activities on a consistent basis due to changes within our society, are causing these methods to no longer suffice as a means to foster community. While in-person methods are still preferred, the church must find new ways in which to expand beyond the conventional methods. How do we continue to engage those who still desire to be connected with others in community? How can we rediscover community?

¹¹² Ibid.

Rediscovering Community

As previously stated, it is a known challenge that even with all of the current methods used to foster community there still remains a decline in engagement. There has been a perception that the church may be lost in methods and lack the authenticity in the practice to meet the relational needs that exist within the community. Shaun Stevenson, a contributor to Relevant magazine wrote,

Sometimes I wonder if community-building in many churches has fallen into the same trap that so many other things have fallen into: We talk about it more than we actually practice it. Sermons, Bible study books, podcasts, tweets, Facebook rants—they’ve addressed community at some point. Home groups sit around and talk to each other about how great their community is when they may have someone sitting on the sofa right next to them who feels wildly disconnected from everyone else. We love the *idea* of community—everyone engaged and involved and connected—but how many people show up like I did to the back of that church, longing for someone to reach out to them, shake their hand and have more than a two-second conversation?¹¹³

The old mindset that assumes if you build or provide a resource it will draw others is no longer a viable perspective. Shaun goes beyond his analysis to pose deep questions that ask why current methods rely on the outsider to reach out and connect. He suggested three ways to build better community: put yourself aside, be willing to put in the time, and walk alongside people, not at them. ‘Put yourself aside’ is about stepping outside of your comfort zone and boundaries to connect to those within your community. Whether they are new and seem to be struggling in certain areas of their lives, the extension of reaching out allows for community to remain and flourish.¹¹⁴ Being willing

¹¹³ Shaun Stevenson, “3 Ways the Church Can Build Better Community,” RELEVANT Magazine, December 27, 2017, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/3-ways-church-can-build-better-community>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

to ‘put in the time’ is a realization that community is not built overnight. True genuine relationships and friendships must be fostered and cultivated. It will require an investment of quality and time to spend time together with others.¹¹⁵ Lastly, to ‘cultivate true community’ it requires walking with others. Walking alongside people is a willingness to accept that people are frail, broken, and depraved. No one is exempt from life issues and struggles. No matter what someone faces in life, there needs to be a safe place that, through loving relationships, helps each other work through their issues and supports transformation.¹¹⁶ Stevenson’s sentiments affirm the plight many congregants in the American church context feel about finding meaningful community and connection.

Each of the current face-to-face methods, such as weekly church attendance, bible study, and home groups provide opportunities to learn about Jesus, study scripture, and hear from other believers; however, they have their shortcomings. Where current practices fall short is that they are time-boxed, short spurts of life engagement that do not always provide opportunities for genuine relationships to form and develop. They are set up as a top down, teacher-student model, which generally relies on one individual to lead and bring the information and discussion forward. The drawback to that is that not all voices are being heard and/or valued in each encounter. Furthermore, current methods do not fundamentally engage others to daily do life together. By practice they are designed for members to come in and out of fellowship on a weekly, and for some, monthly basis.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

In rediscovering community, there is both a present and prophetic understanding of community that must be held in tandem. The Very Revered Dr. Martyn Percy wrote “because the church is a body, grounded in a context and social construction of reality, it always reflects and sacralizes values that have yet to be fully processed and comprehended.”¹¹⁷ As members of the kingdom of God we sit in the crux of the kingdom that is here and yet to come. Rediscovering community requires a commitment to what it means to be communal. The concerns expressed by Shaun Stevenson, and many others in America, address our dissonance with maintaining communal activities and embodying the core attributes of community.

Psychologist Dr. David W. McMillan discusses the core attributes that make up what it means to be communal: spirit, trust, trade, and art. He writes “spirit with respected authority becomes Trust. In turn, Trust is the basis of creating an economy of social Trade. Together these elements create a shared history that becomes the community’s story symbolized in ART.”¹¹⁸ He goes on to explain each attribute and its importance to formulating community. Spirit is fundamental to community. This communal component embodies the notion that self-discovery and growth cannot be isolated from community. It is through communal connection with others that we see ourselves for who we are and are able to evolve through the spirit of friendship with others.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Burlington, VA: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2013), 160.

¹¹⁸ Mcmillan, 322.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 315.

Trust is an out-growth of the spark that comes with the spirit of friendship. As intimacy grows over time, members of the community become more open to share and express their feeling about themselves, members of the group, and the function of the group. Honesty and transparency are core values that are not only fostered by the group but are shared within members of the group.¹²⁰ The next communal component Dr. McMillian emphasizes is Trade or Shared Emotional Connection in Time and Space.¹²¹

Trade expounds on trust by allowing members to not only feel free to share and connect but to also engage in emotional negotiations with others in community that allow for criticism, diversity of thought, and alternate opinion. The openness to engage gives way to communal learning and growth. This is what continues to stimulate the social economy of community.¹²² The last component is Art. Art represents a myriad of elements: story, music, symbols, etc. These are visible benefits of a healthy community. Wuthnow asserts, “They represent values like courage, wisdom, compassion, and integrity, values that outlive community members and remain a part of the spirit of the community.”¹²³ Art, while the final component, embodies the essence of the community and therefore, keeps it going and ever evolving.¹²⁴

In the process of rediscovery, it is not only important to know what it means to form community, but we must also understand the practical implications and practices of

¹²⁰ Ibid., 316.

¹²¹ Ibid., 321.

¹²² Ibid., 321.

¹²³ Ibid., 323.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 323.

fellowship within the church community. Jerry Bridges in *True Community* summarizes how we apply true spiritual fellowship in community with others. He affirms,

Spiritual fellowship involves mutual commitment and responsibility. We must commit ourselves to faithfulness in getting together, openness and honesty with one another, and confidentiality in what is shared. We must assume the responsibility to encourage, admonish, and pray for one another. Spiritual fellowship means that we “watch out” for one another, feeling a mutual responsibility for each other’s welfare. This does not mean that we transfer the responsibility for our Christian walk to another person or that we assume his but rather that we help each other through encouragement and accountability.¹²⁵

Like the four core attributes of community presented by Dr. McMillian, our fellowship with one another is a dynamic connection. It is a spiritual fellowship of committed members that welcomes anyone who desires to join through meaningful and quality connections. It fosters trust through mutual accountability while maintaining openness and honesty. It gives room, time, and space for the community to support each other by walking alongside each other. Rediscovering community is about sharing and growing in a true spiritual life journey that is both present and prophetic.

Conclusion

American Church leaders cannot deny the challenge faced with local church participation in spiritual communal practices. Sunday school, Bible study, home groups, and weekly services are all traditional media the American church has used to foster and nurture community and discipleship. While each of these provides opportunities to share

¹²⁵ Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), kindle loc. 816.

together, they also present limitations due to time and space constraints on when the community can engage.

Research presented in this section has shown that there is a trending decline of engagement in these practices on a weekly basis. In the last few decades of the 20th century there has been a tremendous shift in how people view their faith and spiritual growth. The shift towards inward faith has only led to a greater lack of community and isolation. As leaders in the 21st century, we cannot dismiss this reality and only focus on the faithful few. In order to continue the great commission and ensure the health of the church as a collective whole, we have to foster meaningful community that embodies a spirit of trust so that people feel welcomed into it. Community as we know it needs to be rediscovered.

It is evident that we cannot have discipleship without community. The New Testament provides evidence as to the communal nature of discipleship. Hebrews 10:24-25 spurs us to love one another, serve each other, and never forsake meeting together. The New Testament view of discipleship depicts a collective perspective of faith, one that involves a daily sharing of life together. In order to rediscover community within the American Church context we must be willing to continue to evolve our methods and community practices.

While we do not want to alienate those who still do attend traditional church communal activities, we cannot ignore those who are now on the margins. We need to look holistically at our methods and seek out new media that can work in conjunction with our current methods. The evolution of technology allows for connection to extend beyond face-to-face interactions. It lends itself to new opportunities to establish

community and connection with those who otherwise seek spiritual growth and discipleship outside of traditional means.

SECTION 3:

THESIS

In America, there has been an increase of people who identify as Christians, detaching and disconnecting themselves from traditional forms of church community. As a result, attendance and engagement within these church communities has been on a steady decline.¹²⁶ The emphasis on individualism and detachment from community has led to isolation and loneliness in this country.¹²⁷ There is notably a lack of community in many aspects of daily life: faith, work and family. Despite the disconnection, the human desire for community is inherent to who we are as human beings. In order for American church leaders to combat the ills of this now public epidemic, community will need to be rediscovered.

Rediscovering community begins with reaffirming fellowship as the core of the mission of the church. As in the early church, *koinōnia* was at the core of the mission, daily growth, and formation of discipleship in conjunction with the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. Fellowship as members of a community is essential to the growth and longevity of community in the American Church context. Fellowship that has a purpose, with an intentional framework that fosters quality connections among its members, will be transformative in the process to rediscover community.

We can continue to build upon the foundation laid by the early church and approach this challenge in the 21st century as an opportunity. This opportunity is a new

¹²⁶ *State of Discipleship*.

¹²⁷ McGregor.

koinonia. We need a *koinonia* that is deeply rooted in a theological understanding of meaningful fellowship, faithful discipleship, and community. We need a new way to evolve our methods in expanding our reach and connection in order to continue to do life together as believers, both locally and globally. This rediscovery will need to leverage new methods in addition to the current practices in order to foster a community that is both present and prophetic.

A new *koinonia*, at its core, integrates both a theological framework of *koinonia* with a proven conceptual framework of *communities of practice*. Specifically, exploring online media and the implementation of *online communities of practice* is the method by which American church leaders can continue to serve those they have been called to serve. The incorporation of a renewed cycle of praxis for discipleship provides a practical model for participation and communal engagement within community.

This section will discuss how our definition of community can be expanded by the conceptual framework of communities of practice. Furthermore, I will expand my discussion into online media that supports online communities of practice and their ability to support both local and global community connection. Second, it explores how the integration of a circle of praxis within an online community of practice combined with the theological framework of *koinonia* provides a practical basis to engage believers in meaningful community and faithful discipleship. Third, this section will outline how we can continue to build upon the foundation laid by the early church and see this time as an opportunity. Finally, the section will make the connection between opportunity and discovering a new way to experience *koinonia*.

Embracing New Methods

The world is changing daily: technology has transformed the way human beings live, interact, and connect with others. From mobile devices, live streaming applications, and 24/7 high speed connection, the way in which the world is becoming more connected is constantly evolving. People, places, and things are no longer anonymous users of technology but clearly identified and engaged in the demand for innovation and advancement. It has become imperative for leaders to fully understand and engage effectively in our digital world. Eric Sheninger writes that “consistent innovation, effective integration of technology, meaningful professional development, connecting beyond the walls of a brick-and-mortar building, and an open mind are all mandatory duties of a leader in the digital age.”¹²⁸

For leaders, technology must have meaning to one’s organizational context. If it cannot provide a suitable solution to a problem it will not be adopted properly and therefore, transformation cannot take place. When discussing the importance of technology in the context of education, Yong Zhao, Presidential Chair and professor at the college of education for the University of Oregon, noted that “the potential of technology must be translated into meaningful solutions to educational problems. Only when such a translation occurs will the majority of educators find reasons to adopt it. Technology then becomes a solution looking for a problem – in a subculture that frequently perceives the introduction of technology as a problem rather than a

¹²⁸ Eric C. Sheninger, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, a SAGE Company, 2014), Preface.

solution”¹²⁹ For ministry leaders, the questions that must be asked are “what is the problem that we are trying to solve?” and “how can we identify a suitable solution that will be useful and meaningful?”

Seeking to find solutions to existing demands through innovation lends itself to new problems and challenges. Despite that, challenges that arise. In a digital age technology continues to evolve, moving toward a greater-interconnected world. Mobility of technology enables connectivity from anywhere in the world.¹³⁰ In the same fashion, online networks allow for connectivity through fluidity across time and space.¹³¹ The freedom of connection lends to the growth and exploration of sustainable online communities. These communities are not established as a means to replace existing face-to-face communities but become an extension that allows for the communal engagement to continue beyond the in-person time and space.¹³²

In discerning and seeking out solutions, the opportunities to live out the mission of God and embrace some new methods in conjunction with the work the church is already undertaking, are greater than they have ever been before. Incorporating communities of practice is an opportunity yet to be fully integrated within the church context that supports the extension of our connection with one another and those on the margins.

¹²⁹ Ibid., Forward.

¹³⁰ Charlene Li, *The Engaged Leader: A Strategy for Your Digital Transformation* (Philadelphia, PA: Wharton Digital Press, 2015), kindle loc. 98.

¹³¹ Ibid., 95.

¹³² Baab, 23.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (CoP) have become a fundamental practical framework that is based upon an established domain (shared interest), community, and practice.¹³³ This framework has been implemented in the education, technology, and government sectors. “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”¹³⁴ The conceptual framework of communities of practice can foster community and discipleship within American church communities.

The knowledge economy is essential to communities of practice. Knowledge economy refers to knowledge not as an object to be documented but as a dynamic and viable shared asset that is always evolving. This framework has been used in a myriad of organizations to establish a strong knowledge economy through domain, community, and practice. While the attainment of knowledge through experience may be individual, knowledge is communal.¹³⁵ The manner by which a community chooses to manage knowledge is fundamental to how they value and steward the knowledge-sharing that occurs between its members.

Communities of practice are not intended to replace all methods that support structures within an organization, such as organized ministry team structures. They

¹³³ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 72-73.

¹³⁴ Étienne Wenger, Richard A. McDermott, and William Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2010), 4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

should be valued for the knowledge economy they foster and the contribution practitioners make to steward the knowledge and growth on an ongoing basis. Table 8 outlines the differences between communities of practice and the traditional community practices within an American church context.

As noted in Section 2, all of these methods are intentionally designed to meet the needs of those seeking to establish connection and quality relationships within a faith community. Sunday school, while it is a staple method used by the American church to provide religious education and establish shared beliefs, is driven by church leaders and is not offered in every church context on a weekly basis.

Bible study, although it is a well-established face-to-face opportunity that is intended to foster community through group learning focused on a specific topic or life application, it is time boxed. Most bible study lessons are about 6-8 weeks. While sharing does occur, they are typically moderated by set curriculum that includes key questions intended to help each member connect to the lesson in their personal life.

Small groups are unique because they can provide a multi-purpose opportunity for community. In smaller congregations they allow for members to connect and discuss life and practical application of their faith as it relates to their individual experiences. Collectively the group can weigh in and share. In addition, as in the case of Willow Creek, they can serve as a way to encourage members to serve in tactical and practical ways.¹³⁶ They exist and evolve based on the ministry need.

¹³⁶ Comiskey.

Table 8. Snapshot Comparison of CoPs and Traditional Church Groups

| | What's the purpose? | Who Belongs? | What holds it together? | How long does it last? |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Community of Practice | To establish co-learning through sharing knowledge and developing members. | Membership is voluntary based on shared interest. | Participation, commitment to practice and growth of knowledge base. | Based on members commitment and shared interest in the group. |
| Sunday School | Biblical/ Denominational education | Church members and invited guests. Typically grouped by age | The leaders of the group as a part of the weekly ministry offering | Based on church leaders |
| Bible Study | The study biblical scripture through prescriptive lesson series | Church members and invited guests. Typically grouped by age, gender, and marital status | The leaders of the group. Can be a requirement of membership by church leaders/ interest in bible study topic | Typically the length of the bible study series. (usually 6-8 week time frames) |
| Small/Home groups | To serve the ministry through task based practical activities Or practical life needs | Through volunteering, spiritual interest or geographical location assignment | The goals, objectives and needs of the group and/or activities. | Seasonal- i.e. during the school year out for the summer or summer only |
| Parachurch Organizations | To serve believers independent of denominations and traditional church oversight. | Anyone who wants to join- Typically grouped by age, gender, spiritual interest | Mutual needs of the group, the addition of new members and the organizational structure | Ongoing-based on membership attendance |

Source: Adapted from “A Snapshot Comparison” table by Wenger and Snyder. William M. Snyder and Etienne C. Wenger, “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 1, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2000/01/communities-of-practice-the-organizational-frontier>.

Parachurch organizations are widely known and they cross denominational barriers. They provide a large variety of offerings and each focuses on a specific age, gender, and spiritual interest. Because they are independent of denominations, they rely heavily on their membership and the addition of new members to maintain and evolve. Furthermore, they expand their reach into areas beyond the local church settings: community centers, universities, nonprofits, etc.

Each of these methods serves a purpose and supports the formation of community. However, there are gaps and limitations to these methods: limitations due to time boxed face-to-face connection, limitations of geographic location, and the limits of teacher-student curriculum design. In conjunction with these methods, church leaders need to evolve and explore new opportunities that can help not only fill the gaps but propel the American church further in the 21st century. In this discussion on communities of practice, I will explore each component and how each of them is essential to the make-up and practice of the community.

Domain

The domain in a community of practice is established through shared interest.¹³⁷ Domain is the common purpose and identity of the CoP. It centers the community on unification around meaning and shared value. It is the driver of participation and shared ownership.¹³⁸ A well-defined domain demonstrates the maturity of the community and

¹³⁷ Étienne Wenger-Trayner and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, "Introduction to Communities of Practice," wenger-trayner.com, accessed December 13, 2018, <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>.

¹³⁸ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 296.

provides concrete understanding and visibility to the public. Furthermore, it provides the boundaries and the baseline by which the members will engage within the community.¹³⁹ A solid domain makes a community a group of committed practitioners and not a group of friends.¹⁴⁰ Domain invokes inspiration for thought leadership that contributes to the viability of the community.

Within a church context an example of shared interests could be monastic practices or social justice. These are shared interests that may not be addressed in a traditional bible study or home group on an ongoing basis. In a CoP, shared interests can become the focus of the intentional group of members who have an interest and commitment to contributing to and participating in this knowledge base. Wenger et al. asserts “a shared domain creates a sense of accountability to a body of knowledge and therefore to the development of a practice.”¹⁴¹

Community

The shared interest becomes the core of what makes the social formation of the community intentional. While domain allows for a common vision to become the basis for trust and relationships to form,¹⁴² community is about belonging and mutual commitment.¹⁴³ Within communities of practice, the commitment requires the community

¹³⁹ Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 27.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 2015.

¹⁴² Ibid., 33.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 34.

to meet on a regular basis. Maintaining a solid domain and a regular practice leads to opportunities for diversity in the community to flourish. Wenger et al. affirm that “with enough common ground for ongoing mutual engagement, a good dose of diversity makes for richer learning, more interesting relationships, and increased creativity.”¹⁴⁴

Communities of practice do not need to be homogenous in the sense that everyone has the same role or position.¹⁴⁵ Heterogeneous communities cultivate diversity. Members of the community who share the domain can have diverse roles. The mutual engagement in shared practice provides the community with a well-rounded diversity of knowledge.¹⁴⁶ Participation is voluntary. Even if it is assigned within the organization, the way in which the participant engages in the community is based on the person.¹⁴⁷ The way community takes form can vary.¹⁴⁸ Some CoP’s form unintentionally, based on a sub-group of people who wants to meet with others to talk about subject matters related to what they do or those that are intentional, whose origin began with a solid domain and intentional structure.

As discussed in Section 2 concerning McMillian’s *Sense of Community*, an effective and healthy community must be a place where members can experience honesty and trust.¹⁴⁹ Lynne Baab further asserts “because spiritual disciplines connect us with

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴⁵ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 74.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹⁴⁹ Mcmillan, 316.

God's heart and priorities, they have an impact on relationships and the call to serve with love in the world. Healthy communities of faith look beyond themselves to engage with the needs of the wider world because of God's care for all people."¹⁵⁰

Because relationships form due to the commitment to the domain, the community can explore tough issues, present their vulnerability in exploring nuanced questions, and expound on their expertise by contributing new solutions to the community. Conflicts that arise on issues discussed within the community demonstrate maturity of the community in how they are handled.¹⁵¹ The productivity that results from these moments allows the community to thrive and evolve. All in all, community is about the mutual benefit of everyone who is a part of the community.

In discussing community as a component of Communities of Practice within an American church context, it is important to acknowledge the challenge faced by embracing the egalitarian nature of the communities in a top down leadership model. In contrast to Bible study and small group leaders, leadership in a community of practice does not operate in the same fashion as a traditional group. While it has a facilitator, the leadership is not the central focus on the community of practice. Wenger et al. further affirm,

¹⁵⁰ Baab, 24.

¹⁵¹ Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 37.

All communities of practice depend on internal leadership, but healthy communities do not depend entirely on the leadership of one person. Leadership is distributed and is a characteristic of the whole community. Recognized experts certainly help to legitimize the community's role and voice, but they are not necessarily the ones who bring the community together or take the initiative to explore new territory. Rather than think in terms of specific leaders and followers, it is more useful to think of such roles in terms of an ecology of leadership. Leadership in a community of practice can be very diverse, including community organizers, experts and "thought leaders," pioneers, administrators, and boundary spanners.¹⁵²

Communities of practice level the playing field by valuing as equal, all of the voices within the community. Everyone's voice is essential as a practitioner who contributes to the knowledge base of the community. It is through the practice of the community where maturity of identity and knowledge take place. As that happens old members are able to support new members and they all co-learn, grow, evolve, and wrestle with the tough questions together.¹⁵³

This rediscovered manner in which community is formed and fashioned provides great opportunity for those who exist at the core and those on the margins to share in the lives of others, embrace diversity of knowledge and life experience to foster meaningful community and faithful discipleship.

Practice

What makes a community of practice distinct from a group that just shares knowledge is that everyone committed to the group is a practitioner. Etienne Wenger

¹⁵² Ibid., 36.

¹⁵³ Chris Kimble, Paul Hildreth, and Peter Wright, "Communities of Practice: Going Viral," in *Knowledge Networks: Innovation Through Communities of Practice*, ed. Yogesh Malhotra (Hershey, PA: Idea Group, 2004), 222.

states that “practice is, first and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful.”¹⁵⁴ Practice is about the communal experience. Practice can be demonstrated in the ways in which the knowledge is stewarded through tools, resources, new frameworks, and ideas. It can also become evident in new models and practices that emerge from the group.¹⁵⁵

Practice is not exclusive to practitioners who have expertise in current methods and practices, but the community inspires new schools of thought and evolution. As innovative ideas formulate, the community of practice becomes the place where these ideas can be discussed through common language and practice.¹⁵⁶ Wenger et al. assert that “an effective practice evolves with the community as a collective product. It is integrated into people’s work. It organizes knowledge in a way that is especially useful to practitioners because it reflects their perspective. Each community has a specific way of making its practice visible through the ways that it develops and shares knowledge.”¹⁵⁷

Wenger asserts “yet, whatever discourses we use to define what knowledge is, our communities of practice are a context of mutual engagement where these discourses can touch our experience and thus be given new life. In this regard, knowing in practice involves an interaction between the local and the global.”¹⁵⁸ The regular interaction within the conceptual framework of communities of practice extends beyond face-to-face

¹⁵⁴ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 51.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁵⁶ Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 38.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 141.

interactions into online media which allow for communities to grow both locally and globally.

Lynne Baab affirms “technology is revolutionary. It can flatten structures and dismantle hierarchies. It allows conversation to flow across the globe, so that the brightest minds are no longer hindered by location; rather, they can share information and ideas freely.”¹⁵⁹ Online communities of practice can be used to rediscovery community through facilitating connection and meaningful practice without the limitations of time and place.



Figure 4. Components of a Community of Practice

Online Communities of Practice

Online communities of practice (OCoP) use a framework that supports the rediscovery of community in the 21st century. This framework provides a guide as to the formation of establishing a sustainable community. Online communities of practice use

¹⁵⁹ Baab, 56.

online media as a means to embody the three components: domain, community, and practice. While the framework of communities of practice does not specify online media that should be used, there are online platforms that support fostering community and meaningful fellowship.

Online media provide a means to connect the community throughout the week, reconnecting the community from Monday to Saturday. Lynne Baab asserts “online community can supplement congregational life in those situations where people’s specific needs cannot be met in a congregation simply because others have not experienced the same trauma or specific challenge.”¹⁶⁰ It provides the community with a platform to discuss topics of shared interest that may not occur in weekly church activities. Furthermore, the use of online media can help reduce the gaps that often occur during the week or even throughout the days of the month where face-to-face interactions within the faith community do not exist. Online community engagement provides on-going support and connection that can be just as meaningful as face-to-face encounters.¹⁶¹

Inherently, social media platforms are designed to allow for sharing, responsive interactions, and one-on-one or group engagement. These social media platforms allow for the flexibility of using these platforms to engage in multiple spiritual activities, meeting the needs and preferences of those within the community. Not all of them may be fitting within a specific community context, but the benefit to having multiple options

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 23.

allows the community to figure out which medium will provide the best outcome for a sustainable online community to flourish.

Online Media that Foster Community

In a 2017 study conducted with 1070 adults, the respondents were asked a variety of questions related to their use of social media. Figure 4 shows the results of the percentage of adults who use the current social media platforms. Figure 5 shows that not only are there platforms that are used more frequently than others but that all of the platforms listed are used by practicing Christians, non-practicing Christians, and non-Christians.

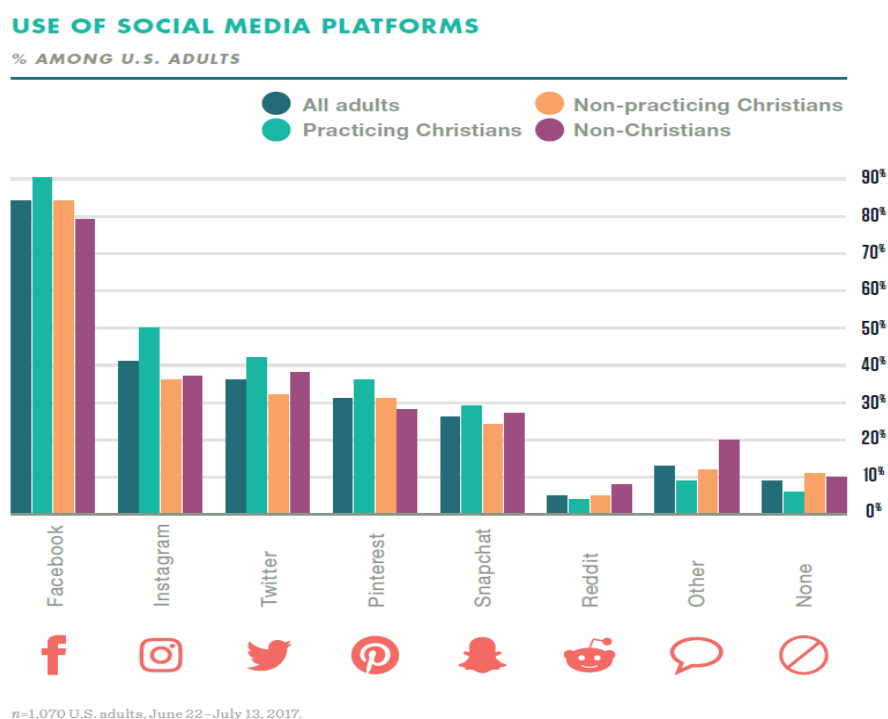
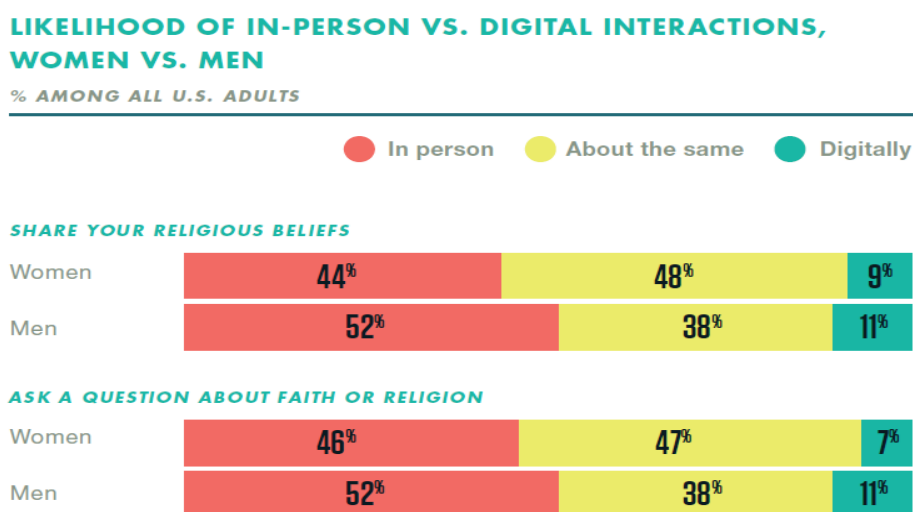


Figure 5. Use of Social Media Platforms¹⁶²

¹⁶² *Spiritual Conversations*, 34.

As leaders, in considering using online media as a means to foster community, it is important to understand the methods that are often used to engage in community with others on a consistent basis. While technology will continue to advance and evolve it will also be imperative to invest time in understanding the changes and shifts as they are embraced within the American cultural context. This makes the incorporation of online communities a dynamic one that is always evolving and growing.



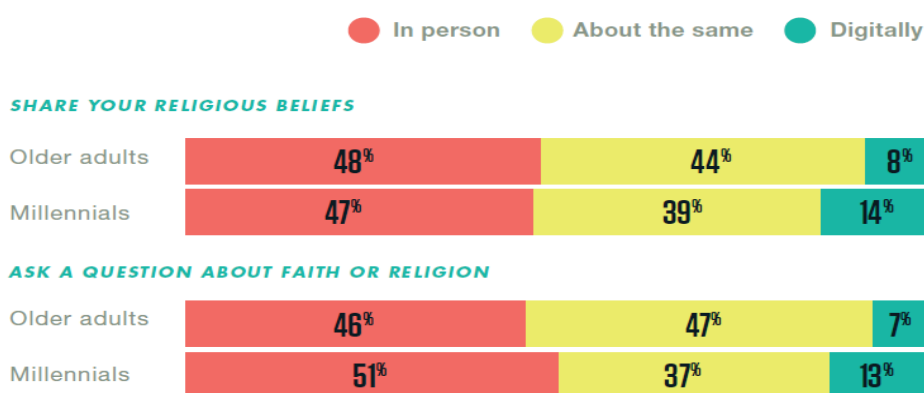
n=1,070 U.S. adults, June 22–July 13, 2017.

Figure 6. In-Person vs. Digital Interactions-Women and Men¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Ibid., 41.

LIKELIHOOD OF IN-PERSON VS. DIGITAL INTERACTIONS, MILLENNIALS VS. ALL OLDER ADULTS

% AMONG ALL U.S. ADULTS



n=1,070 U.S. adults, June 22–July 13, 2017.

Figure 7. In-Person vs. Digital Interactions- Millennials and Older Adults¹⁶⁴

Figures 6 and 7 show the medium by which the adults surveyed were most likely to share in faith-based conversations. While solely digital is not a large percentage among any of the demographics, what is enlightening is that there is a high percentage that do both. So the incorporation of digital interactions as a means to have faith conversation is evident. Furthermore, it is important that in an American Christian context where in-person activities are not as frequented, that we consider the benefit of expanding the activities into the digital space. Providing an additional option gives the community opportunities to continue their conversations in the medium that is best preferred by the individuals within the community.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

Technology Stewardship

The discussion of technology and online platforms must be combined with stewardship. Incorporating a specific online medium within a community must be done with the community at the heart of the decision. Members of the community can provide support by being stewards. Wenger states that,

Technology stewardship is an emerging role that describes both a responsibility and a practice—an attitude as well as all the conversations, decisions, and learning that address the design and management of a community’s technology infrastructure ... It is distinct from traditional community leadership, yet in its own way, it involves leadership in caring for the community.¹⁶⁵

This type of stewardship has five streams of activity: community understanding, technology awareness, selection and installation, adoption and transition, and everyday use. Community understanding is about knowing the community, particularly how they relate to technology and their needs in supporting their current and future growth. Technology awareness involves the knowledge of available technology and the interest in learning what technology is on the horizon to support the needs of the community. Selection and installation involves understanding of the community in conjunction with the awareness and sensitivity to the technology available; the selection process should be a well-informed choice. Adoption and transition as a steward is important. The role of a steward is to help the community to adopt the new technology and support the rejection of technology that did not suffice for the needs of the community. Lastly, everyday use is

¹⁶⁵ Etienne Wenger, John David Smith, and Nancy White, *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities* (Portland, OR: CPsquare, 2009), loc. 1038.

about integrating the use of technology as a part of daily practice within the community. The integration and use should evolve as the community continues to evolve.

Being good stewards of technology within the group is critical for online communities of practice. The community's identity is not defined by the technology it chooses. No matter which online media is selected by an online community of practice, Wenger expresses that "communities of practice should not be reduced to purely instrumental purposes. They are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human."¹⁶⁶

Communities of Practice: Learning and Participation

Domain, community, and practice are not just components of a theoretical framework but a practical framework that serves as a practical model for rediscovering community. Wenger et al. affirms that "the model provides a common language that facilitates discussion, collective action, and efforts to gain legitimacy, sponsorship, and funding in an organization. Defining domain, community, and practice also clarifies the definition of communities of practice as a social structure distinct from other types."¹⁶⁷ In light of the practical nature of this model, how can it foster growth and knowledge sharing within an organization for those who have a diverse skillset and knowledge base? The answer to this question can be addressed in exploring Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's research on situated learning, apprenticeship, and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP).

¹⁶⁶ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 134.

¹⁶⁷ Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder, 40.

The transfer of a knowledge base and development of a skillset is not a new concept in situated learning environments. The concept of apprenticeship studied by Lave and Wenger provided concrete examples of situated learning in practice. They discovered that within apprenticeships it is not about the master teaching the novice, but the mutual benefit of shared practice allowed for co-learning and growth. Lave and Wenger assert “The social relations of apprentices within a community change through their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices’ understanding and knowledgeable skills develop.”¹⁶⁸

The basis by which situated learning occurs in apprenticeship is in community. Therefore, communities of practice become a channel by which a learning curriculum is created. Learning curricula are resources that are available only to practitioners through their learned experiences.¹⁶⁹ Through their study of apprenticeships they were able to form a distinctive learning concept for communities of practice by which practitioners engage, develop, mature, and contribute in legitimate peripheral participation.

Communities of practice involve a learning concept known as legitimate peripheral participation. This concept is used to explain the way that membership within a community of practice occurs. According to Lave and Wenger, learning, in communities of practice, is a primarily social practice rather than a cognitive practice.¹⁷⁰ Lave and Wenger write “in such a community, a newcomer learns from old-timers by

¹⁶⁸ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 94.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 44.

being allowed to participate in certain tasks that relate to the practice of the community. Over time the newcomer moves from peripheral to full participation.”¹⁷¹

Participants are motivated to expound on their co-learning because the more they are able to learn the more they can contribute and share. The continual interactions of new participants in the community help to shape their identity, competence, and maturity as a practitioner.¹⁷² Therefore it can be asserted that components of practice cannot be separated from the level of participation one engages in within the community.¹⁷³ Faithful commitment to participation in community as a means of learning, growing, and identity is also understood in *koinonia*. It was through *koinonia* that discipleship in the early church was established. It was fostered through a situated learning environment where spiritual maturity was attained over time as the believers continued to practice and live out their faith in community with others.

Communities of practice provide a framework for *koinonia* to be rediscovered and where a commitment to spiritual growth, maturity, and making of new disciples can be fostered. Lave and Wenger conclude their discussion on how situated learning is foundational to knowledge transfer and communities of practice.

¹⁷¹ Kimble, Hildreth, and Wright, 222.

¹⁷² Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 152.

¹⁷³ Kimble, Hildreth, and Wright, 222.

In summary, rather than learning by replicating the performances of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction, we suggest that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community. Because the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be addressed within the developmental cycles of that community, a recommendation which creates a diagnostic tool for distinguishing among communities of practice.¹⁷⁴

The community serves as the place where tough questions are discussed and learning is done over time as the community continues to develop and grow. One model for development cycles of community for practitioners is the Cycle of Praxis. In conjunction with the communities of practice framework, it provides a practical model for rediscovering community and faithful discipleship.

Cycle of Praxis: A Model for Practitioners in Community

Praxis is derived from an ancient Greek concept. In the field of education there are two educators who have had significant influence on Praxis in education: Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and American educator David A. Kolb. One of the major concepts of Freire's work was on Praxis as Action and Reflection. From his standpoint, "It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Lave and Wenger, 100.

¹⁷⁵ "Concepts Used By Paulo Freire," Freire Institute, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.freire.org/paulo-freire/concepts-used-by-paulo-freire>.

Kolb is known for his cyclical process of praxis. It is made up of four stages of learning (explained in the simplest form): experience, reflection, conceptualization, and testing. Figure 8 shows Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

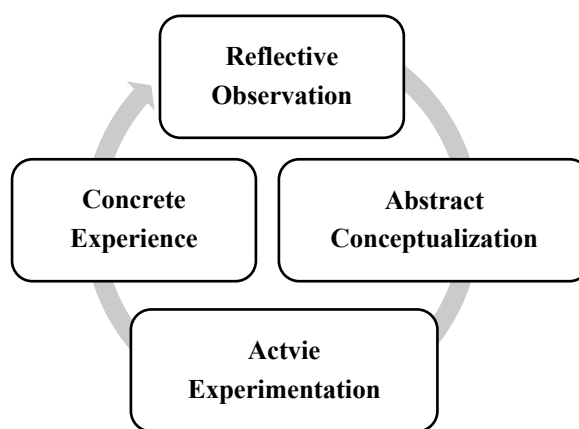


Figure 8. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle¹⁷⁶

Concrete Experience is about the action that takes place in the learning cycle. Reflective Observation is the stage when a learner can reflect upon their experience. Abstract Conceptualization is the stage that takes into account the reflection on the experience and determines what needs to change. This is the stage that welcomes new ideas into the learning cycle. The last stage is Active Experimentation. This stage allows the learner to plan and test out their new concepts or ideas.

While both Freire and Kolb were influential in helping us frame how experience is an effective method in learning, this model has evolved over the years and has been applied in many arenas outside of education. Dr. Bjorn Peterson expanded this cycle in

¹⁷⁶ Saul Mcleod, "Kolb's Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle," simplypsychology.org, February 5, 2017, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>.

his Cycle of Praxis for Community Development. Figure 8 shows the cycle stages. Like Kolb's cycle, this cycle has four stages—experience, learning & reflection, synthesis & planning, and implementation & review.

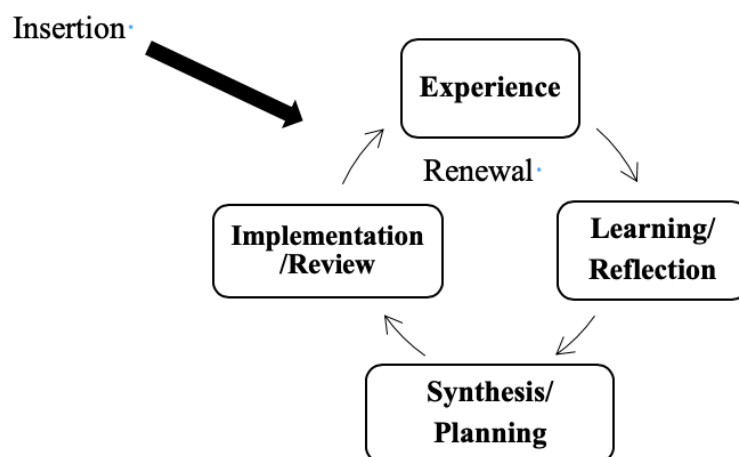


Figure 9. Bjorn's Cycle of Praxis for Community Development¹⁷⁷

Bjorn's Cycle of Praxis is,

a framework for creating sustainable, human-centered solutions in response to complex community challenges. ... it is responsive to the dynamic nature of problem solving by providing structure that facilitates intentionality in analysis and action ... to prepare community members for learning and action while protecting the dignity of all affected by the work being done.¹⁷⁸

Peterson sees *experience* as feeling the needs of the community and listening to the experiences of those in the community.¹⁷⁹ Learning & Reflection involves acknowledging

¹⁷⁷ Bjorn Peterson, "The Cycle of Praxis for Community Development," *Looking Bear Leadership*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.lookingbearleadership.com/reflections/2018/3/6/the-cycle-of-praxis-for-community-development>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

the complexity of the needs and experiences of the community.¹⁸⁰ Synthesis & Planning is about taking into account the lessons, insights, and reflections that have been experienced until this stage.¹⁸¹ Implementation & Review is the action stage. This stage is not about ensuring that the plan being implemented meets the needs right away, moreover, it is to see improvement in the engagement with the community as the cyclical iterations continue.¹⁸²

The cycle of praxis as model offers a way to practically live out the formation and sustainability of a community. The manner in which each stage is practiced by members in the community is unique to its community. The cycle does provide a model that supports meaningful community commitment and engagement. In the context of the problem American church leaders are facing, this model can serve as a guide for how communities of practice incorporate legitimate peripheral participation as it relates to faithful discipleship in the church community.

Cycle of Praxis, Participation, and Discipleship

The rediscovery of community through online communities of practice leads to the evaluation of the intersection between cycles of praxis, legitimate peripheral participation, and discipleship. I would propose that the model presented by Dr. Peterson is a good basis and should be modified to be contextualized for practitioners in the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

church. Figure 9 shows how the model would enable participation that increases spiritual competency and mentorship in faithful fellowship between new and old members.

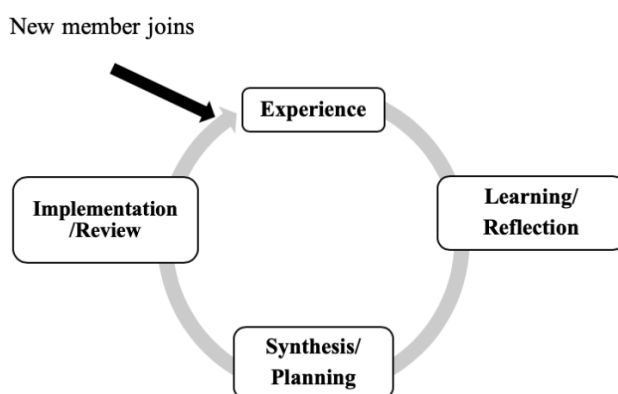


Figure 10. New Cycle of Praxis for Faith Based OCoP

In this new cycle of praxis, experience focuses on the daily life of each Practitioner and how they practice their faith in communion with their family, workplace, and church community. *Experience* can involve incorporation of faithful spiritual practices that support their domain. Learning and Reflection in communion with their community allows for space for tough questions and exploratory ideas based on experience in contribution to the community. It is also the place where trust continues to grow as they witness members who they have shared with in experience also become vulnerable in learning and reflection.

Synthesis and Planning would allow for members to feel valued as all members contribute to the analysis and new insights that will support further growth and connection. Implementation and Review is an opportunity for new members to see their changes and transformation in action. It gives grace for the experiential nature of living

out our faith in community. It opens the door for new experiences which will engage and encounter new members into the community.

Membership or discipleship is not the goal but the outcome of the practice. The more participation and commitment that is involved, the more growth and maturity take place. Furthermore, the increase of competency, trust, and quality engagement will continue to support the connection of the members in online and offline practices. Every iteration cycle allows for new people with a shared domain to enter into the community as well as existing members to renew their commitment to this communal learning process.

Community Rediscovered

In Section 1, we discussed the issues and needs of local ministry leaders, Pastor Joy, and Chris and Anna. Based on their ministry contexts, what would it look like for them to rediscover community? Pastor Joy, local pastor in Greensboro, NC, desires to find a way, in conjunction with her face-to-face ministry opportunities, to establish online communities as a ministry resource. In doing so, she hopes to not only engage her members but connect with those outside of her local community who actively seek knowledge and spiritual growth through discipleship in community with others.

Pastor Joy

Pastor Joy presented the idea of communities of practice to her members. She encouraged her members to establish groups through various online media platforms. A group of members in her congregation decided to create a Facebook group that allows for them to discuss monastic practices. This group has members from all walks of life and

age groups. Daily members come together for a group video chat where they share in devotion, meditation, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines. They continue to share history, methodology, and new practices via posts and group chats.

New members are added as experiences are shared and practiced with others outside of the group. Because of this, membership has extended beyond the local church to those who live outside the United States. The global reach has connected Christians and seekers from a variety of countries. In addition to their online connection, members who live in close proximity to each other have formed small groups where they are able to share and practice together in person. Diversity within the group is welcomed and appreciated as the community continues to mature and grow.

In this scenario, the devotion to Christian monastic practice is the domain of interest. The community is sustained through a Facebook group where committed members from the local church join those who have sought out interest of this community online. The practice is in the daily devotion to monastic practices. Each member is a practitioner and is able to practice and experience in community with others. The curriculum is in the posts, video chats, and the diversity of evolving methods and spiritual disciplines.

Chris and Anna

Chris and Anna, local ministry leaders in Chico, CA, share a passion for faith and music. As they have traveled throughout the state and the country, they have discovered that there are others who share their passion and are not a part of a church community. Their desire is to find a way to bring this community together no matter where they are currently located. Chris and Anna want to establish a faith and music community where

other musicians, and those who share a passion for faith and music, can come together and share new music, discuss industry knowledge, and spiritually support each other.

After researching online media resources, Anna decides to use a website that includes a blogging platform. The website allows for members to publicly share with those who may be interested in faith and music. Members of the group are able to share images, quotes, lyrics, insights, videos, and audio clips. As they connect with others during their tour opportunities, newcomers are invited to join and share equally. Each member takes turns publishing a post and everyone in the group asynchronously engages and responds to each post. When members travel to various cities, other members connect them to the local church communities. This allows for members to share in both an online and face-to-face community experience.

In this scenario, the intersection of faith and music is the domain of shared interest. The community is sustained online through both face-to-face connection and members who join based on their interests in the domain from the website and blog. Practice is in the fact that the members are practitioners as musicians. They contribute to the knowledge economy of the group through the co-learning activities. New members and existing members are equal contributors. The outcome is a “curriculum” that is created through the posts, images, music, asynchronous chats, etc.

In both scenarios, Pastor Joy and Chris and Anna were able to connect their online communities with face-to-face communal engagement. Through technical stewardship they were able to determine what online medium would work best for their community. As their platforms continue to mature, they can continue to evolve their usage of these resources to meet their needs. While they were intentional about setting up

these communities, each group fosters organic growth and facilitates an egalitarian model that values every individual contributor.

Conclusion

In America, we are experiencing a decline in community. Isolation, depression, and lack of community are plaguing our country. In a digital age, where innovation and technology continue to shape the way in which our society connects and relates to each other, we cannot rely on the resource to rediscover community. American church leaders have an opportunity to extend their reach and become intentional about adopting technology. With intentionality comes stewardship of technology, learning to not let it be negatively disruptive but become transformational within their context. While the early church provided a framework, it will be up to the church leaders in the 21st century to carry on the mission and communal practice so that it is sustainable for generations to come.

Communities of practice provide a sustainable framework that can be leveraged for both face-to-face and online formation of community. As technology continues to evolve it increases its significance in the daily lives of Americans. Despite the misuse of technology as a resource, it can be a sustainable tool for maintaining community. Doing life together as a faith community is no longer a goal but an attainable practice that continues to evolve to meet the needs of its members. New members are motivated and mentored by existing members. Knowledge and sharing become the primary focus and all members are able to participate.

Whether a person sees themselves on the margins or in the core, they all have a place within the community to add value. Cycle of praxis provides a working model to

give a voice to how we continue the great commission in the 21st century. We must continue to evolve and grow in our understanding of faith and community. Learning and experience are not inseparable. Cultivating new disciples through community allows the community to continue to thrive. In combination with current ministry methods online communities of practice and cycle of praxis lend themselves to a present and prophetic view of rediscovering community in the American church context.

Furthermore, the integration of both the theological and the practical frameworks serve as a foundational approach to the problem at hand. It can be both established and replicated within many American church ministry contexts. As we embrace this opportunity and begin to engage in the shift to a new direction, we as believers in the 21st Century are positioned to participate in a renewed, sustainable, and faithful community. It is pivotal that we continue to understand the importance of community in the life of the Church and to press forward as bearers of the kingdom that is here and yet to come.

SECTION 4:

ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The artifact is a website entitled “A New Koinonia: Doing Life Together.” The purpose of the site is as a web-based resource that provides dynamic information that helps church leaders who seek to foster meaningful community and faithful discipleship understand and implement communities of practice. Doing life together is an emphasis on the church community exemplified in Acts 2:42. As argued in Section 1, *koinonia* is at the core of what it means to be communal. The manner in which believers formed community, connected daily with each other, and ensured that all needs were met, provided a practical example for living life together in community.

The site will provide information related to communities of practice and online communities of practice as a means to foster community in conjunction with their current community practices. In addition, it will support church leaders in their understanding of how to engage those on the core and in the margins to establish a model of faithful discipleship through the practical framework of cycle of praxis.

The final version of the site will include a variety of media resources: blog posts, videos, forum discussions, and social media groups. The intent of each of these resources is to support and encourage church leaders and non-leaders to connect to a community of practice based on their shared interest. The site will be designed to be optimal for both standard web view and mobile responsive and can be accessed from any browser. The mobility of the site will allow for it to be an available resource no matter how anyone chooses to access this site.

SECTION 5:

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

This section is to discuss the specifications of the artifact that I created to support my research and practical application interest. The emphasis on evolving face-to-face meetings to expand community is an opportunity for church leaders. Furthermore, the purpose is to help church leaders understand the importance of empowering and equipping lay member with the appropriate resources to grow and expand the faith community in a sustainable way. The direct intent of this artifact is to provide a practical way to support healthy community that encourages meaningful fellowship and faithful discipleship.

Goals

As discussed in previous sections, in America, isolation and depression has been diagnosed as a public epidemic. The intended goal of this website is to provide a sustainable web-based resource for American church leaders who desire to evolve into new methods to foster meaningful community and faithful discipleship. This website will seek to facilitate church leaders to engage and find practical support to implement communities of practice. My desire is that not only will leaders glean from the information but that they will solidify relationships with others seeking to accomplish the same goal.

Audience

The primary audience for this website is small to mid-sized American church leaders. The ideal hope is that it would extend beyond leaders to lay members who seek to connect and engage with others on a deeper level. Leaders and lay members would feel

empowered to establish their own online communities of practice that are sustainable and build their spiritual knowledge economy. Initially my reach is to local ministry leaders that I have established a relationship with, primarily in the pacific northwest, but also in the Midwest, east coast and now international ministries.

Scope

The scope of this artifact is to provide a centralized fundamental understanding on communities of practice and the cycle of praxis as a model for rediscovering community. The site will provide a variety of resources that support American church leaders in establishing a practice that enables the growth and maturity of community. It will also give insight to those who exist at the core of the faith based community and would like to find a new way to establish community. While one of my future goals is to support missional organizations, the scope of this artifact is to support local, American, small to mid-sized churches.

Content

The content on the site will include the following:

- Identify the issue of lack of community in America.
- Outline the foundational principles of Communities of Practice.
- Provide resources for establishing communities of practice and online communities of practice.
- Provide a framework for discipleship by explaining the cycle of praxis.
- Online resources: blog posts, videos, community forums, and social media pages and groups that support the formation and sustainability of communities of practice.

Budget

The overall budget of this site will evolve as the needs and expenses increase, based on the various communities it is intending to serve. Currently, the site is hosted on Wix.com. The domain was purchased by google.com. The cost to host with a domain is \$100 and the URL purchase was \$24 with the same as an annual renewal fee. As it relates to the maintenance, for the near term I will handle the maintenance of the site in all aspects.

Standards of Publication

The site will initially be published under the URL www.anewkoinonia.com and www.anewkoinonia.org on the Wix platform. I am familiar with building sites in Wix and the platform currently provides the functionality needed for the initial launch of this site. As the site continues to evolve and grow, I will look at additional online platforms to host and facilitate the progressive needs of the established community using the site. The site content will consist of written content and diagrams. The next phase is to include video, blogs, community forums, and social media groups. An example of a video script, site map, and screenshots of site pages are included in Appendix A.

SECTION 6:

POSTSCRIPT

This dissertation was intended to lay the groundwork for the evolution of traditional community practices within the American church context. Communities of practice and online communities of practice are an established framework that has been implemented in a variety of institutions: education, government, and technology. While religious institutions are not as prominent in establishing this framework, there is an opportunity to see this practice applied to American faith-based communities.

After evaluating the problem and the proposed solution to this specific ministry problem, I chose to do a Track 02 dissertation. Having a practical asset in conjunction with the research and theoretical framework allows for church leaders to experience the intersection of theory meeting practice. The first part of the dissertation presents the academic argument that explains the theoretical and practical frameworks of koinonia, communities of practice, and cycle of praxis to affirm viable opportunities to rediscover community. In addition to the research and written work, I produced a sustainable web-based resource that provides dynamic information to American church leaders to be able to establish and implement communities of practice within their local context.

In my discovery, there were many ministerial scenarios that could have been assessed and included in this discussion. In considering other areas of further research and exploration, one of the first areas is the discussion of discipleship. As the church expands into the 21st century how we understand and continue to redefine our models and methods of discipleship are imperative to maintaining koinonia in the life of the church. Furthermore, missional organizations are seeking community and new ways to become

more communal and share the gospel. Interviewing missional leaders and setting up online communities of practice is a formal way to expand the framework presented in this dissertation. With a variety of online media resources, it gives way to multiple ways in which a community can be established. While there are some countries and even cities that do not allow for online communities to be established, the hope would be that community would be established by traditional means.

The vision for this dissertation and artifact is that it would become transformative to the faith community. While there has been a significant decline in community within the American church context, it is important to embrace how technology can be a resource that supports growth in community. The innate human desire for community will always remain. The American church has an opportunity to combat the public health epidemic of isolation and rediscover community.

The evolution of communities of practice and online communities of practice in the American church context provides a picture of the future of the church in the 21st century. It is not the intention that all church leaders will adapt to this ideology, but this framework is a proven means of fostering quality in communal engagement. The opportunity for growth and change is on the forefront. As a church leader, our choice to participate will determine the pace that the church will continue to evolve and grow in the future.

Overall communities of practice in a faith-based setting will take time to establish. Leaders need to be open and willing to shift from their top down approach of ministry to empowering every lay person and supporting the growth of community through doing life together. One of the benefits of this combined framework is that

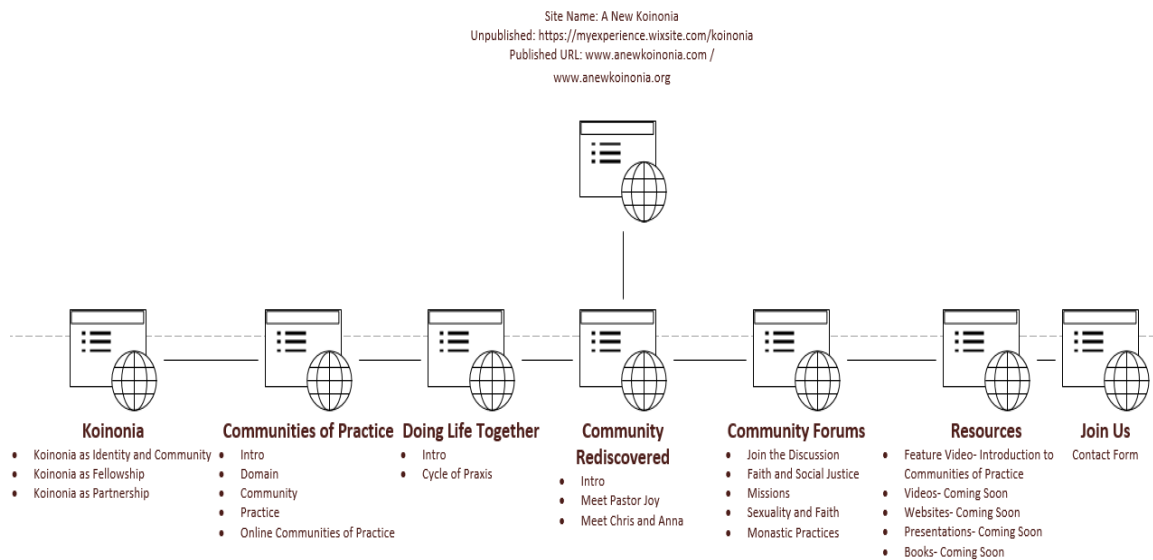
leaders can create a group that will function as an egalitarian ministerial community. By empowering the people, the cultivation of a new sustainable community becomes a focal priority in how the church leaders choose to foster community. I hope to dedicate a portion of my life work to fully support church leaders in seeing these sustainable communities becoming an affirmed community practice. Rediscovering community is a process and a commitment. It embodies the essence of koinonia: community, fellowship, and partnership.

APPENDIX A:

ARTIFACT

This Appendix provides sitemap of the website that will be available at www.anewkoinonia.com and www.anewkoinonia.org. It also includes screenshots of the pages created and a video script of a clip that will be added to the site upon its completion.

A New Koinonia Site Map

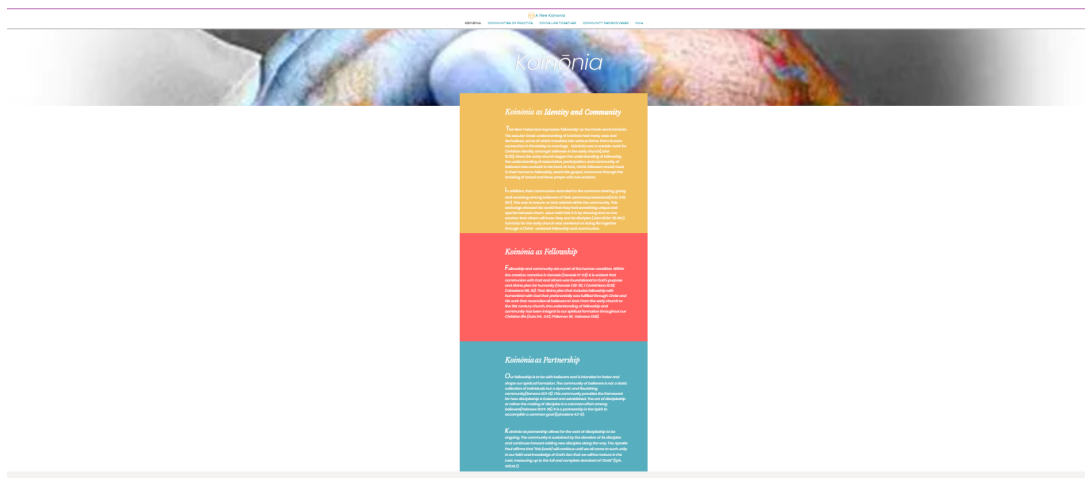


A New Koinonia Website

Home Page/ About/ Join Us



Koinonia



Communities of Practice

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice (CoP) have become a widespread practice because they connect people in a community and help them learn, grow, and share their knowledge and skills. They are a natural part of any organization, and they can be used to improve performance, innovation, and learning. This page provides an overview of the concept and offers resources for creating and sustaining a CoP.

DOMAIN

The domain is the area of knowledge or skill that the community is focused on. It is the shared body of knowledge that the community members bring to the table. The domain is the foundation of the community and is what gives it its purpose and identity. The domain is also the source of the community's learning and growth. The domain is the shared body of knowledge that the community members bring to the table. The domain is the foundation of the community and is what gives it its purpose and identity. The domain is also the source of the community's learning and growth.

COMMUNITY

The community is the group of people who share the domain and are committed to learning and growth together. The community is the heart of the CoP and is what gives it its life and energy. The community is the group of people who share the domain and are committed to learning and growth together. The community is the heart of the CoP and is what gives it its life and energy.

PRACTICE

The practice is the shared body of knowledge and skills that the community members use to learn and grow. The practice is the shared body of knowledge and skills that the community members use to learn and grow. The practice is the shared body of knowledge and skills that the community members use to learn and grow.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Online communities of practice (CoP) are a type of CoP that exists in a virtual space. They are a type of CoP that exists in a virtual space. They are a type of CoP that exists in a virtual space.

Doing Life Together

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Doing life together as a faith community is no longer a goal but an attainable practice that continues to evolve to meet the needs of its members. New members are motivated and mentored by existing members. Knowledge and sharing become the primary focus and all members are able to participate. Whether a person sees themselves on the margins or in the core, they all have a place within the community to add value.

It is evident that we cannot have discipleship without community. The New Testament provides evidence as to the communal nature of discipleship. Hebrews 10:24-25 spurs us to love one another, serve each other and never forsake meeting together. The New Testament view of discipleship depicts a collective perspective of faith one that involves a daily sharing of life together.

"Spiritual fellowship involves mutual commitment and responsibility. We must commit ourselves to faithfulness in getting together, openness and honesty with one another, and confidentiality in what is shared. We must assume the responsibility to encourage, admonish, and pray for one another. Spiritual fellowship means that we 'stretch out' for one another, having a mutual responsibility for each other's welfare. This does not mean that we transfer the responsibility for our Christian walk to another person or that we assume his but rather that we help each other through encouragement and accountability."

- Jeff Bridges, True Community

"Because the church is a body grounded in a context and social construction of reality, it always reflects and sacrosanct values that have yet to be fully processed and comprehended."

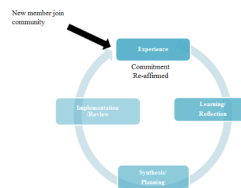
- The Very Reverend Dr. Marilyn Peroy, Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology

Cycle of praxis provides a working model to give a voice to how we continue the great commission in the 21st century. We must continue to evolve and grow in our understanding of faith and community. Learning and experience are not inseparable.

Outlasting new disciples through community allows the community to continue to thrive. In combination with current ministry methods online communities of praxis and cycle of praxis lend themselves to a present and prophetic view of rediscovering community.

In this new cycle of praxis, experience focuses on the daily life of each practitioner and how they practice their faith in communion with their family, workplace and church community. Membership or discipleship is not the goal but the outcome of the practice. The more participation and commitment is involved the more growth and maturity take place.

Furthermore, this increase of competency, trust, and quality engagement will continue to support the connection of the members in online and offline practices. Every iteration cycle allows for new people with a shared domain to enter into the community as well as existing members can renew their commitment to this communal learning process.



Experience

Experiences related to the practices that incorporate faith and spiritual practices that support their Christian (shared) values.

Learning/Reflection

Learning & Reflection is communion with faith community allows for space for tough questions and questions based on experience in contribution to the community. It is also the place where trust continues to grow as they witness members who they have shared with in experience also become vulnerable to learning and reflection.

Synthesis/Planning

Synthesis and Planning would allow for members to feel related as all members contribute to the analysis and new insights that will support further growth and connection.

Implementation/Review

Implementation & Review is an opportunity for new members to see that change and transformation in action. It gives space for the experiential nature of living out our faith in community. It opens its door for new experiences which will engage and encourage new members into the community.

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Community Rediscovered

Community Rediscovered

In a digital landscape of social media, the church has found a new way to connect. Through online communities, the church is rediscovering its mission and vision. This is a time of great opportunity for the church to reach new people and to grow in its understanding of faith and community.

The church has found a new way to connect. Through online communities, the church is rediscovering its mission and vision. This is a time of great opportunity for the church to reach new people and to grow in its understanding of faith and community.

Meet Pastor Joy

Pastor Joy is a member of the church in the city of New York. She is a woman of faith and a woman of action. She is a woman who is committed to the church and to the community. She is a woman who is committed to the church and to the community.

Pastor Joy is a member of the church in the city of New York. She is a woman of faith and a woman of action. She is a woman who is committed to the church and to the community. She is a woman who is committed to the church and to the community.

Nice members are added to experience and shared with members who are committed to the church and to the community. This is a time of great opportunity for the church to reach new people and to grow in its understanding of faith and community.

In this time of great opportunity, the church is rediscovering its mission and vision. This is a time of great opportunity for the church to reach new people and to grow in its understanding of faith and community.

Meet Chris and Anna

Chris and Anna are a young couple who are committed to the church and to the community. They are a couple who are committed to the church and to the community. They are a couple who are committed to the church and to the community.

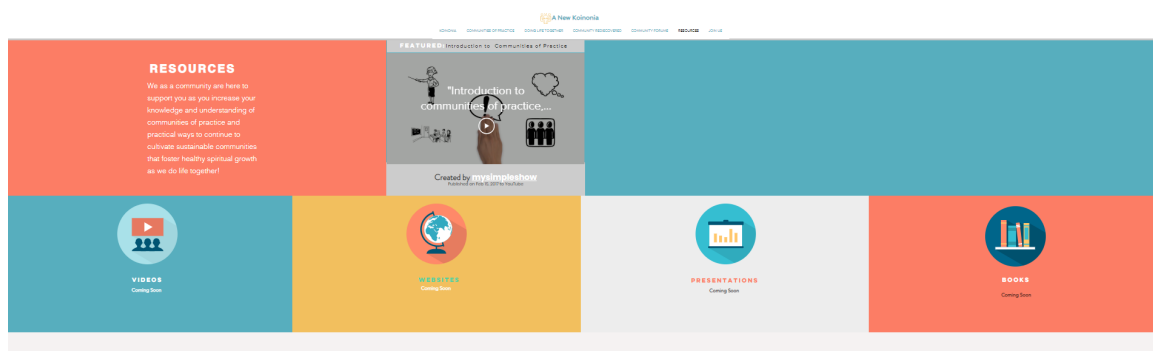
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Resources



VIDEO SCRIPT

The Problem (1-3) 2 minutes

Scene 1: In America there has been an increase of people who identify as Christians, detaching and disconnecting themselves from engaging in traditional forms of church community.¹⁸³ In 2012, The National Congregation Study reported over **80%** of the congregations surveyed showed less than **250 people** participating on a regular basis. In a 2014 Pew study, out of **35,071** Americans surveyed, only **36%** attended church on a weekly basis and **33%** attended church once or twice a month.

Scene 2: Many American church leaders are challenged by this trending decline and are compelled to seek out new opportunities and methods to support fostering meaningful community and faithful discipleship. The 21st century church sits in the crux of a paradigm shift. The shift is being driven by our need to evolve in the manner and methods used to maintain fellowship among believers and with those who are seeking community among believers. The unfortunate reality is that our places of worship and our understanding of what it means to have fellowship with another have presented both a challenge and an opportunity.

Scenes 4-6: As the world continues to bring new, innovative ideas, people are finding new ways to connect with one another. The ability to physically travel within short periods of time has led to the sprawl and dispersal of what was once the “local

¹⁸³ “State of the Church, 2016”.

community.” People do not need to live within the community to be a part of the community. What is now deemed as the local community has taken on a nuanced definition as it relates to how people identify, connect and grow with others.

However, considering all of the innovation and evolution of community formation, what has not changed is the human desire for community. Fellowship and community are a part of the human condition. Within the creation narrative it is evident that communion with God and others was foundational to God’s purpose and divine plan for humanity. Jeremy Oddy, who undertook a theological study of *koinōnia* in the local church writes that “the **contemporary hunger for community** ought, on the face of it, to **present** to the church with a major **opportunity**, for the church embodies the promise of the renewal of man in communion with God and his neighbor.”¹⁸⁴

The importance of community in the mission of the church (7-11) 2 minutes

Fellowship is at the core of the mission of the church. George Panikulam in *Koinonia in the New Testament: a dynamic expression of Christian life* affirms that “the wealth and richness of the NT *koinōnia* emerges from the fact that the person of Jesus Christ stands at the centre of man’s fellowship with God and man’s fellowship with his fellow man.”¹⁸⁵

Jeremy Oddy asserts “Fellowship with the triune God, then, is the source from which fellowship among Christians springs; and fellowship with God is the end to which

¹⁸⁴ Oddy, 4.

¹⁸⁵ Panikulam, 6.

Christian fellowship is a means.”¹⁸⁶ He goes on to state that “fellowship of Christians is an integral part of the mission of the church. As the church lives the life of Christ in the world, it shows a fellowship that is uniquely its own. This fellowship ... is a feature that attracts to Christ and witness of the Christian experience. Consequently, mission would fall flat without fellowship. Thus, fellowship is the source of mission.”¹⁸⁷

Fellowship in Christian life is both vertical in our relation to our triune God and horizontal in our relation to one another. Our fellowship is to be with believers and is intended to foster and shape our spiritual formation. The community of believers is not a static collection of individuals but a dynamic and flourishing community. This community provides the framework for how discipleship is fostered and established.

Spiritual fellowship involves mutual commitment and responsibility. We must commit ourselves to faithfulness in getting together, openness and honesty with one another, and confidentiality in what is shared. We must assume the responsibility to encourage, admonish, and pray for one another. Spiritual fellowship means that we “watch out” for one another, feeling a mutual responsibility for each other’s welfare. This does not mean that we transfer the responsibility for our Christian walk to another person or that we assume his but rather that we help each other through encouragement and accountability.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Oddy, 10.

¹⁸⁷ Oddy, 28.

¹⁸⁸ Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), kindle loc. 816.

Introduce CoPs (12-17) 2 minutes

One way in which we as the church can expand our connection with one another and those on the margins is through incorporating communities of practice.

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”¹⁸⁹ The conceptual framework of communities of practice can foster community and discipleship within small to medium sized American church communities. Communities of Practice have become a fundamental theoretical framework that is based upon an established domain, community and practice. This framework has been used in both the educational and public sector (government):

- (Screen 13).Domain is about “creating common identity, meaning, purpose & value. It inspires participation and mutual exploration.”
- (Screen 14) Community creates social fabric of learning, fosters mutual respect and trust. It spurs a willingness to share, ask, listen be vulnerable and courageous.”
- (Screen 15) Practice “creates domain-based knowledge the community develops, shares & maintains—frameworks, tools, ideas, stories, documentation, etc.

This framework extends beyond local communities to expanding them into global ones- (Screens 16-17)

Etienne Wenger educational theorist, and practitioner of Communities of Practice stated “Communities of practice should not be reduced to purely instrumental purposes. They are about knowing, but also about being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human.”¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, OCoPs “Practice is, first

¹⁸⁹ Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner.

¹⁹⁰ Wenger, *Communities of Practice*, 134.

and foremost, a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful.”¹⁹¹ “Yet, whatever discourses we use to define what knowledge is, our communities of practice are a context of mutual engagement where these discourses can touch our experience and thus be given new life. In this regard, knowing in practice involves an interaction between the local and the global.”¹⁹²

Conclusion (18-20) 2minutes

The 21st century church, in comparison to the early church, sits in the crux of a paradigm shift. The shift is being driven by our need to evolve in the manner and methods used to maintain fellowship among believers and with those who are seeking community among believers. We, as believers in the 21st century, are positioned to participate in a renewed, sustainable, and faithful community. It is pivotal that we understand the importance of community in the life of the Church and continue to press forward as bearer of the kingdom that is here and yet to come

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹² Ibid., 141.

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