

Creating Strong(er) Community **Eric Geiger**

When the New England Patriots won their first Super Bowl in 2002 against the St. Louis Rams, they were huge underdogs. The Rams were the ones with the high-powered offense racking up points on a weekly basis against their opponents. The Patriots, many believed, were just lucky to be in the game.

As the Super Bowl began, each team was asked to choose either their offense or defense to be introduced. Having your name announced at the Super Bowl in front of millions of fans is the moment kids dream of while playing ball in streets or empty lots.

As expected, the Rams chose their offensive starters to be introduced. And one by one each player ran unto the field to the sound of his own name. Some jogged slowly, savoring the moment. Others danced through the tunnel of cheerleaders.

The Patriots' introduction followed. And their introduction was very different from that of the Rams. ESPN commentator Trey Wingo called it "the coolest thing I have ever seen in 36 years of Super Bowl history." The crowd at the game and the viewing audience spread throughout thousands of Super Bowl parties across the Country heard...

"And choosing to be introduced as a team, the New England Patriots."

The Patriots ran unto the field as one. Not as a group of individuals wearing the same uniform, but as one team rallying passionately around a singular mission. Guys gave up the opportunity to have their names broadcast to millions of viewers for the opportunity to display their unity.

The fierce unity of the Patriot's team was very powerful as they unleashed their collective energy on a common goal. And the unity of the team was inspiring. People stood in awe as the team ran unto the field as one. Fans cried. Announcers were rendered speechless.

Church Leaders' Longing for Unity

One is truly powerful. Unity is always attractive. And church leaders long to unite people in relationships, to facilitate deep and meaningful connection in their

churches, to move people to living in biblical community. You have asked or heard the questions:

- How do you help people form relationships so that they are attached to the church?
- How do you get people to connect beyond the worship service?
- What do you do with people in small groups?
- How can we make the community deeper in our groups?

All the questions reveal the longing church leaders have to create strong (or stronger) community in their congregations.

The longing is pure because God created people to live in community. Community is embedded in the Christian faith. We see community at the beginning of our story. God, as a triune yet one God, created humanity -- "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." (Genesis 1:26) God quickly grew dissatisfied with man being alone, so He created a helper that would be suitable for him (Genesis 2:18). And though sin's entrance into our world distorted everything, the longing for unity remains.

While people long for unity, God requires it from His people, from His church. His desire for believers, for His church, is that we would be one. And He desires our unity, our oneness, to be deeper and greater than any football team. In the hours leading up to His arrest, Jesus begged the Father for our unity. Jesus' famous high priestly prayer took place between the moments of His last supper with His disciples and the moment of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He prayed, "I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

Jesus' prayer is a huge statement of His dream and vision for those of us who claim to be His followers. He desires for His people to be as unified as He and the Father. The unity between the Father and Son is not casual or surface. They are truly one. And God desires for His oneness to be reflected in our relationships. From a theological vantage point, our oneness reflects the character of our God. Jesus' prayer gives greater meaning to the metaphors used in Scripture that paint the picture that the Church is His body and a family.

From a missiological standpoint, our unity is a statement of the gospel in our culture. As the displayed unity of the Patriot football team was an awe-inspiring moment, the unity of the body of Christ grabs the attention of our culture for

Jesus prayed that the world would know Christ was sent through His follower's unity. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus shared that all men would know we are His by the love we have for one another (John 13:35). We are recognized as His not by our cool bands, our vision statements, our traditional or modern architecture, or even our evangelistic zeal. We are known as His by our unity.

Broken Buzzwords

Community is foundational to who we are and who God is calling us to be. Thus ministry leaders who internalize Jesus' prayer for unity seek to foster true community in their ministries. We want our people to be the church, not merely come to church.

So we preach and teach about oneness, about community, about living in interdependent relationships with other believers. We strategize and think about creating a culture that encourages community (such as *Sticky Church* by Larry Osborne). We focus on systems that effectively move people toward places of relational connection and attachment (such as *Activate* by Nelson Searcy).

But as we long to foster community, we must realize that many of the buzzwords we use are broken. And we must move beyond the buzzwords to helping people experience the unity Jesus prayed for.

While I love the word "community" because of its basic meaning, the word is often used to describe anything a church or ministry does. It is a cooler word for "fellowship" because my generation observed the phrase "food, fun, and fellowship" tagged to countless lame events the church offered and insisted on a new word. I am grateful for the word and continue to use it, but since "community" has been used to describe anything and everything, sadly it often describes nothing. Community must be more than a nebulous term casually placed on anything a ministry offers. In short, leaders must not only cast a vision for community, but must also define the values of community in a given context.

And while I love the word "organic" because I love the thought of ministry leaders creating such a healthy culture that biblical community just happens organically as a result of the thriving and inspirational environment, "organic" is often used to describe anything that is unintentional as in, "Uh. Hmmm. Uh. It just sort of happens. Organically." *Organic* growth must be the result of a healthy culture created by sound teaching and visionary leadership and not a spiritual tag we apply to all things done haphazardly.

Common Unity

As I speak and consult with church leaders, many are searching for best practices on moving their people from places of observation in large group settings to places of deep participation and relational attachment in small group settings. To places of true unity, no matter what buzzword is employed. While the names of these relational environments vary (small groups, community groups, Sunday School, Adult Bible Fellowships, etc.), the desire expressed by leaders is very similar; *we want to help people live the reality of what Jesus prayed for.*

As we seek to foster community, we must ask ourselves, what are we uniting our people around? As we build systems to attach people, what exactly are we attaching them to? As we desire to foster an environment where community happens, what values do we articulate as essential in community?

We must remember that community literally means *common unity*; therefore, a community is a group of people united around a common belief system, set of values, and mission. This is the essence of Paul's challenge to be "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and in purpose." (Philippians 2:2) **The strength of our community will only be as strong as the strength of what we unite people around.**

Since unity flows from a theological understanding (*Make them one as You and I are one*) and a missiological commitment (*that the world will know*), we must build community around these two values (theology and mission). Since unity is most strong when fostered around values that are rock solid, our unity must be built on the common commitment to the character of God and His mission. Practically speaking, people must be united around Scripture and around mission.

Or we can seek to unite people around anything. And call it community. And be OK with whatever people unite around because, well, it is happening "organically." If so, we will foster weak community because of a shaky set of common beliefs, values, and mission. And we will look with envy at football teams whose values are stronger than the shallow and weak ones we hold up for our people.

So as you seek to build strong or stronger community, prayerfully consider uniting people around Scripture and mission.

1) Common Unity Around the Scripture

In the same prayer where Jesus pleads with the Father for our unity, He also prays for His disciples to be made holy through the Word. "Sanctify them by your truth; your word is truth." (John 17:17) Our oneness and our holiness are related. When sin increases (gossip, pride, etc.) our community suffers. As we are made holy, our community deepens (love, patience, kindness, goodness, etc). Uniting people around the Scripture is essential for the health of our community.

Tim Keller in his work, *Reason for God*, masterfully explains that a completely inclusive community is an illusion. He articulates that any strong community must hold to a set of values that defines the community. Scripture must define our community, and we must hold Scripture as the common ground for our unity. Since the depth of our oneness is related to the strength of our shared values, we must unite people around the Scripture. We must build people around the holy text that endures forever (I Peter 1:25), the living and active Word of God (Hebrews 4:12), His Word that when hidden in our hearts causes us not to sin against our God (Psalm 119:11), and that is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16)

Ministries that attach people without some type of expression of biblical study are creating too weak an attachment. And too shallow a community.

How do you help your groups unite around Scripture?

Some common approaches to helping groups unite around Scripture

1. Curriculum via a publisher

Churches provide biblically based curriculum to small groups that they purchase from a publishing house . Often a "taxonomy" of learning is followed from the publisher which seeks to engage groups in the whole counsel of Scripture, theology, practical issues, etc.

Greatest advantage: A thought-out "taxonomy" of learning

Greatest disadvantage: Groups may not feel the current offering is relevant

2. Self-selected studies (self-selected)

Churches provide lists of approved curriculum to groups and groups self-select what they would like to study.

Greatest advantage: Groups desire to study what they are studying

Greatest disadvantage: The diet of study may become narrow.

3. DVD curriculum

Churches provide DVD teaching from trusted ministries, churches, or they record their own. The leader becomes a facilitator and not a teacher.

Greatest advantage: Leaders are freed up to shepherd relationally, more people are able to lead groups, and content is consistent.

Greatest disadvantage: Those with gift of teaching may become frustrated

4. Discussion Questions Based on Weekend Teaching

Churches provide discussion questions written by their people based on the weekend messages (see Sticky Church by Osborne). The leaders discuss in depth the message and help those in the group make personal application

Greatest advantage: The reinforcement and the application from the weekend teaching creates synergy in learning.

Greatest disadvantage: If there is an average leader in a group, the discussion may not be substantial as there is little additional content.

2) Common Unity Around Mission

Groups meeting together must not be the end result. *True community results in mission.* True community will nudge Christ followers to mission because just as Jesus was sent into this world, He has sent us into the world. (John 17:18) Movement to small groups (or the equivalent) cannot be the endgame for us as church and ministry leaders. We have a greater and higher calling than placing people in relational holding tanks and claiming ministry success. Mission must be deeply embedded into our definition of community.

Jesus told a short story to paint a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32)

The Kingdom of Heaven started small with Jesus and His unpolished group of disciples. The movement has grown very large, but according to Jesus – the Kingdom is not large for the sake of being large. But *so that the birds of the air may come perch in its branches.*

The phrase "so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches" took Jesus' disciples back to several Old Testament passages describing earthly kingdoms that were so powerful and fruitful that people outside of those kingdoms benefited from them. For example, the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, had a dream where he saw a tall tree standing (Daniel 4). In the dream the tree was large enough that everyone in the whole earth could see it. There was a lot of fruit on the tree, enough for everyone to eat. *And the birds of heaven perched in its branches.* Nebuchadnezzar asked Daniel to interpret his dream. Daniel told the king of Babylon, "You are that tree." David was saying to the king, *your kingdom, the Babylonian kingdom, is so fruitful and so influential that others are impacted by your influence. Nations are finding comfort, security, and food in the tree that is your kingdom because Babylon brings culture, education, architecture, prosperity, and peace to others. The birds of the air come and perch in your kingdom's branches.*

Jesus' disciples also knew the story of the Assyrian kingdom, a kingdom that at one time was so strong that other nations were impacted and influenced by the Assyrians. The Assyrian kingdom was so influential that "all the birds of the air nested in its boughs." (Ezekiel 31:6)

Jesus' Kingdom had a small start, but it has grown into a large tree so that something remarkable would occur. So the culture around us would benefit from

our existence. So the world in which we are planted will come and perch in our branches.

The challenge for us is clear – those outside our Kingdom should benefit from our community. Our common unity must be the mission of God – to exist for those who are not yet in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our common unity must be a deep passion to serve those outside the Kingdom, to live in such a way that those without the same beliefs and values as us would still be influenced by the existence of our community. Practically speaking, small groups (or the equivalent name) must be challenged and unleashed to serve people within the culture.

And as we unite people around mission, not only do those outside of God's Kingdom benefit, but also the level of our unity is simultaneously strengthened. When people are united around mission, the level of connection increases exponentially. Neighborhoods are never closer in South Florida than immediately before a hurricane when everyone is working *together* to be prepared. Sports teams, such as the Patriots, often display great unity because they fight to win *together*.

**Uniting Groups on a Mission
Three Practical Suggestions (choose one initially)**

- 1) Challenge groups to go on a global mission trip together
- 2) Ask groups to adopt a local organization (school, fire station, business, etc.) and regularly serve that organization through simple acts of service.
- 3) Match groups to a local mission organization and have those groups regularly serve local mission organizations your church believes in. (homeless ministry, women's shelters, tutoring programs, etc)

Bottom line, to foster community that reflects the heart of Jesus' prayer, we must unite people around Scripture and mission. Those must be the rallying points of our common unity. As we do, we will move closer to being one as Jesus and the Father are one. And the world will see our unity and realize that we belong to God.

And choosing to be introduced as a team...