

COMMUNITY

TAKING YOUR SMALL GROUP OFF LIFE SUPPORT



BRAD HOUSE
FOREWORD BY MARK DRISCOLL

Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Patrick Mahoney of The Mahoney Design Team

Cover image: Patrick Mahoney

First printing 2011

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-2306-9

ISBN-10: 1-4335-2306-X

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2315-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2316-8

EPub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2317-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

House, Brad, 1976–

Community : taking your small group off life support / Brad House ; foreword by Mark Driscoll.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2306-9 (tp)

1. Church group work. 2. Small groups—Religious aspects—Christianity.

I. Title.

BV652.2.H68 2011

253'.7—dc22

2011014458

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11			
14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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DIAGNOSIS: AN INTRODUCTION

CRITICAL CONDITION

Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthian church with these words:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.¹

These words are amazing because the bulk of the letter that follows is Paul rebuking and correcting these “saints” for their sin, lack of knowledge, and, ultimately, their poor witness of the gospel through which they were saved. In this letter we can see Paul’s love and concern for the church, culminating in his charge to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.”² He wants to see their lives transformed so that the work of the Lord can be accomplished. Paul is concerned with the legacy of the church in Corinth. He is not satisfied with them merely hearing or knowing the gospel. But it is not that Paul wants the church to *do more*. He wants them to *be more*. I am convinced that he is not disappointed with the church as much as he desires to see them live abundant lives that reflect what Jesus has already done.³

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Fast-forward to the church today. What do you think Paul would write to us? Do you think if he sat in on a typical small group meeting he would be satisfied with the state of the church? Would he see us living as one body with each part working in harmony for the glory of God in all things?

Sadly, community within the church today is hemorrhaging. Giving in to the pressures of our culture to do more and fill every gap with entertainment has pushed community to the margins. We don't have time to invest in people and relationships. Our attention spans have dwindled to two-minute sound bites on YouTube. We can only invest 140 characters in our relationships.

The answer to such social fragmentation can be found in small groups. Yet small groups, at least in the traditional way we envision them, are not solidifying community as we thought. As we will discuss in chapter 2, one study indicates that less than 18 percent of young evangelicals ages eighteen to twenty-three participate in a small group, Bible study, or prayer group that is sponsored by their local churches. This disconnection is concerning. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12 that we need every member of the body to participate in the life of the church, and when one member suffers the whole body suffers. If that is the case, what happens when 82 percent of the body is completely missing?

Several years ago, a longtime leader came up to me one day and told me that he was done. He just couldn't lead a group any longer. He said that it was draining him of energy and time and, in his words, "sucking the life out of [him]." Surprised, I asked him why it was so draining. He proceeded to describe a typical small group meeting: three hours, lots of preparations for hosting and the Bible study, awkward circles—you know the drill. I asked him what it would look like for that group to be life giving, and he painted a gripping picture of a Christ-centered community. When I asked him why he didn't lead his group to that picture, he replied that he didn't know he could.

If we are going to take our groups off life support, we are going to need permission to reimagine what gospel-centered community looks like. We will not change the preconceived view of groups by

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making participation a requirement for membership or by changing the names of our programs from “ministries” to “groups.” Small groups will thrive when they become the place where we experience life-giving transformation.

I, like Paul and many others, am concerned with the legacy of the church. That is why I wrote this book. The number of seats we fill will not determine the legacy of our churches. The depth to which the gospel penetrates those lives will determine our legacy. I have no qualms about large churches so long as they are committed to seeing the gospel transform the people in them. I want to see as many lives as possible saved and transformed by Jesus. My heart and conviction is that we can, and will, see lives transformed through authentic, gospel-centered community that is inspired by the power and wonder of God.

We cannot be content with the status quo of today’s church. Foundational to this work is the conviction that we were created for more, we have been redeemed for more, and we are empowered for more. This does not mean that we need to do more, but that we *are* more through the reconciling work of Jesus.

In this book, I join the chorus of leaders calling the sleeping church to wake up and “abound in the work of the Lord” because his grace has made it possible. I endeavor to affirm community as a gift of God’s grace for the purpose of exalting the Son and making him known. In other words, community is not about us; it is about God. Community is an instrument of worship, a weapon against sin, and a tool for evangelism—all for the exaltation of Jesus.

A lot must change for this to become reality. In his book *Don’t Waste Your Life* and his sermon series on the book of Romans, John Piper calls for having a wartime mentality when it comes to the Christian life.⁴ We are fighting for the glory of God and the souls of our neighbors, who are casualties in the fray. To paraphrase *Don’t Waste Your Life*, the church has been lulled into believing that we are in a time of peace. We often live lives of comfort, nonchalantly going about our business as if we are safe from the dangers of war. Yet Scripture tells us that Satan prowls around like a lion waiting to

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devour us.⁵ Peter declares that sin is waging war against our souls.⁶ Paul encourages us to fight the good fight and hold firmly to the faith as if someone were trying to rip it from us.⁷ This does not sound like peace. These verses and many others are brilliantly prophetic of the reality in which we live. Every day we see the casualties of this war. That is, if our eyes are open. The effects of sin are ravaging our friends and neighbors, not to mention the church itself. The question is, Are we going to fight?

As I survey the landscape of the church today, especially as I get behind the curtain and look at how people actually live their lives, I see a church that has little signs of life. We appear to be breathing as we gather for worship services and run our programs, but oftentimes we are merely surviving rather than living life abundantly. Jesus tells us that we must lose our lives if we want to save them. Life should be defined as the passionate pursuit of God. It should be marked by a hatred of sin in the believer's life and an unquenchable desire for the fame of Jesus, taking every opportunity to share the gospel with a fallen world. If that is life, how are your vital signs? Can you find a pulse in the community of your church?

We have tried everything to prop up community within the church in hopes that it will spring back to life. We inject it with mission statements as if a shot of adrenaline will get things started. This leads to short bursts of excitement that fade just as quickly. We build programs to relieve the pressure and weight of being in community, hoping that if we can breathe for our people, then they will be more apt to participate. Unfortunately, the opposite happens, and they become dependent on feeding tubes and iron lungs.

In the end we may be able to sustain a pulse, but it is hard to call it life. It is artificial and plastic. People gather in small groups for discussions, but lives are not transformed by the gospel. Real life begets more life. It changes lives and transforms cities. I want us to have that kind of life. That is the life that is promised through Christ. That is the life that we receive from God. When Jesus said that he came that we might live life abundantly, this is what he was talking about—life that is empowered by the Spirit, exalts the Son, and glorifies the Father.

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Artificial life is static, tethered to a system or program that sustains it. I want our churches to experience life off of the machines, life that is actively responding to the grace that has been poured out on us. It is my prayer that the ideas in this book will help you to breathe life back into community in a way that will not only rally the church to action, but also give your people a means of building a strategy to advance the kingdom in the context of where they live.

DEFINING TERMS

COMMUNITY GROUP

You will hear this term frequently. *Community group* refers to the scattered church grouping that may be known more commonly by the moniker *small group*. You may call yours care groups, missional communities, life groups, or fried chicken. The point is that we are generally talking about the same small unit of community within the greater body of the church. Now, although I suggest that the name is not the point, I should mention that nomenclature is significant. The name you choose could have an inspirational or limiting effect on the expression of that community. Care groups, for example, have a hard time engaging missionally in culture because when a person joins a care group, he or she expects to be cared for, not to be challenged to evangelize. On the other hand, missional communities will theoretically have the opposite dilemma. With that said, *community groups* is not the perfect name or the only name for such communities, but it has served us well at Mars Hill Church, and I will use it in the remainder of this book.

CHURCH

I will borrow the definition of *church* from Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears in *Vintage Church*:

The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and

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Communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God's glory and their joy.⁸

Important in this definition is the truth that the church is a community of God's people gathered for his mission. Therefore, when I speak of the church in the following chapters, I am referring to the body of Christ, not an organization, the leadership apart from the body, or an abstraction. We are talking about flesh and blood, you and me.

MISSION

Buzzword of buzzwords in the church today, *mission* is still too valuable a concept to abandon. I will, however, take the time to define a broad definition of it. Although there may be specific nuances of the mission to which God has called your church, it must include the making and maturing of disciples. That is to say that the mission is to glorify God by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus for the sake of gathering God's people to him, and to teach and grow them in their knowledge and love of Christ. Jesus put it this way, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."⁹ Therefore, when I speak of owning or living out the mission, it should be understood in these terms.

HEALTH PLAN

It has become cliché for a book on community groups to state that it is not advocating a program, but I will say it anyway. I am not advocating a new program. What this book is about is shaking the Etch A Sketch of what community groups are and how they function in the church. It seeks to expand the idea of what community groups could accomplish for the kingdom of God. In doing this, I want to bring together theology and ministry philosophy with practical application and strategy that is worked out with effectiveness. To accomplish this, the book is separated into three sections.

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THE FOUNDATION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LIFE

Life in our community groups starts with building on the right foundation. The first section seeks to define these foundational principles of community. Starting with a theological background of what community is and God's purpose through it, we will address the motivation behind having community groups in your church and why they are essential. This section will address the purpose and need for community groups within the church and how they work together with other functions of the church, such as preaching and worship, to produce transformation in the lives of disciples. This section will also address the general state of our churches with regard to community and ownership within the body that is hamstringing the local church. We have been remiss, as the church, in creating systems and small group programs without anchoring them to the purposes revealed in Scripture. The purpose of this section is to challenge you to know why you are building a small group ministry before you ask the question of how.

HEALTH PLAN: REDEFINING COMMUNITY GROUPS

The second section applies the foundational principles from the first section to redefine what community is and how we employ it as a church. If we are going to rethink community, there is a great deal to blow up when it comes to the practical experience. Ironically, for "a holy nation, a people," we are comically pathetic at community.¹⁰ Sadder still is the fact that the church's offering of "real community," which the world so desperately needs, is woefully short of the sales pitch. This section will address common pitfalls in the way we experience community that render it ineffective and obligatory rather than life giving. We will address strategic ways to organize and lead the church that encourage ownership, participation, and creativity. This section will also challenge us to think differently about community groups, including their function, rhythms, and engagement with culture. We will discuss ways in which your community groups can participate in the mission and work that God has ordained for your church.

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TREATMENT: EFFECTING CHANGE IN YOUR GROUPS

Ever read the “how to draw” comic in the Sunday paper? In the first section you draw a circle. In the second section you draw two squares. Then in the last section you have a full-color drawing of the Mona Lisa. That is just plain mean. And it would be mean, or at least unfruitful, to paint a picture of a new way to experience community and not give you help in getting there. The last section will address how you get from where you are today to where you want to be in the future. We will take the time to address how change can occur on a large or small scale and give some practical examples of how you can inspire your church toward a new paradigm for community. This is not a plug-and-play way of living in community. It will require repentance, prayer, commitment, and patience. The result of living life in a way that glorifies Christ and encourages one another toward righteousness, though, will be worth it.

REDEFINED BY THE CROSS

Peter describes the church in this way:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.¹¹

I want this for the church. This is who we are in Christ because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross and through his resurrection. I want us to be a people who proclaim the excellencies of Jesus and whose conduct, through the transformation of the gospel, brings people to the cross. Imagine the effect that this would have on your city or town.

My good friend, Pastor Bill Clem, was preaching on community

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and summed up the conviction and passion I have for it. I was disappointed that he had coined the statement instead of me, but because we are in community, I like to think we said it. It went like this: “The world will not recover from the community of God’s people living lives to glorify Jesus.”¹² This statement should change the way you look at community in your church. We have the means to proclaim the kingdom of God through the same means God has always used: his people. The question is, Are we willing to count the cost, repent, and receive the blessing of community?

I love Jesus and I love his church. My prayer is that this book will be a blessing to you and your church as you rethink what it means to live in community for the glory of God. I pray that community groups would be a source of soul-satisfying life in your church. I pray that the name of Jesus will be exalted in your city through the witness of the body of Christ. I pray your city would never recover.

PART ONE

THE FOUNDATION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LIFE

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION

The purpose of this section is to lay a foundation for building a life-giving and life-sustaining community within your church. Illustrating the need for a solid foundation, Jesus said,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.¹

I want us to be a church that has the confidence of a house built on the rock. Jesus calls us to dig deep into his Word and lay a solid foundation of faithfulness. We are called to hear his words, be changed by them, and to live out of the convictions brought by the Holy Spirit. He is telling us to build our lives on the foundation of faith and obedience in him, through the living Word of Scripture.

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What an excellent foundation! Yet there are so many who build their foundations on sand rather than rock. When it comes to ministry, and community group ministries in particular, I see sloppy foundations. We can get so excited about a new innovative idea or opportunity to contextualize that we often skip this important step: build your foundation on the rock. Wind, rain, and floods will come in the form of sin, suffering, and tragedy. The question is, Will your community have the conviction to be the church when the flood comes, when Jake confesses to an addiction to porn, when Jane loses hope, when Tom loses his job?

A colleague relayed this story to me. An army friend of his was watching new recruits train on the shooting range when he noticed one young man standing at attention at the end of the range. He didn't know why the soldier was there, but now that he thought about it, there was always a soldier at attention at the end of the shooting range. He approached the officer in charge and asked why. The answer was, "That is how we have always done it." It was the protocol for firing on the range. Curious, his friend researched further. His findings were amusing. The protocol was written when officers rode horses. The young man at the end of the range was there to hold the horses' bridles so they would not get spooked from the gunshots. Though the officers no longer rode horses, the protocol was never changed, thus the lone soldier simply standing at attention at the end of the range.

It seems silly, but how many of us have never even asked why we have community groups at our churches? Having small groups at your church because of tradition or because that is what "successful" churches do is not a particularly sturdy foundation. It is like having no foundation at all and makes it fairly difficult to inspire a commitment to community.

So, before you begin building (or remodeling), let me encourage you with this: be like the wise man. Ask why before you ask how. Build your foundation before you pick out the drapes. We are so often in a hurry to fix the lack of authentic community within the church that we start building without a foundation. Jesus tells us not to be

THE FOUNDATION: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR LIFE

fools who put all our effort into building a house, picking out just the right hardwoods to accent the light in the family room, when it will all be washed away in the first storm. The goal of this section, and chapter 1 in particular, is to clearly define the foundation upon which we want to build our community groups so that they will stand up to the many storms that will come blowing through.



RE:LIT

Resurgence Literature (Re:Lit) is a ministry of the Resurgence. At www.theResurgence.com you will find free theological resources in blog, audio, video, and print forms, along with information on forthcoming conferences, to help Christians contend for and contextualize Jesus's gospel. At www.ReLit.org you will also find the full lineup of Resurgence books for sale. The elders of Mars Hill Church have generously agreed to support Resurgence and the Acts 29 Church Planting Network in an effort to serve the entire church.

FOR MORE RESOURCES

Re:Lit – www.relit.org

Resurgence – www.theResurgence.com

Re:Train – www.retrain.org

Mars Hill Church – www.marshillchurch.org

Acts 29 – www.acts29network.org

Community within the church today is hemorrhaging. Attention spans are dwindling, noise levels are increasing, and we can't seem to find time for real relationships.

The answer to such social fragmentation can be found in small groups, and yet the majority of small groups—at least in the traditional sense—are often not the intentional, transformational community we really want and need. Somehow we need to get our groups off life support and into authentic community.

Pastor Brad House helps us to re-imagine what gospel-centered community looks like and shares from his experience leading and reproducing healthy small groups. With wisdom and candor, House challenges us to think carefully about our own groups and to take steps toward cultivating communities that are able to glorify Jesus, bless one another, and participate in the mission of God.



“*Community* will inspire your small group leaders to grow and maintain healthy, Christ-centered, and mission-minded groups.”

Craig Groeschel, Senior Pastor, LifeChurch.tv; author, *WEIRD: Because Normal Isn't Working*

“An excellent book that clearly, theologically, and practically helps us to see what it means to be a biblically functioning community on mission for Jesus.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book has the power to redefine small group ministry.”

Rick Howerton, author, *Destination Community: Small-Group Ministry Manual*

BRAD HOUSE is a pastor at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, where he oversees community groups for the multi-campus church. He has been involved in community groups at Mars Hill since 2003. He and his wife, Jill, have three children.

CHRISTIAN MINISTRY / DISCIPLESHIP