

Icebreaker: New Year's Balloons

[Tami Rudkin](#) | posted 12/12/2000

Write the following incomplete sentences on small slips of paper and place them in balloons. (Duplicate as needed to make sure there is one per person.) Put the inflated balloons in the middle of your circle. On the count of 3 have your group jump up, pop a balloon, and complete the sentences in their balloon.

My hope for my job this coming year is ...

My hope for my personal relationship with God this coming year is ...

My hope for my family this coming year is ...

My hope for my church this coming year is ...

My hope for my small group this coming year is ...

Article: Community as Crucible

Exploring the cost and value of community

by [Michael Mangis](#) | posted 9/29/2009

Although the Fall has left us disconnected, God created human beings to be communal. The New Testament refers to the church as a body. Besides his lengthy passage on the Body of Christ in [1 Corinthians 12:12-27](#), Paul wrote this concise statement about the body: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom 12:4-5).

Years ago I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*. It has deeply influenced my thoughts about what the church can and can't be. Bonhoeffer pointed out that true Christian community is nothing like our fantasies and illusions of a wonderful, welcoming family. Sometimes it is like that, but more often the church is like a crucible. We have to live in proximity to people we don't like. Even if we do like them in the beginning, we will soon discover their annoying qualities.

The crucible of a community heats us up and holds us in so we can't get away. In the process it refines us, bringing our impurities to the surface where they can be skimmed away. Even the desert fathers and mothers, many of whom lived as hermits in caves, settled near each other and created the first model for the communal life of monasteries. They recognized that community is necessary for spiritual purification.

On our own we easily ignore our own sharp edges. When we live close to other people, we constantly bump up against each other, and our unfinished edges are impossible to hide. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Prov 27:17, TNIV). If we are serious about confronting our own signature sins, we should seek to be part of a community where this kind of sharpening can take place.

Ned's Boy

As a child living in a small town, I was very conscious that I was not anonymous. Once I went to the grocery store for my mother. I realized in the checkout line that I had forgotten to bring a check to pay for the groceries. I asked the checker if I could leave the groceries for a few minutes while I went home to get some money. She studied my face for a moment, then said, "You're Ned's boy, aren't you?" I confirmed that I was Ned's boy. She sent me home with the groceries and said I could bring the money back later.

I enjoy many aspects of suburban life. I have a multitude of choices for entertainment, dining and cultural activities. I even have hundreds of churches within driving distance. It would be very easy, however, to live in the suburbs and never put down roots.

Many of my patients have no friendships, even at work. They have no church community, or else they have church-hopped too many times to maintain any ties. Some go to churches with thousands of others and don't recognize another person at the worship service. They live in sprawling housing developments where every house looks like its neighbor and the average length of stay is about three years.

My wife and I have chosen to stay at the same church for the entire time we have lived in our present home. We know the neighbors on our block, Our friendships here span almost two decades. You can create community in the suburbs—if you want to and you know how. In a small town you have no choice. You would have to work hard to *not* be part of the community. Even if you isolate yourself and seldom venture outdoors, people still know who you are, and they know whom to call if they don't see any activity at your home for awhile.

I am not suggesting that communities in small rural towns are healthier or happier than communities in urban and suburban areas. What I am saying is that for most people in our culture anonymity is the default condition; community is an option. People in cities and suburbs have to *choose* to be in a community. They have to find one or start one and actively seek to be part of it. If things don't go well in that community, they can always leave it and join another one without even changing jobs or houses.

Community and Sin

What does all of this have to do with sin? Anonymity and the diffusion of responsibility create a place for sin to flourish. Sin does not thrive under accountability. While communities are not always healthy and do not always confront sin, it is difficult to combat sin in the absence of any community at all. Jesus was clear in his instructions to us: take care of each other, especially watch over the weakest and most vulnerable, do not ignore the importance of gathering together, appreciate each other's gifts, and hold each other accountable. In other words, be the church.

Christ calls us as individuals to take up our crosses and follow him. But Christ also calls us as communities to bear one another's burdens and live in harmony. The immediate response of Jesus' followers after his crucifixion was to come together. The Book of Acts follows the activities of the church learning to be the church after Jesus' resurrection. The Christian life is not only one of personal piety but also of communion. Though many of us might be called to the desert, literally or figuratively, to fast and pray, few of us are called to live there, Most of us face the more difficult task of learning to live with and love our neighbors.

Christian community should be the place where we learn to be more like Christ; where we are transformed into his image from the inside out. Instead many churches have become places where we learn to polish our own images. The arrangement is upside down. My personal piety should draw me toward Christ; the church should help me integrate and deepen my transformation. Instead, churches are sometimes transformed into sparkling store windows designed to draw people in and keep them entertained and happy with the product. Certainly the church should be a winsome and welcoming presence in our world. There should be a balance between sinking into sullenness and propping up superficial cheerfulness.

Like-Minded People

Every Christian who seeks to grow in righteousness needs a community to foster that growth. *Community* does not always mean *congregation*. Ideally the body of believers with whom we worship will help us practice penitent self-examination. Even if they do not, we can search out a group of like-minded people who hunger for a more radical kind of honesty. For several decades the small group movement has opened opportunities for Christians to have something like what first-century Christians enjoyed: small, intimate families of believers who support and sustain each other in Christian formation.

For me, two different types of spiritual formation groups stand out as exceptional models. One is Renovaré, the organization established and guided by Richard Foster, which seeks to introduce the

contemporary church to the writings and practices of the church throughout its earlier history. The other is the spiritual direction group, introduced by the Shalem Institute.

In *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small-Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*, Renovaré provides a practical and profound introduction to the spiritual life. Renovaré promotes the premise that the Christian spiritual life can be divided into six streams modeled after the life of Jesus and the key traditions of church history. The six streams of tradition are the Contemplative, the Holiness, the Charismatic, the Social Justice, the Evangelical and the Incarnational. In the next chapter we will more fully explore the streams.

My wife and I and several other people started a small group using *A Spiritual Formation Workbook* when it was first published. The early stages of a group are always important for setting the tone. Groups are usually made up of a mix of temperaments. Some people want intense intimacy, some people want light socializing, some people want to read and study something together, some people want to spend much time praying. The Renovaré model strikes a wonderful balance of different needs and desires. It helps group members foster intimacy with questions and discussion. The workbook provides practical ways for believers to grow in spiritual formation and ways they can support and hold each other accountable in spiritual growth.

The small group that we started more than a decade ago is still going. It is unreasonable to expect every small group to turn into this kind of community, but when it happens, it is a blessing. Our group has gone through changes as some people have moved away and others have joined. We have seen each other through the deaths of seven parents, and we have celebrated several children's weddings. Twice over the years we have returned to the book that helped us get started and found that it renewed our thinking. We go through dry periods when we are too busy to meet regularly, and we have arguments about what our group should be doing. Those are all elements which make up a community.

The other type of group that I have found exciting is the spiritual direction group, introduced by the Shalem Institute. In Rose Mary Dougherty's book *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*, she presents a model of prayerful groups focused on periods of silent listening to God on each other's behalf. These groups are not social gatherings but are focused intensely on discerning God's still, small voice in the confusion of daily living. They go beyond the role of individual spiritual direction to add the discerning ears of several people in the group rather than just one director. My wife and I have taught the method of this group in several contexts, and students have gone on to establish groups of their own. The groups can be ongoing or they can meet for a specified period of time, such as six months, before coming to an end.

My wife and I were part of this type of group spiritual direction for several years. Like our spiritual formation group, our spiritual direction group became a community. There we sometimes confronted each other and talked about our own personal struggles with sin. The difference was that the spiritual direction group was less socially involved with each other and more focused on prayer and discernment. Our group could sometimes pray silently together for hours. There is something intimate and powerful about sitting together in prayerful silence. It was wonderful to be together in Christ's presence without having to talk, sing or pray out loud.

Both the spiritual direction group and the spiritual formation group provided a place to talk honestly and vulnerably about our relationship with God. By participating in each other's spiritual lives, each of us saw other ways of relating to God, and we enjoyed the privilege of seeing God at work in each other. We could be imperfect together. Several of us live far from our families, so we could be family to each other. Over the years conflicts, tensions and annoyances arose. One group is still going; the other came to a natural point where it was time to end. I consider myself blessed to have had these two groups in my life. Both have been instrumental in my spiritual growth.

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