



Bits & Pieces

... from Gerrit Gustafson

Battle Buddies

Walk down any busy sidewalk. Everybody looks fairly normal, right?

But, according to [a recent Cigna study](#), every other person you see (58%) is experiencing significant loneliness. And for any that you see that are between 18 and 24 years old, it's an astonishing 4 out of 5 (79%)!

You would think with all of our "connectedness" - email, cell phones, social media - we wouldn't have a problem with loneliness. But we do.

Most churches offer sermons, but little conversation; truth, but minimal community. Sitting in our congregations and listening to sermons generally doesn't scratch the loneliness itch. Smaller groups of 15 to 25 people help, but generally, if you were inwardly troubled with something personal, you likely wouldn't disclose it even to that number.

It seems there needs to be an even *smaller-than-small* group where trust is high and genuine honesty is more natural.

Education, business and the military use these tiny groups to provide encouragement, integration and protection. In the military these smaller units are called [battle buddies](#) (thus the picture above).

How Wesley Did It

In the 18th century, John Wesley organized the revived believers in England and the US into *Societies*, *Classes* and *Bands*. *Societies* were similar to our congregations, *Classes*, similar to our small groups, and *Bands* were groups of 3 to 5 honest friends where confession of sin was common. ([Click here](#) for an excellent resource about how *bands* are being employed today.)

Regarding confession, Catholics have the practice of confessing to priests. And though most Protestants would claim that they go directly to God to confess our sins - and generally most Protestant services have a time of silent prayer for confession of sin and collective absolution -

Scripture points out that we also need to confess to others. “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). While never ceasing to confess our sins to God in private, we should learn the habit of confessing our sins to one another, just as the Scriptures command. These smaller-than-small fellowship circles can provide a setting for that kind of transparency and the healing that results.

I believe the formation of these high-trust fellowship hubs is the Church’s best chance of addressing the loneliness epidemic that is threatening both the church and our society today.

Consider This

Look around among your Christian friends and prayerfully think of two others that you trust, and who might have the same interest as you to move beyond *casual fellowship* into *purposeful fellowship*. You and two others. Men with men; women with women.

Ideally the meetings should be face to face, but it’s certainly doable to meet virtually. Agree on how frequently you meet, but I would recommend at least once a month.

Ask them to consider a trial period of six months to meet around a simple format including these *Five Questions*:

1. What is it that is bringing you joy?
2. What is it that is causing you anxiety?
3. What do you hope for in the months ahead?
4. What’s going on with your family or those closest to you?
5. Are there fears or failures that we should pray about?

Take turns serving as host. The host opens with a prayer inviting the Lord to supervise, and then reads a meaningful scripture with comments of what that means to him. This *opening* should be kept to about five minutes.

Then the three of you take turns going through the *Five Questions*. Take eight to ten minutes each. After each person shares, the other two may ask questions, make comments or offer a prayer. But the posture for the other two is that of prayerful listening, not primarily advising. Let the Holy Spirit lead. If there is a request for forgiveness, be sure to express forgiveness in Jesus’ name.

The time is concluded with the host leading in a prayer of blessing.

So:

1. Host opens with prayer, scripture and brief comments;

2. The three take turns going through the *Five Questions* followed by comments, questions and brief, conversational prayers;
3. The host concludes with a prayer of blessing, and next meeting and host is set.

Spiritual Foundation for Smaller-than-Small Groups

1 John 1:5-10 describes the connection between walking in the light and true fellowship with God and one another.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Cleansing from sin follows walking in the light. Being dishonest about our sin and denying its presence is walking in darkness. Three times in this brief passage, we are warned against this kind of *pretending*.

Derek Prince used to say, “We should call a spade a spade, not an agricultural implement!” It seems our default is to deny, or at least, minimize our shortcomings. The result is that our fellowship with God and with one another is hindered, and deep cleansing is delayed. This kind of cleansing is vital for us to be instruments growing in usefulness to God.

But part of the reason we stand aloof and miss out on these benefits is that we rarely have a setting where we know there is confidentiality and healing grace. Recovery groups have learned that there is rarely deliverance from addiction without gut level honesty.

How to Go at It

Don't be the “Artful Dodger.” Allow God's light to be bright in your heart and in your words. It may take some practice, but, as best you can, let go of presenting an image of how you want to be seen. That's called *play acting*. Let your friends see the real you - not better, not worse. Remember, God is supervising; you can trust him.

Avoid diversions. These times are not for the purpose of discussing what's wrong out there. The temptation, especially among men, will be to deflect to discussions of sports, politics or religion. There are certainly times for those discussions, but these times together have a different purpose.

Listen carefully. When someone is sharing, don't be thinking of anything other than what they are saying. Enter into their thoughts and feelings. Practice empathy.

Confidentiality counts. When something personal is shared, hold it in confidence. Trust demands that.

It's a Jungle Out There

The world we live in is not a friendly place. The picture above of the three soldiers with rifles and battle gear depicts the preparation we need for the battle that all of us are in. We need to arm ourselves and coordinate with our *battle buddies*. The conflict requires it!

When we're isolated from honest relationships, our enemy has us just where he wants us. We'll be easily defeated.

My guess is that those other two you're looking for are close at hand. Give them a call.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them (Mt. 18:20).

...a threefold cord is not quickly broken (Eccl. 4:12).

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