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Next Sunday

**An Honest
Dialogue
About the
Future of
the Church**



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Turn-and-Greet Terrors or Does Anyone Actually Care That I'm Here?

Creating Genuine Community



NANCY

The management team of Willow Creek Community Church met every Tuesday over lunch. I attended those meetings for the entire twenty-year run of my time on staff.

We sat in a square of soft blue sectional couches up in our senior pastor's third-floor office, with a wall of windows overlooking the manmade lake on the church's sprawling hundred-acre property. Willow's food service, called Harvest, prepared a delicious meal for us every week. Balancing plates on our laps in front of a low coffee table, the ten of us would catch up one another on our weekends—stories of our children's antics and accomplishments, movies we saw on date nights, and sometimes how we were “really doing.”

After our time of reconnecting, we would switch gears and dig into whatever agenda items faced us as we sought to lead the church. Some Tuesdays, other staff members were beckoned to join us to discuss ministry plans, vision, strategy stuff.

I vividly remember the day our executive pastor informed us that we would be hearing from a small group of the next generation, labeled Generation X by American culture. Our management team was composed of baby boomers, mostly in our forties. This group of earnest young people (in their twenties) wanted to design a new weekend experience and day-to-day ministry for their generation. I had an instant flashback to when I had been in their exact spot twenty years earlier, believing my parents' generation was clueless about how to do church effectively. I much preferred being on that other, younger side of the conversation!

They began by describing what they saw as the fundamental differences between the two generations. While they eagerly walked us through a well-prepared presentation, listing all the reasons why our approach to church wasn't working for them, I

pasted a smile on my face, hoping to come across as open and curious while hiding my rising defensiveness. I think I faked it pretty well until I heard this statement: “Our generation highly values community. In fact, it’s most important to us above the experience of Sunday morning.” All I heard was what they did not say directly—you boomers don’t value community as much as we do.

Maybe more than any other member of that management team, I was riled up by their assumption. Of course, I didn’t lash out and say the words flying through my head at the moment: *Community is what this church was built on! How dare you try to hijack this value and claim it belongs to your generation exclusively! Everything I have built in the arts ministry of this church centered on a foundation of deep, authentic community. My team has been together the longest, and we are like family to one another!*

To this day my most treasured memories of ministry are not massive events—like when we crammed twenty thousand people into Chicago’s United Center for the church’s twentieth-anniversary celebration—or the original musicals we created for outreach, or the powerful Christmas and Holy Week services filled with moments of transcendence and wonder and beauty and God’s holy presence. Those were all meaningful to me, but they cannot compare to the life-giving experiences of our little team.

My most precious ministry memories include the retreats our arts staff would take in a small Wisconsin cottage, sometimes laughing so hard over meals that tears ran down our cheeks, dancing around a tiny kitchen as we washed dishes to the sounds of Sister Sledge—“We are family. Get up everybody and sing.” We honored one another as we reviewed video highlights from our services and presented homemade awards in our own version of the Oscars. That same team formed a circle on a deck of the cottage, and with a bowl of water and a few towels, we washed

one another's feet as we confessed our sins of pride and envy, visibly serving our brothers and sisters.

We knew one another's stories. We worked through inevitable conflicts with one another and learned to say "I'm sorry." It wasn't all abundant joy. One day after an extremely difficult meeting when my team risked telling some hard truths to me, I walked to my car and slammed the door, thinking, *Community, shamunity! Who needs it?* (Such a mature, Christ-centered response!) But deep down, I knew I needed it.

I danced with raucous celebration at the weddings of Steve's daughters. I stood at the graveside of Pam's father as the bagpipes played terribly out of key on a dreadfully humid summer afternoon. My teammates showed up at the hospital when my toddler came down with a mysterious high fever. We didn't just do ministry together; we had the profound gift of doing life together. This included the major highs and lows of life along with the more ordinary, everyday moments we couldn't wait to share with one another. At Willow we would often say that doing ministry with people you love—*community*—is the hidden treasure that emerges in the midst of the cause. Ministry can be extremely hard in so many ways, and no one is in it for the pay. The remarkable and unexpected gift is all about the relationships we form as we do the work of the kingdom and catch one another's eyes, thinking, *I can't believe we get to do this together.*

I can hear some protests that of course a group of creative artists, "touchy-feely types," would value community. But what about more task-oriented, activist teams or those who are true introverts? My husband, Warren, is a factual kind of guy, a commodities trader who thinks in terms of numbers and ideas, not feelings, and who is most definitely an introvert. Warren has led various ministry initiatives as a volunteer. Early in our married life he took on the leadership role of a ministry called

“Good Sense.” This was a thoughtful, intelligent group of volunteers who helped congregants understand what the Bible teaches about money and how we can honor God with our finances. Warren assembled a team of mostly left-brained accountant types to help lead and coach people to practice getting out of debt, establish a budget, save wisely, and give generously. Once a month this group of eight or ten volunteers would meet in our living room. Warren always had a flip chart ready to launch into his extremely full and very important agenda. I usually hung out in another part of the house. Before one of the meetings I asked Warren if he would like me to make a dessert for his team so they could linger and enjoy some time after the meeting. He said, “Why would I want to do that?”

I responded that maybe, just maybe, the people might want to talk a little about their personal lives, go beyond the agenda, get to know one another a bit. Warren was entirely unconvinced this was necessary but said okay to the brownies. The group started hanging out after the meeting was officially over. Stories were shared about the challenges of raising teenagers, caring for an elderly parent, unrealistic expectations at work, or the excitement of an upcoming vacation. And despite Warren’s assumption that this group in particular wouldn’t want to “do community,” a community started to form anyway.

Our focus on the value of community in the local church must be informed by the bigger picture of the entire social fabric of American culture. Robert Putnam is a renowned social scientist and author who has done extensive research analyzing cultural trends over the past 140 years. In his fascinating book *The Upswing*, Putnam explains how America was once a highly individualistic society during the Gilded Age of the late 1800s. But

with the dawn of the twentieth century this country gradually became more cooperative, peaking in the decade of the 1960s with high numbers of citizens engaging in all kinds of community groups, becoming increasingly a nation of joiners. Putnam says we moved from being an *I* society of rugged individualism to more of a *We* culture, and this trend included weekly attendance and volunteerism in a local church or synagogue.

Yet since the 1960s the trend has dramatically reversed. Putnam writes, “In greater numbers than ever before, Americans seem to have stopped believing that we are all in this together.” Participation in almost every communal activity from unions to the PTA to Rotary Clubs is down. This cultural trend has had a huge impact on local churches. Baby boomers have memories of the *We* society but have also contributed to the decline back toward the *I* culture.

The truth is that every human was created to live in community with a few others. We used to say at Willow that everyone has a deep desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, to serve and be served. We see that Jesus himself invested in a community of friends and disciples, including Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—siblings who invited their Teacher into their home, where Jesus no doubt found rest, refuge, and joy.

But while our magnificent Creator has designed us to pursue connection with one another and modeled that for us, we must choose to move away from our tendency to isolate. All of this has been magnified by the hunkering down we experienced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Our movements back into connection have been tentative and wobbly and even frightening for some.

It’s all too easy for us to minimize the significance of what it means to belong and to be known. I am concerned for anyone who shows up to do any kind of task at a church in the name of Jesus—whether it’s sorting boxes at the food pantry, mowing a lawn, rehearsing worship music, or preparing a room for the children. Each

volunteer has a life outside of the local church. Imagine the volunteer bass player in a worship band who shows up faithfully on a Wednesday night to rehearse. For two hours the group works through the songs to be used the following weekend. Maybe there's a short prayer at the start of rehearsal, but after that it's all about getting the music right. When the work is done, the team says their goodbyes, and the bass player walks out to his car in the parking lot.

What if earlier that day he had a tough conversation with his boss at work, or what if his daughter is struggling with a bully at school, or what if he got good news about a new job for his wife? I think he might feel a little empty and disappointed that no one in the worship band knew his story that day. He would not have felt known and seen. He might even be tempted to feel a little used, only wanted for his musical gift.

I realize it's not possible for every team that comes together for a task to also include an hour or more of sharing our lives with one another. Unless a small group is formed expressly for that purpose alone, it's just not realistic for most of us to carve out that time. However, I think there's a middle ground, a step that does not require major amounts of time but opens the door to volunteers feeling known and seen.



Allow me to move from theory to the extremely practical, with a couple of options for intentionally connecting with a team beyond the task. The first option works well at the start of the meeting or task. What if the group forms a circle—assuming it is less than ten people (if there are more than that, make more circles)—and going around the circle, each person is asked to answer a simple question: Since we were last together, what was a high point in your life? And what was a low point? To avoid stories getting too long and detailed, tell them they each have a total of a minute (or

two if you're feeling generous) to share their high and low. As a leader you have introduced a sense of connection before the work begins. People can choose to follow up on what they hear at a later time, but every individual has a chance to speak a part of their story. And as a group we can rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

The second option works well at the close of the meeting or task time. Circle up, standing so that everyone knows this won't be long. Ask each person for one way we can specifically pray for them this next week. Tell them to say it in a sentence or two. Also encourage everyone to pay close attention to what the person on their left says because in a moment they will offer a short prayer for that person. In this way, during the brief prayer time, each person gets prayed for and each person prays for someone else. As you dismiss the group, individuals can choose whether to follow up with anyone. But my imaginary bass player would go to his car feeling a little more known and seen. In this way we break down the compartmentalization between our personal lives and our ministry service. And a sense of community starts to be built.

I believe that what has drawn many people to the local church in the past, and what will become *even more* essential going forward, is the desire to be a part of a genuine community. There is a mighty power in the telling and hearing of stories. Every single person in a church has a story, and we must create the opportunity for us to share those stories in safe settings, listening to one another:

- understanding where we came from,
- what energizes us and what empties us,
- what delights us and what defeats us, and
- what we are ashamed of and what we aspire to.

One of the most remarkable aspects of a thriving church is when our relationships go beyond what is natural or comfortable for us when we can connect with people across racial, gender, age, and socioeconomic divides. When you think about it, church is one of the only places in our culture where that is possible, where we have the potential to meet and know some folks we would never have crossed paths with otherwise.

In the early years of building Willow Creek, we rented spaces to meet for both our Sunday and midweek gatherings. I was a volunteer at the time, and our midweek service called “New Community” met for a while in the small auditorium of a local high school. Warren and I were by then seriously dating, so we sat together. During the turn-and-greet moment, we turned around and discovered a young African American guy with a huge grin. He introduced himself as Joe and quickly moved from the anticipated shaking of hands to a full-on hug. We told Joe our names, and then he asked, “Where do you live?” Warren owned a home near that school, and Joe wanted the address, saying he might stop by sometime.

Little did we know that God was launching a forty-year friendship in which Joe is a valued member of our extended family. Joe grew up near the church at a home for mentally and physically challenged kids. The state of Illinois placed him there after some foster care experiences that didn’t work out well. Joe was a wiry kid, with more energy than I can describe, who rode his bike everywhere. He heard about Willow Creek and just boldly showed up.

Our friendship with Joe has been life changing for all of us. I believe God assigned us to each other. Joe has taught me more about childlike faith, bold prayers, and generosity to others than I have learned from books or professors or experts. And we got to help Joe find his way as an adult, get jobs and a place to live, and be there for

him through several health challenges. There are times when we drive one another crazy. Joe never lets us know when he is going to drop by, and his timing is impeccable! When I'm most worn out and in need of downtime, there's a good chance Joe will blow into the house like a hurricane, picking me up in a bear hug, and scaring our little dog half to death. I know for sure that I never would have known Joe without the local church. Our love for Jesus brought us to that high school one summer night forty years ago, and now we are family. That is the wonder of community in the local church.

In his superb book *Analog Church*, Pastor Jay Y. Kim lays out how community forms us:

Since its earliest days, the church has been about unlikely people gathering as family, in spite of their differences, living in uncomfortable community with one another, learning together to become one in the transformative presence and by the transformative power of Jesus Christ.

I believe that churches can be wobbly in a lot of ways—not so great at strategic planning, fundraising, or meeting in less-than-ideal settings—but if that church is built on a foundation of authentic community, it can thrive. Love makes up for a multitude of misses. Jesus told us the world will know we belong to him by how we love one another, how we walk with one another, how we forgive one another, how we show up for one another, how we listen to one another, how we believe the best about one another. I have tasted the wonder of community over and over again. That original group of arts leaders on my staff team worked together for more than twenty years. Now we are all in different churches but still in the Chicago area. We gather periodically—on my calendar it says “Old Buddies.” We did life together and are still doing life together as we age and go through retirement challenges, health challenges, and the new joys of grandparenting for some.

I'm writing this chapter during the global pandemic of the early 2020s. Never have I missed gathering in community more! I long to hug my friends and linger over long meals and talk about what's happening in our lives. This week the old buddies did a Zoom call instead, and there was laughter and tears and lots of stories, even some confession. Holy moments of community. Not the same as gathering in a living room or around a kitchen table but the best we can do for now.

What does community look like for each generation? Are there fundamental differences in how we pursue, value, and live out this desire? I'm convinced that while we all desperately need to be known and loved, the forms and practical building of community may look and feel different for not only each generation but also for various cultures as well. How we seek and live out community may be only partly about our age and even more about our individual wiring and norms of our people groups. How community gets built is less important than whether it gets built at all. To varying degrees every human must fight the desires to isolate, hide, and battle life alone—and be willing to become part of the *We*.

Occasionally I imagine a few of my Generation X friends who are now in their forties, many of them leading churches. At some point a young group of millennials or Generation Z will ask for a meeting. They may describe changes they would like to see in the church to reach their generation. If they for a moment suggest that their longing for community is unique to them, my advice is to put a smile on your face, nod, and act as though they have come up with something new and essential for the church to thrive. Listen well to their hearts and minds without revealing your rising defensiveness. Seek to understand. Then you can excuse yourself and have a little screaming fit in the bathroom!

SAMANTHA

1-3-1-4 was the code to my old favorite place. You'd miss it if you weren't looking for it: a narrow hallway snaking through the underbelly of the church I grew up in. When the keypad signals its beeps of belonging, the door opens to a burst of laughter dancing down the hall, like a campfire promising warmth to a distant traveler. When I was little, I couldn't help but run toward it.

The Tunnel, as it was christened, was where my favorite people were: the artists. It served as a green room, rehearsal space, and kitchen, with a door (1-3-5-7) leading to a steep staircase winding up and onto the stage. The walls were littered with poster sheet blueprints full of circles, arrows, words, and images that had materialized into the creative elements of the service that was unfolding overhead. As a child there was nowhere I'd rather be, which is funny to think of now. There were rarely other people my age in the Tunnel. I didn't understand half of the jokes the drama team made, nor had I seen the *Seinfeld* episodes they were referencing. I just wanted to *be there*. To sit quietly at the table and soak in the togetherness of it all. It was in the Tunnel that I discovered the texture of community, what it felt like and sounded like. And though I couldn't name that at the time, I've been searching for it ever since.

Moving around a lot has made this challenging. As a single woman bouncing between big cities and too many roommates in too-small apartments, I was both empowered by independence and depressed by my anonymity. I remember one late New York City night walking to the train when I had the thought, *If I disappeared, it would take a long time for anyone to notice.*

Going to church in these new cities, I wanted somewhere I could belong above all else. I was floating between families—the

one I was born into and the one I hoped to someday begin. I longed to inhabit a me-sized space in a community that would appreciate my presence and take notice of my absence. I wanted to walk into a room where I was known. This is hard to find in your twenties. There's no door code.

The church I attended in Brooklyn had interminable turn-and-greets. I'm not exaggerating; they had to be ten minutes long. I *like* talking to people (I can't imagine what this would have felt like for an introvert); that wasn't the problem. I put on what my friend Tamara and I call "open face": ready eyes, slight smile, open to the present moment. (We used this term to describe what people look like during their first month living in New York and why so many people talk to you on the subway if you're new or visiting. If you have a resting face of curiosity and wonderment, you are inviting these encounters. It becomes necessary over time to close your face a little. Some saintly people maintain a natural open face throughout their life, and you know immediately when you have met such a person. It feels like they have been waiting for you.)

At the Brooklyn church I had the most open of open faces as I turned in circles looking for someone to connect with. But Sunday after Sunday, people swarmed to greet the people they *knew*. It was more of a beeline and greet. Once all the smaller circles had formed I would aimlessly check my phone and wish that the service would get on with itself already. I grew to hate this part of the service and how it reminded me of my exclusion from what C. S. Lewis calls "the Inner Ring."

Eventually, I joined a "life group." I knew right away that I would get along with Tom. He'd spent his life in New York, doggedly pursuing a career in theater. He was in his sixties when we met. With a gravelly voice that seemed made for the stage, he'd tell tales from the Italian restaurant he worked in and the

auditions he'd gone on that week. Tom didn't book many (any) of those auditions, but he never gave up.

Tom loves Jesus. He starts every day with an hour of prayer. One night I came to our small group particularly discouraged about a bad audition, wondering if I'd be working my terrible personal-assistant job forever, already on the verge of giving up after only a year of trying to make it as an actress. As we were sharing updates about our lives, Tom shared how grateful he was for Jesus' love: "I just can't believe how much he loves me. That he's forgiven me, that he wants to know me and walk with me. Anything that happens in my career is just a cherry on top. I already have the whole cake."

Eight years later I still think about those words when I encounter artistic disappointments or even victories. *I already have the whole cake*. In spiritual community we experience these shifts in perspective over and over. There is a limit to how much of God I can experience on my own. God's face shines through all faces, whether the world has taught them to remain open or closed. We just have to stick around long enough to notice.

On Sundays, when it came time for the turn-and-greet, I started to beeline for Tom.



My current church in Austin, Texas, sums up their approach to community and connection this way: if you want it, you gotta fight for it. The lean staff has grown weary of creating infrastructure, programming Bible studies, orchestrating dinners only for no one to show up. For attendance to start strong and then fade. For the very people who requested specific kinds of connection opportunities to forget to go, consumed by the thousands of other things we do in a week.

Our church's do-it-yourself fellowship approach makes it easy for people to stay on their islands. But people like Don and Terra will brave any sea to get to you.

This couple in their sixties arrives at church fifteen minutes early most weeks. They serve in many ways, but one is through this rigorous commitment to being present with those who may be new or alone. Visitors usually get to church before the lazy regulars, and Don and Terra make sure these newcomers have someone to talk to in those idle minutes before the place fills up and the music begins. They are warm and easy to connect with. In fact, Don might actually be Jesus—he is a carpenter and also a potter. Like a literal potter of clay. He has a ponytail. But most likely Don is just Don, and he and his wife are master includers.

I wonder what a church community would look like if more attention was given to discipleship in the art of including. I wonder how you teach people “open face.”

It takes courage to dress up, ride the train, walk the blocks, find which part of the school has been turned into a sanctuary, sit alone, and fill out an info card. It's even more daring to sign up for a small group, buy cookies, get on a bus, find an address, realize you've forgotten a gluten-free option, press a buzzer, announce your name knowing it carries no meaning, sit on a stranger's couch, discover this was more of a wine thing than a cookie thing, and then abruptly disclose matters of the heart. And I'm a White, straight, extroverted pastor's daughter! I love meeting new people. I know the language. I don't fear rejection, not really.

What is being asked of someone whose experience with the church has taught them they are not welcome? What must someone risk to discover whether or not they can belong in your community of faith? For those who the church has historically marginalized and oppressed, how can your church communicate that they will be safe in your living rooms? Do you know if they actually will be?

In her book *Native*, Kaitlin Curtice writes of her experience navigating White church spaces as an Indigenous woman: “The older I get, the more I realize how wired I am for community, for relationship, for belonging. Sadly, the church isn’t always that place.”

It took a long time before I understood that Tom was gay. He often used vague language about wrestling with God over parts of his identity. Another friend from our group remembers it like this: “I felt like he was always taking our temperature as a group on how we would react.”

That space, which I grew to feel so comfortable returning to week after week and sharing what felt like my most vulnerable confessions, did not feel safe to Tom. What had I done to make it this way? What assumptions had we made? What could we have done differently to ensure that every part of every one of us was welcome? These questions haunt me still.

My academic husband, Will, had a lot of resistance to church culture when we were dating. He believed in God but didn’t want to check his brain at the door. Thinking it might be good for him to get to know other men of faith, I convinced him to join a small group for the first time in his life.

It did not go well.

At the *very first* session of the *very first* small group, the *very first* question asked by the leader was, “So, do you side more with God or science?” Will never went back.

Research professor Brené Brown sums it up: “True community is where no one has to hide.”



A 2019 poll by YouGov verified that millennials have surpassed Generation X and baby boomers as the loneliest generation. And that was before the global pandemic that forced the not-yet-marrieds and not-yet-settled to hunker down in isolation for a

year and counting. The Cigna Loneliness Index survey released in 2020 found 71 percent of millennials and nearly 79 percent of Generation Z report feeling lonely—a significant uptick from previous generations.

Can our collective ache for community be met by the local church?

In response to frustrations with my notoriously flaky generation, some churches have tried to gather us “young folks” where we already are: the internet. They put all their efforts into assembling online communities and conversations. During Covid-19, this has been the only form of connection many of us could have, and I am grateful for it. But while the virtual world provides us with tools, I’m unconvinced that our avatars can ever fulfill our bodies’ deepest longings.

When it does become safe to gather again, I wonder if the local church will continue to try to outrun one of its most distinctive features: its localness! Millennials are changing residences more than any other generation (every two years, on average, according to a study from Porch). Is the church on the corner a physical space we can walk into and find warmth in a new place? For us untethered ones, if the church nearby offers a true, inclusive, embracing, authentic, vibrant, three-dimensional community, that would be deeply compelling if not irresistible.

A few years after Rev. Rebecca Anderson and Rev. Vince Amlin started Gilead Church in Chicago, their team identified loneliness as a problem they could help address. They began throwing huge parties—epic, beautiful, and open to all. They threw a catered dinner on the “L” train, an Easter dance party. “It was the kind of thing that might get a total stranger to come,” Anderson says. “And it did.” Now it’s become one of their core practices and worked its way into their mission statement: *a community that*

makes beautiful worship, throws great parties, and tells true stories that save lives. People come for the parties and stay for the church.

At the time I am writing this, my husband and I are in the process of buying our first house. Neither of us is what I would call handy, and when we fell in love with a house built in 1949, we called Don to take a look at it with us. He walked through it carefully, speaking the language of electricity and plumbing with our inspector. He followed up a few days later to recommend an electrician (three actually, each with a personal story) and to give his feedback on the house, which he framed as parental (“you gotta know what you’re getting into”). Here, in the middle of Texas, so far away from family or anyone we would ask to help us with such an enormous decision, Will and I had a parent in Don.

I believe the intergenerational aspect of church community is deeply undervalued. Most churches siphon off community groups according to age and season of life. But where else can folks my age find a Don? In Brooklyn I remember how good it felt to hold a baby, to sit at a family dinner table with non-Ikea furniture, to listen to Tom’s stories. In Chicago I loved volunteering with student ministry, where young people start to ask real, hard questions and everybody’s trying to figure out who they are. Our stories might not intersect if not for the local church.

I have so many memories of my mom and her friends—artists, volunteers, and members of our church—being *with* one another. Laughing and creating in the Tunnel, gathered in our living room, around a table, Christmas parties, funerals, graduations, births, and hospital beds. I remember them *showing up* for one another over and over and over—for the peaks and valleys and all the meals to be eaten in between. I call them my aunts and uncles. They were, and are, a family.

I seriously wonder if I will have that someday.

Sometimes I try to return to the Tunnel, but it's like they've changed the code on me. What was the magic? What made that so special? How was it that all those people wanted to be in the same place at the same time? Why weren't they distracted? Why did I want to be there so badly (besides that it might remind the drama director that I was around, in case, you know, he needed me for any upcoming roles)?

I'm waiting for community to happen to me as it happened to Mom. But maybe it won't happen on my terms or my schedule. Maybe she chose it. Again and again.

When it comes to community, I imagine that I and my mom and her mom and all generations before us wanted something similar. How we get there might shift, but I don't think the goal has: to be seen and loved. To break free of what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the prison of yourself" and be transformed by the face of God in others.

I want wisdom about parenting from people farther down the road, and I want to celebrate young people who are headed off to college. I want to get in the car after we leave someone's house and say, "I'm glad we went" instead of "I didn't know how to leave" because our whole selves showed up, not because I put on a good show. I want people at my dinner table who I would never meet if it weren't for the church. I want someone to call when Texas freezes over and I'm not sure what to do about our pipes. I want someone to call me and share the creative dreams they're afraid to speak out loud. I want to be yanked out of my regular programming to meet Jesus in the people I least expect. I want to talk (and not just think) about inequity in my city and practice (and not just post about) justice work. When loss throws my world upside down, I want people to sit near me, to pray for me when I can't remember how. And I want to participate in these fragments of other people's lives because

consuming them through a screen costs me nothing and transforms me even less.

There are many things a church can do to make it *easier* to show up. Interrogate the language of the culture and the unwritten code of belonging. Consider who it excludes. Train up more Dons and Terras. Lead with love rather than beliefs (especially in small-group icebreakers). And take notice that those of us who've been marketed to our entire lives might gravitate more toward connection opportunities designed around serving rather than reading the pastor's book together.

But at the end of the day I am the only one who can make sure I arrive. I am convicted by these words in Noreena Hertz's book *The Lonely Century*, and I think one could easily substitute the word *society* with the word *church*:

Because society isn't only done to us, we "do" society too, we participate in it and shape it. So if we want to stop the destructive path of loneliness and restore the sense of community and cohesion we have lost, we will need to acknowledge that there are steps we must take, as well as tradeoffs we will have to make—between individualism and collectivism, between self-interest and societal good, between anonymity and familiarity, between convenience and caring, between what is right for the self and what is best for the community, between liberty and fraternity.

It seems the deep and diverse community I long for will cost me my comfort. My infatuation with ease. All of me will have to show up instead of the carefully curated image I'd rather send on my behalf. I will have to offer the one thing nearly every other aspect of modern life is helping me to preserve: time. I must also interrogate my wanderlust, nurtured by advertising and stories that taught me to desire exploration, novelty, and adventure. It

is the antithesis of the invitation to *dwell*. The church has the potential to remind us that we were created for life *with* one another, messy, slow, and inefficient as it may be.

Will and I are putting down roots. We bought the house, after all. (Don's going to help us build a porch!) We know a few folks at our new church, though the pandemic has kept us at a distance. I wonder what will happen next.

We might pass through each other, tourists sharing a beach for a summer.

Or maybe we'll tie our boats together and embark on something better.

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