

Breaking the Huddle: How Your Community Can Grow Its Witness

Available December 2016
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In their groundbreaking book *I Once Was Lost*, Don Everts and Doug Schaupp identified five thresholds that individuals cross when they shift from being skeptics to followers. Now they and Val Gordon show how huddled communities can become witnessing communities and then conversion communities, where evangelistic growth becomes the new normal. The authors have studied the growth of congregations, what enhances and limits them, and have gathered best practices for transformation.

How to Become a Thriving Conversion Community

It is actually possible to help a community grow its witness: tepid huddled communities can learn to mobilize witnesses, and witnessing communities can become red-hot conversion communities.

Just consider what happened to an InterVarsity community at the University of California San Diego (UCSD). Back in 2000, they were a very huddled community. They loved Jesus, they were devoted to digging deep in their lengthy Scripture studies, they had sincere prayer lives, they were passionate about urban ministry and serving the poor, they went to church faithfully, and they really enjoyed honest friendships with each other. They were a smart, sociable, passionate, huddled group of about two hundred members. Meanwhile, there were an additional 25,000 students on campus, most of whom had no experience of God's transforming love.

This huddled community had a powerful narrative about why this was the case. *People at UCSD are focused on science and too intellectual to be open to God. This is hard ground. The harvest is not ripe here. We are not good at evangelism—other communities are better at that. That is not our thing. We are focused on Scripture and serving the poor.* In fact, people would join InterVarsity for this very reason: they did not want to be challenged to make non-Christian friends. They did not want to be around the “E-word.” For some of them *evangelism* was a dirty word. These members chose the huddle because they loved the feeling of the huddle.

UCSD was not the only huddled community in San Diego. As all the InterVarsity San Diego leaders looked at their ministries, they began to face the empirical facts. They were very honest with themselves: *Why are we so ineffective at helping those far from God become followers of Jesus? How come only two people became followers of Jesus through our ministry last year? That is just 1 percent of our whole group. That should bother us. Let's listen to God and see what he puts on our hearts.*

They wrestled with God over the internal question that plagued them as they looked at the facts and asked, *What's wrong with us? How did we let ourselves get so huddled?* They decided they needed to break the huddle. They decided to believe God for more. They shook off the old narrative that their context was simply not very open to God. This godly discontent was a profound turning point.

At UCSD, Megan, Ramiro, Ryan, and Serene formed a new team. Loving those far from God and investing in these new friendships became their top priority. They invited others from their community to join them. Very few did. But together they took risks. They failed. They

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"Thank God for people like Doug Schaupp, Don Everts, and Val Gordon, who help give us a passion for the lost. This book isn't only informative, it encourages and truly inspires any and every Christian to share the good news of the gospel!"

– **Tommy Walker**, worship leader, author of over two hundred worship songs

learned. They had conflict with each other. They got new mentors. They prayed. Some other members of their huddled community accused them of turning their backs on their core values, like serving the poor and the oppressed and caring about God's heart of justice. This rift got worse, to the point that it threatened to split their community in two.

But Megan, Ramiro, Ryan, and Serene saw the change process through. They hung onto each other and onto the mission. They insisted on being aligned around witness, and God used this persistence and rugged faithfulness to indeed break the huddle. You might find it hard to believe what happened next.

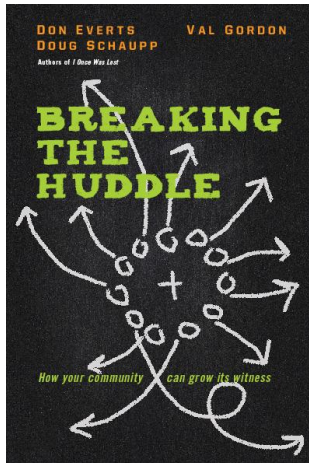
If you visit InterVarsity at UCSD today, you would never guess they were once a huddled community. They have a thriving conversion community. For each of the past five years, they have helped over a hundred students *per year* become followers of Jesus. (This has tipped toward a whopping two hundred per year in the past two years.) Amazing! Today, no one says that people at UCSD simply are not very open to God. But it took a small community of four to begin to break the false narrative, to break the huddle.

Ryan, Ramiro, and Serene have each become leaders of this conversion movement. In addition, they now help inspire and equip other movement leaders across the country to believe God for more. To shake off the old narratives. To pray and go deeper with the Holy Spirit. And, ultimately, to break the huddle in their respective communities. In fact, several of the stories in this book come from conversion communities they have helped lead. (This is all the more amazing when you know that back in 2000 you would never have picked any of these folks out to be movement leaders.) God can use the most unlikely leaders and risk-takers to help a community break the huddle and grow its witness.

Ryan and UCSD's story has become for us a case study of what is possible. It is a story of hope for those of us who are still in the trial and error, depressive, head-banging-on-the-wall stage of trying to help a huddled community grow its witness. In short, Ryan, Ramiro, Megan, and Serene's story ought to give us hope that real change is possible. But this community is not alone. This is what truly gives us hope. We have seen God use a variety of teams, with a wide variety of temperaments and gifts, to help a community's witness grow over time. These stories form the backbone of *Breaking the Huddle*.

We hope that this book really helps us all break the huddle. Every athlete needs to take a knee for some time as she circles up with her teammates to figure out the next play. But then the team breaks the huddle and heads back out to the playing field. Breaking the huddle is an inherently hopeful, purposeful thing to do. May all our communities break the huddle and engage in the next play God has for us.

– Adapted from the introduction, "A Case for Hope"



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"For too long, the playbook for evangelism has been ineffective where it counts: mobilizing communities for witness. Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon offer insights and encouragement for leaders as they work to transform inward-looking groups into conversion communities."

— **John Teter**, director of church planting and former director of evangelism, Evangelical Covenant Church, senior pastor, Fountain of Life Covenant Church

A Companion Book for *I Once Was Lost*

How does *Breaking the Huddle* continue what was started in *I Once Was Lost*?

Don Everts, Doug Schaupp, and Val Gordon: We wanted a companion book for *I Once Was Lost* based on how Christian communities change as we do evangelism. *I Once Was Lost* focused on helping Christians walk with their non-Christian friends on their journey toward faith in Jesus. *I Once Was Lost* has actually been quite fruitful in helping individuals better understand and help their friends. But we saw the need to help leaders know how to lead in such a way that whole communities could be involved and so that everyone in the community was being transformed more into the likeness of Jesus — Christian or non-Christian. Based on our interactions with many different churches and communities, we observed that there are different "types" of communities when it comes to witness. Some communities are "huddled," where witness is nothing more than a concept for them. Others are "witnessing." They are engaged in witness. And some communities are going wild as "conversion" communities. They are aligned around witness. The good news we observed is that it is possible for a community to grow its witness.

As leaders in our own communities who were trying to lead conversion communities, there were very few resources that both described this change and helped us know how to lead this change. Through trial and error we tried to figure that out for ourselves. *Breaking the Huddle* captures our learning and attempts to describe the process in a way that could be helpful to other leaders. *Breaking the Huddle* is our theology and best practices for helping communities change.

How do you hope *Breaking the Huddle* helps faith communities?

Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon: Huddled communities can be transformed by the Holy Spirit and faithful risk takers. Witnessing communities, in turn, can be transformed into conversion communities by God's grace and wise leadership. Without vision and planning, the inertia in faith communities is toward functioning as huddled — as insular communities, often times small in number, with people who love and serve those inside the community, but often don't show the same energy, love, and compassion to outsiders. This book gives hope for change for all types of faith communities and practically helps them understand why a community would want to become a witnessing and conversion community as well as how to help their community get there.

What do you hope readers say after reading *Breaking the Huddle*?

Everts, Schaupp, and Gordon:

1. I believe God may be inviting me to help my community to move toward a conversion community.
2. I have a greater awareness of where my community is today and how to help my

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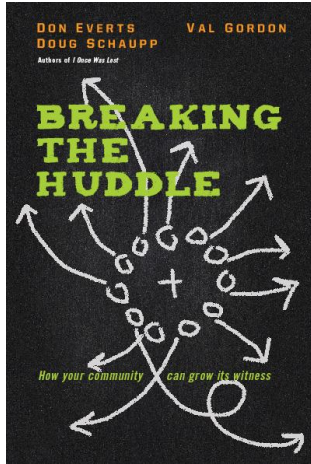
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community take the next step in growing its witness.

3. I have tools to help my small group grow.
4. I know how to pray more intentionally for my community.
5. I want to be part of the change process in my church or fellowship. I want to grow myself.



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“Don, Doug, and Val are fantastic coaches, and they’ve given you a playbook to get you off the evangelism sidelines. If you put these field-tested plays into practice – with God’s Spirit – you’ll get your church or faith community back in the game that truly matters.”

– James Choung, national director of evangelism, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, author of *True Story* and *Real Life*

How Can Your Community Grow Its Witness?



Don Everts is minister of outreach at Bonhomme Presbyterian Church in Chesterfield, Missouri, where he spends time cultivating relationships with people who are generally skeptical Christians. He is passionate about evangelism and global justice. He previously served as an area director for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Boulder, Colorado. His books include *I Once Was Lost*, *Go and Do*, and *Jesus with Dirty Feet*.



Val Gordon is the owner of Gearshift Consulting, a firm specializing in assisting mission-driven organizations to overcome their obstacles to growth. She is also a consultant with the learning and talent department of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and she previously served InterVarsity as associate regional director of New England. She lives with her family in Mystic, Connecticut.



Doug Schaupp is associate director of evangelism for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. A writer and teacher, he focuses on racial issues, postmodern evangelism, and leadership development. He is based in Los Angeles and graduated from Fuller Seminary. He is the coauthor of *I Once Was Lost* and *Being White*.