

The CORE Vol. 1 No. 2

Welcome the ***The Core!*** As we move along in this journey, we want to begin to answer the questions of why we are here, where are we going, how do we get there.

Back in 1995, Rick Warren, Pastor of Saddleback Church in California, wrote a book called, *The Purpose Driven Church*. In it he presented what he called the 5 purposes of the Church. He used 2 very familiar passages, Matthew 22:37-39 and Matthew 28:19-20, to point out these purposes that he proposed are true of every Christ-centered Church. These 5 purposes are Evangelism, Discipleship, Fellowship, Ministry and Worship.

I am in agreement with him on these purposes. Over the last 10 years both in Roanoke, Virginia and in Missoula, Montana, I have seen the truth of this paradigm played out. In my ministry I have determined to make decisions on programs and structure using these 5 purposes as a filter. In other words, if a program or structure is not fulfilling one or more of these 5 purposes I don't use them. This has helped tremendously with focus and keeping first things first.

I believe that each of these purposes speak to a human condition or need if you will and are the answers to our deepest dilemmas as individuals and as a church. God created us for himself but because of sin and it's resulting consequences, we have lost connection with him. Each of these purposes help us regain that connection and assist us in learning how to love God with all our heart, love people and serve the world.

This week we want to look at the purposes of Fellowship and Ministry as they relate to our need for connection with other people. There is a serious problem that many people face. The problem is loneliness. All of us have been there before. It is not a pleasant state of mind to be in. The real scary thing is that loneliness is not isolated to those outside the church! It happens within the church family too!

While we cannot control what everyone thinks or how they feel, we must make it a point to offer opportunities for people to connect in deeper ways. The bottom line for us is this, we must recognize the need for strong Biblical Community because without it our ability to grow spiritually will be greatly hindered.

As we look at a fictional family taken from Randy Frazee's book, *The Connecting Church*, and address the issue of loneliness let us take seriously the need for true fellowship with one another and true ministry to each others needs. When we do this the cure for loneliness will at least be available to anyone who needs it - and just think you might find yourself lonely and in need sometime.

SECTION 1

Read - "The Loneliest Nation on Earth" excerpt from, *The Connection Church*, Randy Frazee.

The Loneliest Nation on Earth

To all appearances and by all standards the Johnsons have a wonderful life. They own a house in a nice suburb with 4 bedrooms, 2 baths and a rear entry 2-car garage. Their house is surrounded by a 6 foot fence to provide privacy for an in-ground pool, barbecue grill, and patio furniture. Bob and Karen have 2 children - a boy and a girl. Each of them has a college degree; they both work and have a combined household income well above the average for their community. Most important, everyone in the family is in good health.

Yet if you could enter the hearts and thoughts of Bob and Karen Johnson, you would discover that they have dreams and fears no one else knows about. While they have never voiced it to anyone, there is an increasing sense of isolation, distress, and powerlessness growing inside of them. In a nutshell, the Johnsons have done a fine job "keeping up with the Joneses," but they still are not happy.

How could this be? The Johnsons are living the American dream. There are so many people who are less fortunate. Actually, this personal dilemma, which is quietly gnawing away a sense of contentment in the Johnsons, is a national epidemic -- their experience is no surprise to sociologists and pollsters. George Gallup Jr. concluded from his studies that Americans are among the loneliest people in

the world.(1) This seems unbelievable when you think of the availability of transportation and the billions of dollars of discretionary money available for entertainment. Americans can buy so much activity--how can they possibly be so lonely? Today more than $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the American people live in metropolitan areas, and more than $\frac{2}{3}$'s of those people live in suburbs. (2) We are surrounded by more people than ever before in the history of our country. With these undeniable benefits in place, how could a Gallup poll rank us among the loneliest people in the world?

Let's take a closer look at the story of Bob and Karen. 8 years ago Bob took a job at an office located in a growing suburb. Although this took them further from their families, both Bob and Karen had agreed that it would still be feasible to fly home on occasion because they were making more money and the airport was in close proximity to their house. Bob and Karen both rise at 6:30am. Bob rushes to leave the house at 7:00am to beat the rush hour traffic; doing so allows him to get to work in 35 minutes as opposed to 55 minutes. He opens the door leading into the garage, hits the garage door opener, gets into his car and pulls out of the driveway. He spots his new neighbor taking out the trash and waves to him with a forced smile on his face. As Bob drives down the street, he reminds himself that his new neighbor has been in the neighborhood now for 2 years, and he still can't remember his name. This thought lasts for about 5 seconds before the radio is turned on, and Bob's mind now turns to matters of the day.

Karen has worked out an arrangement to be at work at 9:00am so she can drop off her 2 children at school at 8:15am. There is the usual rush to get herself and the 2 children ready and out the door by 7:55, but on this day she manages to pull it off. With the same ritual precision, Karen makes her way to her car and starts heading out the driveway when one of the children announces that he has left a lunch inside. The easiest move for Karen would be

go back in through the front door, but she sees her next door neighbor, one of the few retired people in the area, beginning her yard work for the day. While Karen would love to catch up with her elderly neighbor, she is afraid if they engage in a conversation the children will be late for school--and then she'll be late for work. So rather than risk being late, Karen makes her way back to the rear entry garage, opens the door with the automatic opener, and goes inside. As she grabs the forgotten lunch from the kitchen table, she realizes she has forgotten to set the security system. Once this is accomplished, off she goes again.

Bob and Karen encounter an average day at work-- 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours at the office, completing only 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours of real productive work. Both will bring home bulging briefcases, in the hopes of sneaking in another hour of work after the children are in bed. At 3:30, the children go to their after-school program and wait for mom or dad to pick them up.

It is 5:00pm, and Bob absolutely must leave the office if he is to pick up the children on time from the after-school program. As it often goes, Bob doesn't leave until 5:20, and he gets trapped in a 10 minute traffic jam because of a stalled car on the freeway. He arrives at the school 30 minutes late. Everyone is just a little edgy.

Bob and the kids pull into the rear entry garage at 6:15. Bob turns off the security system, ensuring that no one has tampered with their home while they have been gone. Karen arrives at 6:30pm. The first order of business is dinner. Bob and Karen agreed 2 years ago, with a little from a family therapist, that with Karen's return to work to help pay bills, sharing the household chores was going to be a vital part of suburban life; Bob would need to share the load with her in the evenings.

While the children watch TV, mom and dad are working together to heat up a tray of frozen lasagna and garlic bread. After dinner, the dishes are cleaned up, the mail is perused, homework papers are checked, and the children get ready for bed. It is now 9:00pm. The children are a half hour late getting to bed, but it was the best they could do. At 9:15 Bob and Karen finally sit down. They are exhausted, really too tired to talk, so the TV gets beamed on, right in the middle of some prime-time drama. They both watch TV until the news is over, look at their briefcases for a moment, and agree to let the work go undone. Finally at 11:30, they make it to bed. A couple of words are exchanged, mostly businesslike talk concerning tomorrow's details. As they close their eyes, they both ponder how easy this

day was. The remainder of the week-nights will be filled with sports practices, games, music lessons, and some evening meetings at the office.

The next day the family rises again to engage in what has become a way of life for 5 out of the 7 days of their week. But now, the weekend has arrived!

Saturday and Sunday are used for 3 primary activities: house and lawn care, children's sports, and church. These activities take up most of the available hours, but on the average weekend there are a few hours of open time to be used for soaking in life with family and friends. The problem the Johnsons have is common for many other contemporary couples. First, their extended family members live in cities around the US. Second, they were so busy during the week they didn't make plans to do something with another family. Finally, while they would be open to spending some spontaneous time with neighbors, no one is out

in their front yards except a few men mowing their lawns with earphones wrapped securely around both ears and the companion radio strapped to their khaki-colored shorts. Everyone else is either away from home or safely sheltered inside their centrally air conditioned/heated homes, fully equipped with cable TV or satellite dish--or if not inside the house, they're in their backyards, which are completely landscaped for privacy.

Occasionally an outing is planned with another couple or family who may live in another part of town. The time always seems to be a positive experience--yet, because few of the gatherings are routinely with the same family, neither Bob or Karen feels comfortable sharing their deepest dreams and fears. Another weekend comes to a close with unvoiced stress and boredom, and Bob and Karen individually conclude that this was an unusual week; next week will be better. Well, 8 years have now passed since they adopted their "American dream" lifestyle, with somewhere around 416 weeks classified as "unusual".

Oh, there is one more important aspect to the Johnsons' life. Bob and Karen are Christians. They attend church just about every Sunday and have been involved in a church-sponsored small group for a little over a year. The group is made up of other couples of roughly the same age and meets in one of the members' homes every other week.

The Sunday worship services are usually uplifting and inspiring. Bob and Karen feel a sense of satisfaction with their children's involvement in the Sunday school program. As a matter of fact, it was their desire to give their children a religious and spiritual foundation that brought them back to church after a lapse during college and their early years of marriage. While the church is extremely friendly, the only people they really know are those who attend their small group.

The Johnsons' small group usually meets on the first and third Thursday night of each month from 7:00 to 9:30pm. The members of the group rotate the task of hosting the meeting in their homes. Most of the members live about 10 to 20 minutes away from each other.

Bob and Karen joined the group in the hopes of finding a surrogate extended family, or at least a set of close friends with whom they could share their dreams and fears. After a year's worth of faithful attendance to the group, the Johnsons started to miss some of the meetings. Why? There were several reasons. First, with their tight weekday schedule, it was difficult to eat dinner, check homework papers, bathe the children, pick up a baby sitter, drive to the small group, get together by 7:00, leave around 10:15, then take the baby sitter back home, and return home around 11:30. This routine simply exhausted this couple, who were in search of meaningful friendships and a sense of personal peace.

A second reason the priority for the small group diminished was the children's sports games and practices. Both children play soccer and baseball--and one or both of the children have either a practice or a game on Thursday nights.

A third reason was the disappointment the Johnsons were feeling over how seldom the members of the group got together outside of the regularly scheduled meetings. There seemed to be a mutual desire on everyone's part to get together, but something always seemed to prevent a more relaxed and spontaneous outing. Because the group only saw each other for a few hours twice

(sometimes only once) a month, there wasn't the sense of intimacy the Johnsons wanted in order to feel free to really share their dreams and fears. While they would consider their small group members to be their closest friends, the Johnsons were longing for something more.

To look at the outside shell of the Johnsons life, it would appear they have it all together, yet on the inside they are two of the statistically lonely people whom George Gallup writes. Bob and Karen are just 2 of the millions of Americans who are searching to belong. Moreover, what is true of the Johnson family is intensified in a single-parent home. The activity for the adult parent is usually doubled, practically eliminating any time for the development of personal relationships. In addition, the single parent often has to burn a great deal of additional energy negotiating with blended family members.

The single adult is not exempt from loneliness either. While more time can be allocated to enhancing adult relationships instead of managing children's activities, the additional time still leaves them at home many hours feeling deeply alone. While there is usually an active group of acquaintances, most singles still long for a deeper companionship than what seems to be in their grasp. One of the most significant struggles for a single person living in suburban America is the lack of wholesome gathering spots for singles. The lack of access to community means that isolation rules!

(Randy Frazee - The Connecting Church, pg.23-30)

While we are not living in suburbia, the comparisons are not hard to make between the Johnsons and us. As you consider their story, think about how we at FBC are meeting the community needs of those around us. Do we have any Johnsons among us that we didn't realize? As a church we want to develop a place where people truly connect with each other. That is the point of this Core. Hope you enjoy the study and are challenged to think outside the lines.

Pastor Todd

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that America is the loneliest nation on the earth--that there is a problem?
2. How are the Johnsons most like the Christian people you know?
3. How are the Johnsons most unlike the Christian people you know?
4. Describe what makes you think that experiencing Biblical Community is or is not the answer to our problem?
Read Acts 2:42-47
5. To whom does "they" refer in verse 42?
6. Luke gives us a look at the first Christian community in this passage. What do you see the Apostles doing?
7. What do you see the people doing?
8. What do you see the Lord doing?

SECTION 2

Read Acts 4:32-37

1. Luke gives another picture of life in the first Christian Community. He tells us, "Those who believed were of one heart and soul." Put what that means in your own words.
2. Life in this group sounds incredible. What makes it so incredible in your opinion?

3. Why did the Apostles give Joseph the nickname Barnabas?
4. What characteristics of Biblical community can you find in this passage? What about in Acts 2:42-47?

SECTION 3

Read Acts 6:1-7

1. Describe the problem the church set out to solve in the life of the first Christian Community.
2. Describe the solution that the community agreed on.
3. Again what characteristics of Biblical Community do you find in these verses?

Food for thought:

Think about your experience of community within the church. What have been to best 3 things about it? What have been some things you would have liked to experience?

Most of this material comes from Dr. Tom Bulick of Pantego Bible Church and Randy Frazee's book, "The Connecting Church."