

CREATING

FIVE
KEYS TO
BUILDING
A THRIVING
SMALL
GROUP
CULTURE

**SNEAK
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**UPDATED &
EXPANDED
EDITION**

COMMUNITY

ANDY STANLEY & BILL WILLITS

CREATING COMMUNITY

REVISED & UPDATED



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This book is dedicated to all the incredible group leaders that call one of our churches home. Your faithfulness to love and lead like Jesus has influenced many lives and changed many communities. We are so grateful for you and to be on this journey with you.

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PREFACE



RE: GROUPS

Twenty-plus years ago, Sandra and I joined Bill and Terry Willits and three other couples to form a small group. A first for all of us. We were a handful of couples who sensed a need for more meaningful community. We didn't use the term *community* back then. But that's exactly what we were looking for. We felt a need to do life with other couples in our same season.

That first group experience marked us. Sandra and I have been in a small group ever since. Small group—or *community group*, as we refer to it—is a nonnegotiable for us. And it's important to note, we formed that first group three years before we launched North Point Community Church.

Why is that important?

Our group experience had been so formative for us spiritually, emotionally, and relationally that when we had an opportunity to create a church from the ground up, we determined that small groups would be foundational.

A CULTURE OF COMMUNITY

You don't have to attend any of our churches for long before you recognize that groups are not an appendage; they are not a program we tacked on to an existing structure. They are part of our DNA. We *think* groups. In many ways, group life drives what we do—and do not do—as an organization.

The only numeric goal we have ever set for our ministry is in the area of small-group participation. Why? Because we honestly believe that real growth happens within the context of authentic, intentional relationships. And that's what a small group can provide.

Whenever I talk to senior pastors about their small-group ministries, I always ask about their personal small-group experiences. The majority of the time—and I mean the *vast* majority of the time—it turns out that the pastor is not participating in a group. As a pastor, I understand the unique complexities of participating in a small group with church members. But at the same time, it seems a bit hypocritical for a pastor to champion something in which he or she isn't willing to participate. Groups don't have an impact on a local church until they become part of the church's culture. And that begins with senior leadership.

MEET YOUR GUIDE

Bill Willits is one of North Point's six founding staff members. Bill has done the lion's share of the writing for this book. Our shared small-group experience ignited a passion in him to lead the way in creating a small-group culture in our churches.

As our organization has grown, Bill has continued to work with our campus teams to champion our vision of involving every

attendee in a small group. You will see some of their freshest work on the pages that follow.

Many fine books have been written on the topic of small groups, but I believe the updated and expanded edition of *Creating Community* has the potential to change you and revolutionize your small-group ministry, as well as your small-group experience.

—Andy Stanley

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INTRODUCTION



A SEASON OF CHANGE

It's hard to believe it's been sixteen years since we wrote the original manuscript for *Creating Community*. Much happened for us during that time. I bet much happened for you. Organizationally and culturally, life has definitely changed.

At North Point, our good God has opened many hearts and unlocked many doors since 2004. Back then, we were meeting in two locations and were one year away from celebrating our tenth anniversary. Today we are about to celebrate twenty-six years of ministry with eight campuses in the Atlanta area; scores of partner churches throughout the US; and partner networks in Latin America, the Republic of Ireland and the UK, and Australia. Group life at North Point Ministries has grown immensely as well. In 2004, we had 7,200 adults involved in groups through our two Atlanta campuses. Last year, by God's grace and through the efforts of many amazing people, we had over 31,000 involved in groups through our Atlanta campuses and thousands more through our partner churches.

But without a doubt, some of the biggest changes that have

occurred over the past sixteen years have been cultural. Here's a sampling of some of the differences between 2004 and today:

1. **GIG ECONOMY:** Since the launch of companies like Airbnb, Etsy, and Fiverr, temporary employment, freelancing, and single-contract gigs have all grown immensely. Today, 36 percent of US workers do some kind of gig work.¹
2. **EATING OUT:** With quick-service options like food trucks, carryout, and delivery, Americans now spend less on groceries than on eating out.² And when we want to eat at home, let's not forget that grocery delivery services like Instacart and Amazon Fresh and food-prep companies like Blue Apron, HelloFresh, and Sunbasket have made eating in even easier.
3. **WORKING FROM HOME:** Working from home became the new normal with over 80 percent of US workplaces either currently offering flexible options or planning to offer them, according to one study.³ And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.
4. **MUSIC INDUSTRY:** Music subscription services like Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, and Amazon Music have taken over the music landscape with physical CD sales disappearing.⁴
5. **MENTAL ILLNESS:** According to a study published by the American Psychological Association, teens and young adults have experienced a dramatic increase in mental health disorders. Teen depression grew by 52 percent, and young adult depression grew by a staggering 63 percent.⁵
6. **ONLINE EDUCATION:** The pre-pandemic years found online education already growing significantly. That trend will certainly continue because of online education's greater flexibility, lower financial cost, and customizable courses.⁶

7. **RIDE-SHARING SERVICES:** Companies like Lyft and Uber changed the way Americans commute.⁷
8. **SMARTPHONES:** Sixteen years ago, almost no one had a smartphone. Today, over 80 percent of Americans have one. And not only have smartphones changed the way people work; they have also changed the way people play by providing access to video games and replacing traditional cameras.⁸
9. **AMAZON PRIME:** Amazon Prime was introduced in 2005 to little fanfare even with two-day shipping. Today, much to the dismay of many retailers, *Amazon* and *shopping* have become synonymous.⁹ And what was already becoming true became indisputable during the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. **SOCIAL MEDIA:** In 2004, Facebook was being launched at Harvard. Today it boasts 2.8 billion monthly users, and it is only one of many social media sites.¹⁰ A recent report suggests that adult Americans spend over two hours a day on social media.¹¹ And that number is climbing.

Yes, in the past sixteen years, much has changed. All our lives have changed. On top of all the cultural changes, we have gone through a major recession, a major recovery, and a major pandemic that caused another economic downturn in the midst of social unrest. Yet one thing hasn't changed—people. People like you and me. People like those you work with. People like those you live around. People inside the faith. People outside the faith. Young people. Old people. Everyone in between. All people. Everywhere. People still have the same needs they have always had. And one of those needs has become only more acute.

KEY



PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY



The need for connection and community is primal, as fundamental as the need for air, water, and food.

—DEAN ORNISH

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CHAPTER 1



SEE THE LONELY PEOPLE

**WE ARE ALL SO MUCH TOGETHER, BUT WE ARE
ALL DYING OF LONELINESS.**

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Connecting well is critical in order for us to experience life. Or at least life as God intended it to be lived. And I assume connecting well is important to you. But why is it so significant? Why should you want to create a small-group culture in your church anyway? Though much has changed over the past several years, people still need community. People need community for reasons we'll talk about in great length later. But one thing is for sure: people need it because there are still a lot of lonely people in the world. People like Sallie.

Some time ago, I was on a flight on my way to speak to a group of pastors and other church leaders on the topic of community and small groups. I took my aisle seat next to a pleasant woman and began to settle in. Having planned to do some work on the way up, I put my AirPods in, took out my computer, and

immediately withdrew, hoping for a couple of hours of peace and quiet. That is, until *she* walked in. The she I am referring to was a rather well-dressed lady who frantically came on board right before the forward cabin door was closed. With an open seat in front of us, my hunch was that was where she would end up sitting. She came back to our row, looked at the lady sitting next to me, and said, "You're in my seat." Apparently, the lady sitting next to me had overshot her seat by one row. No big deal to most people. Just take the open seat, and we will be on our way. But our late-arriving addition would have no part of that. She was bound and determined to sit in "her seat." So the pleasant lady next to me graciously acquiesced, gathered her things, and moved to the seat in front of us. That's when I got to know Sallie.

Soon into the flight, I had this odd feeling that someone was peering over my shoulder. Sure enough, my peripheral vision confirmed that my new plane mate was looking at what I was reading. After a little time passed, she leaned over and asked, "Are you a pastor or something?" Wanting to enjoy a quiet flight, I was tempted to say no or just ignore her. But having already seen her tenacity, I nodded. At that point, she felt invited to start pouring out her life story. So much for a quiet flight. I mumbled a quick prayer for an attitude adjustment and a dose of wisdom, and Sallie began to unpack her journey. And what a life it had been.

She was estranged from her siblings over family money. She had grown kids but had divorced her unstable husband eight years ago when she couldn't take living with him anymore. He apparently suffered from PTSD from his time as a first responder and was unwilling to get help. And then the clincher. She was dating a guy in another city, someone her kids and friends did not like. At all. As in, "He's bad news, Mom." When I asked her why she thought they felt that way, she told me that they thought he

was unhealthy for her. And, oh yeah, she had forgotten to mention one little detail. The man she was dating was married. He very much liked being with Sallie but was in no place to make any kind of commitment.

Sallie said she was tired of a one-way relationship, and when she shared more of the specifics, I could understand why. He was using her, plain and simple, and then sending her home. She was tired of being treated like a commodity and an afterthought. And for good reason. So, with tears in her eyes, she asked me, “What should I do?” A woman I had met one hour earlier was asking me what she should do at one of the most important junctures in her life. What a great opportunity. And then she added, “I just want to be loved.” I affirmed her need and gave her some simple counsel. After the plane landed and our conversation ended, my sense was that she was really saying she was afraid to be alone. Yes, there are a lot of lonely people.

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

George Gallup Jr. described American culture with these poignant words: “Americans are . . . the loneliest people in the world.”¹ That was thirty years ago. Sadly, it has gotten worse.

Cigna, a global health service company, recently released results from a nationwide survey of more than twenty thousand people aged eighteen and older. It reveals some alarming statistics:

- Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone.
- Only half of Americans have meaningful in-person social interactions on a daily basis.
- Over 40 percent of Americans sometimes or always feel

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that their relationships are not meaningful and that they are isolated from others.

- Generation Z (adults aged eighteen to twenty-four) is the loneliest generation and claims to be in worse health than older generations.²

To address this reality, especially among Gen Zers, the University of Southern California hired a director of belonging. University leadership realized that students on campus were experiencing a loneliness crisis. Many mental health problems and instances of students dropping out were tied to this issue of loneliness. The director of belonging now teaches a popular class for the university on how to create meaningful relationships.³

As another way to address the issue, researchers are working on a pill to combat the effects of loneliness—a condition, studies suggest, that is worse than obesity.

The volunteers at the University of Chicago's Brain Dynamics Laboratory, all otherwise young and healthy, were tied together by really only one thing: nearly off-the-chart scores on the most widely used scale measuring loneliness.

Asked how often they felt they had no one they could turn to, . . . how often they felt alone, left out, isolated or no longer close to anyone, the answer, almost always, was “always.”

The volunteers agreed to be randomly dosed over eight weeks with either pregnenolone, a hormone naturally produced by the body's adrenal gland, or a placebo. Two hours after swallowing the assigned tablet, the university's researchers captured and recorded their brain activity while the participants looked at pictures of emotional faces or neutral scenes.

Studies in animals suggest that a single injection of preg-

nenolone can reduce or “normalize” an exaggerated threat response in socially isolated lab mice. . . .

The researchers have every hope the drug will work in lonely human brains, too, although they insist the goal is not an attempt to cure loneliness with a pill.⁴

If you think this is just an American issue, think again. In 2017, a report recommended that the United Kingdom take serious action to address the issue, including the nomination of a minister of loneliness. The report not only encouraged leaders to find a way to measure loneliness and provide funding to alleviate it but also called on public-sector leaders, private-sector leaders, and everyday citizens to help address this nationwide problem.⁵

And this was before the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown of 2020. Not surprisingly, rising cases of COVID-19 during that time dramatically affected our mental health. A look at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey data shows that depression and anxiety were three to four times more prevalent from April to June 2020 than during the same months of 2019. Rates of suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and alcohol consumption resulting from the uncertainty and isolation of the pandemic rose steadily with the increase of COVID-19 cases.⁶

Welcome to small-group leadership in the twenty-first century. Those statistics represent some of the people in your church.

They may represent you.

During uncertain times, people become even more anxious and depressed. Living isolated only makes it worse. And loneliness was on the scale of an epidemic even before we faced a worldwide pandemic.

Even though most of us live around more people than ever,

we're lonely. We're experiencing what has been referred to as "crowded loneliness," where people feel all alone, even in a crowd.

And social media has only made things worse. It promised to make those who were far away feel near. But it has actually made those who are near feel far away.

FROM PORCH TO DECK

Several years ago, my wife, Terry, an interior designer, read something about home construction that caught her eye. The article she was reading noted that most architects currently design homes to promote privacy and solitude, not connection. Not so when life was simpler and commute times were nonexistent. Back then homes were constructed with front porches, so when you took evening walks or afternoon drives, it was commonplace to bump into your neighbor sitting on his or her porch. After a brief chat, your neighbor would invite you to sit down to enjoy casual conversation and a beverage. People actually took time for one another and saw value in this spontaneous interaction. Talk time on the porch was a way of life. As one writer has observed, "The American front porch further represented the ideal of community in America. For the front porch existed as a zone between the public and private, an area that could be shared between the sanctity of the home and the community outside. It was an area where interaction with the community could take place."⁷

Welcome to the twenty-first century. Retreating from the busyness and intensity of work life, we come home, put the garage door down, and escape. Not outside to the openness of our front porches, but inside to the televisions in our dens. And if we go outside, it's not to the porches on the fronts of our houses.

It's to the decks on the backs of our houses. The harsh truth is that, after a long, hard day and perhaps a crowded commute, we don't want to see people. We want to get away from them! The last thing we want to do at the end of a day is to have one more conversation, hear one more problem, or fulfill one more request. So we shun unplanned interactions by sheltering in place. Our goal is to avoid people—and what they potentially want from us—at all costs. And cost us it does.

.....
Though we are a culture craving relationship, we are some of the loneliest people who have ever lived.
.....

Though we are a culture craving relationship, we are some of the loneliest people who have ever lived. In the midst of crowded highways and crowded communities, many of us are living very lonely lives. We live, work, and play around people but are known by few. We try to educate our loneliness away. We try to medicate it away. We try to legislate it away. But we're still lonely and getting lonelier. And that wasn't what God intended. To be separated and alone was never what he envisioned for his most prized creation.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNITY
.....

- 1. Describe a meaningful relationship you've had. What made it so significant?
- 2. Share the last time you had an important conversation with that person or another close friend. What made it so significant?
- 3. Why are people today so lonely? What do you think people are really looking for?

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4. Have you ever experienced “crowded loneliness,” where you have felt all alone, even in a crowd? If so, why did you feel that way?
5. Describe the last time you had a meaningful conversation with a neighbor.
6. Do you think people actually value community or just the idea of community? Explain.