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Finding authentic community

by Andrea Westby

I've never enjoyed small talk. The idea of trying to hold a conversation with someone about paint colors, the weather or the best types of kids' toys makes me anxious. It's not that I don't love people, but I find surface-level conversations so draining that I avoid them.

As a doctor, I am accustomed to immediate intimacy. Patients often share their life stories at our first visit, from their "embarrassing" physical concerns to deeply personal family issues.

But I've found that cultivating authentic reciprocal relationships outside the office isn't so easy. Dinner parties aren't really the place to discuss childhood trauma or relationship issues. For people like me, it requires years to build enough trust to be able to share details like these. However, I believe that it's nearly impossible to completely engage with another without sharing our "stuff."

Authenticity in church

I mentor an eighth-grade girls' confirmation group. This past year, one of our topics is authenticity within the church and in our relationships. We spoke about bringing our truths and wrestling with hard questions together. We also discussed honesty and vulnerability, and how frequently we church members only reveal our best selves, instead of admitting and sharing our struggles and imperfections. It is my opinion that we must bring our whole selves into relationship and community, or we never fully know each other.

The thing is, if we're truly honest with ourselves, we all have "stuff."

The church should be an obvious place to share it, as threads of love, kindness and acceptance are woven throughout the gospel, and with God's help, we Christians try to live these values in the world. However, we human beings are also really good at drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion between



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worthy and unworthy.

Community helps makes us healthy

Community is important for us emotionally and spiritually, but also physically. There is plenty of research showing the importance of community and connectedness in health and wellness, including studies that show that loneliness and isolation in seniors lead to serious health problems.

In the book *The Blue Zones*, which examines the lifestyles of communities across the globe that are most associated with long and active lives, author Dan Buechner finds that having a connected purpose is key. We are meant to be in community. And unfortunately, an online community doesn't seem to count in the same measurable way.

After my medical training, I moved to a small town in northern Minnesota to begin my practice. I thought it would be easy to feel at home; I mean, my home town is just down the road. I'm "from here," so I should be easily accepted, right?

Real life set in, and it wasn't that easy. I longed for friends—real, true friends I could call and talk for hours, friends whose shoulder I could cry on when I had a hard day, who could make me laugh at myself when I was being ridiculous. And for a while, I didn't have anyone like that here. I had some acquaintances, people I could have dinner with or go for a run with, but we didn't get much deeper than that.

As a young professional woman, I felt an expectation from others (along with my own self-made pressure) to be more independent, and to be a better doctor than everyone else (mostly men). And, as I sought to establish myself in this small town, I felt the need to project that image of steely

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independence and competence in all aspects of my life. It was incredibly isolating.

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But I've found that to get others to open up, sometimes we have to go first. And always, we need to be willing to accept the shortcomings and missteps of others as they learn to forgive and love ours.

I started talking to other young women in my town who also felt that they needed somewhere to belong, and with their encouragement, I started a Café group. To encourage women to host, our only rules were that no one should feel pressure to provide food or to clean their house before our get-togethers.

In our gatherings, I made a point of allowing myself to be vulnerable and speak about my perfectionism, negativity and addictive personality, as well as my unrelenting belief that this world can be a more wholesome, welcoming place, and my unwillingness to accept anything less than that. And the women in the group didn't walk away from me or our community, despite their knowledge of this and me. The truest relationships have remained and enriched my life in a way that I never could have imagined.

True community acknowledges that each of us has a place and a purpose in the world, an inherent value not based on performance, and that each of us has challenges. We give one another the space to live into their vocations while holding each other up in our struggles. Some days, I may not have the strength to sing the hymns, but the voices of those around me carry me along and give me hope for the future. Next Sunday, I may return the favor.



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Closing prayer:

Mother God, we have isolated ourselves from each other and the natural world. We know that we need to live in intersectional and inclusive community in order that we, all of humanity, and the earth can truly thrive. But we often do not know the way, or we turn from each other and the environment. Open our hearts and minds to each other, help us to connect in meaningful ways with even those from whom we differ, and create authentic community available to all. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. Have you experienced authentic community? What was it like for you? In what ways have you brought that experience into other relationships or communities?
2. What is one way that you can nurture or invite authentic community into your life?
3. Has your experience of the church been that of nurturing community? If not, how do you envision it could be?

Andrea Westby is a family physician who currently is a teacher of family medicine in the University of Minnesota's North Memorial Family Medicine Residency, caring for the urban underserved in North Minneapolis. She is passionate about promoting health, wellness, wholeness, justice, and equality in all spheres of life: healthcare, the church, globally. If she wasn't a doctor, she probably would have been a Lutheran pastor. She enjoys reading, food, being physically active, and spending time with her husband and "fur babies" Maeby and George Michael.

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Finding your people

by Laura Morrison

When family is at a distance (either emotionally or physically), it's imperative to find friends who understand you to your core.

I'll be moving across the country soon, from Washington state to Ohio. There, I'll be new. I'll be the one who doesn't belong. But slowly, as time goes on, I hope to become part of the community—and to find my people. Of course, that won't be easy. In some ways it will be painful. But making these connections is not only valuable, it's necessary.

I've been the new person before, having moved from California to Iowa to the east side of Washington state (where Seattle is not) knowing no more than one person in the new place before moving.

I've had to put myself out there, not only to find acquaintances, people you know only on a surface level, but to find true friends. These are the people who understand your motivations and feelings—and they still like you. They are your people, and theirs is a role that cannot be filled by your significant other or your best friend or your cat or your family—especially if you're not close to your family, whether physically or emotionally.

Jesus teaches about friendship and love often, but loyal friendship is also presented in the Old Testament:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had com upon him, each of them set out from his home – Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. (Job 2:11)

Now if you've read the book of Job, you know that the lead character has lost everything dear to him. He is completely and utterly desolate when his bros show up to sit with him and listen to his tale of woe.

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They're there to support him, but they also challenge him as together they wrestle with the big questions of faith and God. This is real friendship. The hard stuff. The good stuff.

It's what we all need in our relationships.

So how can women who are coming into a new place find "their people"? Through years of packing up and moving and doing it all over again, here's what I've learned.

Say "yes," again and again

It's simple. When someone invites you to do something, you say "yes." Even if that thing is volleyball and you're terrible at sports. Even if that thing is karaoke and you don't sing. This doesn't matter. Show up because you don't know who may be there – maybe a new friend or maybe not. Either way, you explored a new possibility.

Join a group

Look at the events page on any local newspaper website to find groups for anything from Moms Who Motorcycle to Knitting Circle. Making new friends as an adult isn't always natural, but chances are that in groups like these, you won't be the only one looking to meet new people.

Find a church

The Quakers call themselves the Religious Society of Friends. I've always loved that. It seems to me that every church should be a society of friends. Obviously, you won't be bosom buddies with everyone you meet at church, but through a shared faith in God, it's easier to find people who understand you. Getting into a small group Bible study, like a Café group, can also lead to important connections. To have a place to talk about Jesus and what it means to be a follower today cannot be underestimated.

Prepare for the next move

"Jump," "Leap," "Have faith," they tell us. But the unknown is always scary. Prayer can also help you during a new transition to a new home.



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My grandmother, now in her 80s, has had to move often thanks to her father's and later her husband's work. Each time was hard, but she would pack up and go when the time came. Because of this, she has friends all over the country. She calls many of them weekly and still writes handwritten letters. Our sense of place and worth isn't only wrapped up in the place we live, she taught me. It's about finding an authentic community of friends, even if they don't live nearby.

Remember what it's like to be new

The thing about being in one place for a while is that you eventually forget what it's like to be the new person. There are always new people moving in. They feel the exact same way you did. They are you. Make them feel welcome. Give them practical advice, like where the best farmer's market is. Tell them where to meet people. Tell them they're not alone. You can't promise love or even best friends, but you can promise they'll find support.

Now, once again, I'm moving. But this time I won't be so alone—I'll be moving with my new husband into a new apartment and a new job. This is absolutely amazing—and terrifying! But I'll have my husband's family nearby and some of his friends. What a blessing. And I look forward to finding my people too. The journey will be well worthwhile.

Closing prayer:

God, I'm here once again to cry out to you. Through all of the stress and the worry of daily life, you are there, always. Listening. Help me to recognize you in the beauty of your world, and the beauty of your people. Lead me to make strong and lasting relationships built on honesty and laughter and your word. Bless the friendships and connections I have now, and bless the ones to come. Be with those who feel lonely. Help them to realize that loneliness is never the truth. Love is stronger. You are stronger. Your timeline is never the same as our own. Blessed be your name. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you think of your friends as like your family? If not, would you like to?

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2. How can we be more approachable and welcoming of others who may be new?

3.What are some ways you can better cherish and enhance the friendships you have? What makes you feel most part of a group?

Laura Morrison, a journalist, is moving to Cleveland, Ohio. She wants people to know that she'll always be a Seattle Mariners fan.

This article first appeared in the May 2017 issue of Cafe. <http://www.boldcafe.org/blog/faith-reflections-finding-people>