

Community Health and Leadership

The health of a Bridgetown community is not ensured through the possession of a great leader, excellent practices, high attendance or close relationships. Every member brings their own cultural baggage and expectations of what a community should be, and there are certain tones and a unique atmosphere that each community sets and fosters dependent on the backgrounds of each of its members. Leaders have control and influence over that tone and atmosphere, but part of leading a healthy community is uncovering the unhealthy baggage that members bring to the table, and replacing it with the loving, grace filled love of Jesus over time. This is done through the example of the leader, by the way community is ran logistically, but especially by the way that members are treated by their leaders and each other when members break community expectations.

In order to have a firm grasp on what a healthy tone and atmosphere looks like, it is useful to have a thorough understanding of what unhealthy behaviors look like so that these behaviors can be recognized and replaced with grace. Once these unhealthy behaviors are understood it is then possible to move into the space of building up healthy ones.

Abuse is a strong word, and it is understandable to feel uneasy about its use in our context because of its negative connotations, but it is important to understand that the type of behavior we are talking about is on a spectrum that on the lower end is present in all of our relationships to some degree, and on the extreme end of the spectrum causes trauma. I am not insinuating that Bridgetown community leaders intentionally create an atmosphere that in any way is on the higher end of this spectrum, but the traditional approach in the church towards abuse is to avoid and ignore the topic in hopes that it never shows up on our door; this is not acceptable. In general the church seems to be clueless when it comes to the topic of spiritual abuse and perhaps even what healthy communities should look like. There is an unfortunate false narrative that if the proper theology is preached that socially healthy communities will be created organically; Bridgetown does a great job of not buying that narrative. But a healthy church must directly confront and understand abuse, even if they themselves never reflect abusive behavior so they can recognize it and avoid it.

It is also not completely accurate to condense community health as a net result of emotionally healthy individuals. The two are related, and a healthy community is not possible without a healthy leadership, but individual health doesn't matter if a leader is unable to recognize and shut down unhealthy atmosphere, which takes education and

understanding. It is this education and understanding that I will attempt to establish with the help of Ken Garrett's dissertation on Spiritual Abuse which came out of our Western Seminary last year.

Ken defines an abusive church in this way:

A distinct group that subscribes to the general, core-beliefs of the Christian faith in its doctrines, but exists in an atmosphere in which the policies, practices, traditions, decisions, and demands of the church's leader(s) have created a socially unhealthy, traumatizing environment in the congregation.

He then defines spiritual abuse as:

The application of undue influence and coercion over a person's thoughts and actions, resulting in various forms of trauma to the individual, and particularly related to the spiritual/ecclesial milieu (in this work, a Christian church).

Ken outlines eight indicators of churches that abuse. These indicators are not limited to Christian communities, they actual have universal elements that can be found in every community. It is important to understand these indicators as also on a spectrum, with varying levels of severity. A leader should individually approach each of these indicators and attempt to create atmosphere that is as low on these spectrums as possible, and recognize when certain boundaries are crossed.

The eight indicators as found in Ken's dissertation:

Deception, Loss, Isolation, Elitism, Group-Speak, Fear, Disclosure, Trauma.

My adaptation of these eight elements for our context:

Expectations, Resources, Healthy Relationships, Elitism, Group-Speak, Open Environments, Confession and Sin, Healthy Exits

Expectations: What is promised is what they receive.

(Adapted from *Deception: What Is Received Is Not What Was Promised*)

Before a relationship begins all relationships start with a set of expectations, and in healthy relationships what is promised is what is received. Healthy communities are realistic about what they promise their members, and with each of these indicators there are implicit and explicit elements. It is important that every leader asks

themselves; what are members in my community promised, and how is the actual result different?

The implicit element here is what every member brings from their cultural baggage, from past communities, from assumptions they have that aren't rooted in the basics course, or from the deeper parts of their character that they may be unaware of. The explicit elements are found in what is stated at church on Sunday, in the basics course, and during community. Both of these elements must be recognized then confronted through thoughtful reflection, prayer, and group discussion. Expectations must be realistic and failures to meet these expectations must be permeated by the forgiving and loving, tender grace of Jesus.

Resources: Are we asking for more than our members feel comfortable giving?

(Adapted from *Loss: The demand for more, of everything*)

Communities have a cost. There is the time and emotional energy, and then the economic costs of travel, a meal, and a mission. These costs are unavoidable for a community, but there are boundaries that all communities need to establish. If any member feels as if they are giving more than they are able, they should feel free to communicate this with their leaders and each other without fear. Stage of life, personality, and many other factors are vital to take into consideration, but it is important that leaders don't see themselves as required to persuade any of the less committed members into giving more than they feel they should.

Even if a leader sees that someone is *able* to give more, especially when compared to others who perhaps sacrifice more than they should, a healthy leader never asks more of their members than those members feel comfortable. There is a time and space, where if firm relationships are established, a leader can point this out those who perhaps contribute much less than they should, but this boundary must be treated with incredible care. Here is an example of what this might look like practically.

One member of a community who shows up every week is always backing out of the things they are meant to bring for the meal, and passing it onto other members of the community. Their excuses are legitimate, and they give proper notice, but it seems that the other members are sacrificing more in this area and the leader notices that this is a continual pattern that persists for several months, and there aren't obvious stage of life restrictions that make it easy to understand why this member is unable to contribute. The leader might say something like "Hey, I want to connect with you about the food contribution. I

want to make sure you know that I am not expecting you to contribute more than you feel comfortable or able, but if it's okay, I'd like to have an open conversation about this.”

The leader should not expect the outcome of the conversation to be that the person contributes their share, rather it is to bring the issue up in a way that the other person does not feel socially guilted into contributing more than they feel comfortable. The person should not feel like noncompliance is going to affect their community relationships. This is only possible in a loving, gospel centered community, where the warm grace of Jesus is at the foundation. A leader must put themselves into the situations of their members who may have very different personalities or stages of life, and they must err on the side of grace with their members. This has to be applied to the mission aspect of a community, to any financial giving in a community, the contribution to a meal, and especially to extra activities outside of a once a week gathering that communities participate in; anything beyond the once per week meal should be described as a fun, optional, open invitation.

Healthy Relationships: Keeping members from self-isolation

(Adapted from Isolation: The community as the sole source of friendship and family)

In an unhealthy community it explicitly stated that the community is the source of the deeper relationships in the lives of its members. At Bridgetown this could potentially be an unstated assumption that members bring to their communities, or it can be implicitly present in the way that each individual interacts with their community.

A healthy community will never expect their members to place the needs of the community above their family or existing relationships. If mom is in town, she doesn't spend time alone on Tuesday night because the member has placed their weekly community meeting above family. Mom either comes to community (with notice), or the member bows out for a week, both are understandable. Healthy communities encourage friendships outside of their community, and recognize that a Bridgetown community might not even be a place where deep friendships are formed.

Elitism: Healthy relationship with those outside of our community.

(Adapted from Elitism: The prevailing notion of superiority)

Elitism in unhealthy communities is explicit and extreme, and because it is rarely experienced by common members of churches in this way, what is actually very low spectrum elitism is perceived as much higher by those unfamiliar with the extreme. It

would be misguided to describe Bridgetown or its communities as elitist, but there is an implicit lower spectrum element here that members may bring to their communities or Bridgetown in general.

A healthy Bridgetown community will not have a negative view of other churches in the Portland area. They don't say that Bridgetown is the only decent church, the only one following the way of Jesus, and they don't put down other churches. Other churches are seen as partners and co-contributors, and as equally legitimate paths to following Jesus.

Healthy community members will also be careful to not present themselves as separate from members of our church who are not part of a community, and members should be careful in the way that they speak to people at our church who are not in Bridgetown communities. It is a very popular question in our church to ask "Are you part of a Bridgetown Community?" and it is not a bad question, but the fact that many of our regular attenders are unable to commit to a specifically Bridgetown organized community is important to recognize, and those who are not in community should feel isolated.

There are many legitimate reasons that members of our church are not able to commit to the communities that we organize, and as Gavin has said, these members should not feel coerced into a community that they can't commit to, or feel left out of our church. Stage of life is one reason that a person may not be able to commit to a community. I would also argue that certain people are not in an emotionally healthy space, due to anxiety, past trauma, etc. to be part of a Bridgetown community, and these people should be recognized, supported, encouraged, and met where they are at, both by Bridgetown members who are in communities, and the Bridgetown leadership in general. Bridgetown Communities are a service, tool, and opportunity that is offered by our church to those who do not have communities of Jesus followers who they can share life with, they are not *the* way to follow Jesus.

Group-Speak: The unique language of churches.

The way that this indicator relates to Bridgetown is very complicated, but fascinating and important. In short, Bridgetown does have Group-Speak elements, but these are not nearly as extreme as is found in unhealthy communities, and they are actually constructive, not used as a method of control, rather as a tool for redefining what it means to be a Christian in our context against the common definitions found in our culture. Our Group-Speak comes from our Practicing the Way series, the Basics

course, books written by John Mark, and consistent cultural elements that happen each Sunday. As Bridgetown further develops a unique identity this may be an area for leadership to be aware of, but for now this is not necessarily something that Bridgetown Community leaders need to worry about, with one exception, which is the addition of members who have not been part of Bridgetown for any length of time.

Here is an obvious list of Bridgetown Group-Speak: Bridgetown Communities, Missional Communities, front line pastors, Family Disciple Mission, be like Jesus, become like Jesus, do what Jesus did, 'God's will be done in Portland as it is in Heaven', everything on the intentional and unintentional spiritual formation paradigm such as Teaching Practice Community and Stories Habits Relationships. This list also includes common words such as Holy Spirit, prayer, but also included is our common way of seeing and describing our faith and the world.

Each of these phrases or words has to be defined to those who are not familiar with our church, because if we use them in casual conversation the exact meaning of these phrases is unclear. In order to not become socially isolated from our city, it is important that we recognize our tendency to have different language so that we can communicate with other Christians and non-Christians in our city. It is also important that when members join our communities we are all on the same page as to what these words mean, and that takes the recognition that we have different definitions for most of our words compared to even other similar churches in our city.

Once you are clued into this you can see it everywhere; it is for this reason that every time John Mark brings up Bridgetown Communities he gives its quick definition for everyone, and anyone that has been around Bridgetown for long can almost verbatim recite that definition; a small group of ten or fifteen people that meet around a table once per week and are dedicated to practicing the way of Jesus, and they are really the heartbeat of our church. Because of Group-Speak Gerald before he could give the sermon on the forgiveness practice had to quickly remind everyone what it is that our church does with practices; that we usually are working through a book of the Bible, namely Matthew, but take a break to spend a few weeks on one of the practices of Jesus. There are phrases and sayings that having meanings that are specific to our church, our members pick up on these and frequently verbalize them.

This shouldn't be alarming, nearly every community has aspects of Group-Speak, whether it is a professional community, the military, the houseless community, or ultra-light long distance backpackers. It is important to recognize and account for Group-Speak, and in an unhealthy community it can be a powerful tool for harm, but in

healthy communities it is also a necessary tool for building identity; if new definitions for ideas are not provided by a community, the members will gladly fill them in by borrowing from their culture, and as John Mark says in the Practicing the Way series, good teaching takes false narratives and replaces them with true narratives that are full of the love and grace of Jesus. Please read pages 100-105 of Ken's dissertation on Group-Speak for more information on this topic.

Open Environments: Keeping away fear based motivation.

(Adapted from *Fear: Dread of failing to please your leaders*)

Most people can relate to the idea of an authority figure using fear to manipulate or control, but it is the lower spectrum and implicit aspects of this idea that Bridgetown Community leaders should be aware of. It is the responsibility of every leader to foster a relationship with their community members that allows members to feel that they don't need to act in any way towards other members in order to please them or gain their favor.

It is for this reason that during the fasting practice I explicitly stated and recognized that there is no reason for any of our members to feel like they need to participate in the fasting practice; I did however emphasize the power and benefit of doing so, that is a large part of why we do the practices in the first place. It is also for this reason that I am always explicit in stating during our Tuesday night meeting that it is okay if anyone missed church Sunday.

I do this to foster a community atmosphere where the members can openly say that they didn't have a chance to listen to the sermon or do the practice without the feeling of social shame or guilt. The obvious failure of this leadership method that many may be quick to point out is that it can make it appear as if you do not take the disciple aspect of following Jesus seriously, but I fervently reject that criticism as opposite to the grace-filled character of Jesus. Members who do not participate as fully as is perhaps hoped for must be met with grace, and the way leaders really show that they are serious about discipleship is primarily through example and careful explicit statements. Here is an example:

We are doing the fasting practice this week, so if you would like to participate, set aside a time during your week to fast. It is okay if you are not able to participate, there are a lot of legitimate reasons for why you might not be able to, I recognize that and it's okay to shelf this practice for a different season of

life, you can get creative with an alternative practice such as silence and solitude, or maybe contemplative prayer.

And the next week:

Was anyone able to do the fasting practice this past week, and do they want to share about their experience?

Rather than:

How did the fasting practice go?

Healthy communities have members who feel comfortable with communicating their feelings to each other and their leaders. When you have someone in your life to whom you can tell anything, and know that you aren't going to be judged or corrected, it allows an individual to have a healthy space to grow into the place that their leaders will show by example. This leads us into our discussion on disclosure.

Confession and Sin: Handling the mess with grace.

(Adapted from *Disclosure: Confession as a church requirement*)

Confession is a healthy and helpful spiritual discipline but if not handled correctly can have devastating consequences. I would also like to take some time in this section to speak on the general handling of sin in our communities by community leaders.

Confession must happen organically, and it must never be done through any coerced method. A healthy community should never open up a space where members feel like they must confess their sin in order to have group validation, or that they must confess in order to *truly* beat a sin, rather the confession of sin should come from a space that is member initiated, but leader fostered. It is member initiated in the fact that leaders should never explicitly open up a time for group or individual sin confession, rather members might choose to confess sins in healthy environments that leaders foster.

Leaders foster these environments in several ways. First, they build strong relationships with their community members. Their members know that their community loves them, won't judge them, will keep their confession confidential, and are rooting for their well being, not for their strict adherence to legalistic disciplines. Confession should never happen unless this first step is established, meaning new

communities should avoid confession altogether. Confession as a tool to develop false closeness early in relationships is destructive and cult-like.

If the following must be verbally stated: 'everything here is confidential, we won't judge you, we want what is best for you, and that's our motive' then it likely isn't true. These ideas should already be unquestionable in the minds of healthy community members. This verbal statement is not how this environment is fostered, because it causes the members who hear it to ask themselves 'Is that really true?' and unease is caused when they realize that it is false. Healthy communities however should verbally reinforce these truths *after* confession takes place: 'Thank you for sharing, I'm rooting for you'.

Second, leaders foster these environments through providing space with the occasional separation of genders during prayer and discussion. This gives space for girls to talk about girl stuff, and guys to talk about guy things, because it is not realistic to expect confession across gender lines to be comfortable for anyone outside of the context of marriage. Leaders also foster space through meeting with members individually to talk about life.

Members of communities initiate the confession of sin when they feel like they can trust those they are confessing to. It is not fair to expect members to have this level of trust with every member of their community, and this trust takes time and care. It should not be implied that this level of trust automatically comes with time, and members must develop this without leader intervention or coercion. Members also initiate confession when they feel like those they are confessing to actually care about them and their well being.

It is also in this context that leaders must handle sin in the lives of their members. If the sin does not directly and explicitly impact the community in a way that each of the members can see, but it is a personal sin that happens outside of the community meeting, a community leader must be extremely careful with how they approach the situation. For example, if a leader finds out that a member of the community is sleeping with their unmarried significant other, but this has no direct negative impact on other community members, a couple of guidelines should be followed.

First, a community leader has to recognize that just because they are community leaders, they do not have automatic rights in the happenings of the lives of their members. The position of community leader does not grant any authority in any way

over what the members of their community do outside of community. What does establish authority in the lives of their community members is relationship.

If you don't care enough about a community member to establish a relationship with them, you should carefully consider your motives behind why you believe you would like to see them alter a sinful behavior. It is not enough that you claim to value them, and know that the sinful behavior may be harmful, therefore you should intervene. Implicit or indirect impacts on a community are also not enough of a reason to intervene before relationship is established.

Only in the most extreme examples should a community leader involve themselves in the personal lives of their community members to alter sinful behavior before this relationship is established. Followers of Jesus at our church believe that sex outside of a marriage relationship is not the vision that Jesus has for relationship, they can harm themselves and others emotionally and spiritually, but it is not a situation so dire that the leader should feel that they have the authority to step in unless a relationship with that member is established first. That authority is given to the Holy Spirit who will work within that individual to deal with sin, and a leader who oversteps their boundaries with members who they have not established relationships with is implicitly stating that they don't believe the Holy Spirit has the authority or power to intervene in an individual's life unless they as leaders involve themselves.

It is arguable that the potential damage caused by a leader who is attempting to alter sinful behavior of a member who they don't have a relationship with, is greater than the sinful behavior that should be handled by the Holy Spirit.

Here is what a conversation with the above example might look like between a community member and leader after a strong relationship is established when they meet up for coffee.

I noticed that you mentioned that you've been staying the night at your girlfriends, and I wanted to have an open discussion about that because I believe that isn't the vision that Jesus has for healthy relationship. Because I care about you, I wanted to bring this up, but I totally understand if this is something that you don't want to talk about. I know that there was a time in my own life where I had also had a similar relationship, and I really wish that I had someone in my life who would have talked to me about it, because the fallout of that relationship took me years to recover from. Whether you want to discuss this or not, I'm totally here for you, and I hope you don't feel like I am judging

your behavior, or am bringing this up for any reason except that I don't want to see you hurt.

Healthy leaders reflect Jesus invitation to grace in every aspect of their community, motivated by Jesus centered compassion. This relationship-first approach doesn't apply in situations where communities are directly impacted by sin such as harassment, inappropriate statements, or other group conflicts.

Healthy Exits: the end game.

(Adapted from *Trauma: Leaving is Painful and Costly*)

All Bridgetown Communities will eventually dissolve, and its members come and go for various reasons throughout its lifespan. The focus with this element revolves around how people who exit communities are treated. It also focuses on the realistic view that each community will eventually end, or become unrecognizable as old members leave, and new ones come. The primary concern of community members who learn that someone in their community is leaving should be on the well being of that individual. Here are a few interesting questions for reflection on this element.

Do I feel like I would have hard feelings against someone in my community if they decided to leave?

Would members of my community feel loved if they were to encounter a circumstance that required them to exit my community?