

Analog Community, Part 2

Victory Life Church, Central — Sunday, August 24, 2025

Part 2: “Real People in Real Spaces”

Scripture Reading (Key Text)

Acts 2:1–4 (ESV)¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were **all together in one place**.² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 2:40–44 (ESV)⁴⁰ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and **the fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.⁴⁴ And all who believed were **together** and had all things in common.

Introduction and Framing

Have you ever had an experience or conversation with a group of friends where you laughed so hard, you were in tears, or your stomach or face muscles hurt? But when you tried to recount the story to someone else, they just stared blankly at you? What do we usually say to them? “Well, I guess you had to be there.” Being present makes a difference in the experience.

I imagine this is something akin to the story we are reading here in Acts 2. Luke is trying to communicate something of a powerful experience, unique in human and salvation history. Though the Holy Spirit is still present with us today and can open our eyes to see His work here at Pentecost and His ongoing work throughout history, there was something unique to those who were present in this moment. A snarky way of explaining this is like this: if this were live-streamed, those watching online would only be *watching* this powerful moment, not *experiencing* the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on this day.

What flowed out of the day of Pentecost was the birth of the church, and one of the descriptors of this young church was “togetherness,” what is described as “fellowship,” a word that describes relational intimacy. There was a deep commitment, energized by the Holy Spirit, to real people cultivating real relationships and gathering in real spaces *together*.

Our task in the modern age of digital connectivity, social media, and AI chatbots is to resist the consumeristic approaches to church and become an alternative: a deep and genuine community of belonging, friendships, and sacrifice, and analog community.

The church is to be an analog community: real relationships with real people in real spaces.

Digital community should (at most) be a *supplement*, not a *substitute* for analog community.

God considers belonging in community to be *essential* to our humanity.

Genesis 2:18 (ESV)¹⁸ Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone...”

God considers belonging in community to be *essential* to being his people, the church.

1 Corinthians 12:18–20 (ESV)¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Here’s what we know: God considers belonging in community to be *essential*.

Here’s what I wonder: Why do we consider *optional* what God considers to be *essential*?

Four Spaces of Belonging

If the church is called to be an analog community of real people in real places, how do we create that sense of belonging that is an essential part of being the church?

Acts 2:42 (ESV)⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and **the fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Many churches with noble intent have expressed a desire to be “a church *of* small groups, not just a church *with* small groups.” Ours would be included in this. This comes from a clear recognition that relationships are vital to transformation. Belonging to a community is one of the key ways God transforms us. When we surrender our lives to Jesus, we don’t just belong to Him; we are called to belong to His people as well. We all want to belong, to feel that sense of finding “your people,” and the church is supposed to be that people for those searching for Jesus and those who are followers of Jesus.

Have you ever found it difficult to “fit in” or find “your people”?

Have you ever felt pushed into a space or a relationship?

“Belonging” is not one-dimensional.

What I mean by this is that feeling that sense of belonging is not as simple as feeling like you fit in or you don’t. So many churches, ours included, have tried everything possible to move people from just attending on a Sunday, as important as that is, to belonging to a small group, in the hopes that relationships get forged that lead to transformation and a strong sense of belonging, that clear sense of finding “my people.”

For some people, this has absolutely been the case: life groups have been the key to transformation and belonging, to freedom and friendship. For others, it feels like you’re being pushed into forced friendships, or for some, it even feels like “**forced relational hell**.”

[Elevator Story — +Pic]

The church is to be a community of real relationships with real people in real places.

Acts 2:1 (ESV)¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were **all together in one place**.

There is a way of understanding belonging and relationships, as well as the need to be in real spaces together, that matters to our relationships with God and our identity as disciples of Jesus and being the church, while also not feeling like you are being forced into a “relational hell,” a tight elevator you can’t escape.

In addition to our personal relationship with God, there are four more kinds of relationships He uses to transform us and that contribute to that felt sense of belonging. These relationships are represented by “spaces,” and each, in its unique way, contributes to our sense of belonging. All four matter, and all four are essential to us feeling like we belong; that feeling like we have found “our people.”

The more we understand these four spaces of belonging, the better we can integrate into belonging to a community of transformation. My hope is that this church will do this well and help everyone feel like they belong at the right level. Relationships that constitute a sense of belonging exist in four specific spaces.

Four Spaces of Belonging¹ (Intro)

1. Public: 100+ people
2. Social: 20–70 people
3. Personal: 5–12 people
4. Transparent: 2–4 people

In all four spaces, we *make connections* with other people and find those connections to be *significant*, and in each space, we *participate* and are *committed* in some way.

These meaningful and significant connections with real people, and our commitment and participation in each of these real spaces, constitute our sense of belonging. It is not simply the number of friends or intimate relationships we have that constitutes this. It’s connecting with real people in all four spaces that we need to have that sense of belonging that is essential to us being fully human as God intended. For the church to be who God has made us to be, we are responsible for cultivating this sense of belonging in each of these spaces.

Connecting this to the church, our worship gatherings are a “Public” space. There’s a way to connect and engage in that space that contributes to a sense of belonging. The truth is that you need deeper relationships to belong in community, and because of this, the church offers small groups. Are small (life) groups the best way to develop friendships? Maybe. For some, absolutely. They are a way, but not the *only* way. For some, it feels like “forced relational hell.”

¹ The original idea of spaces correlating with relationships came from sociologist Edward T. Hall in the 1960s. He coined this in the term “proxemics” to describe “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space.” *The Hidden Dimension*. p.1

The primary relationship we all must cultivate is our relationship with God. It is this relationship that acts as the foundation of all transformation and should be the foundation of all other relationships. God considers community to be essential, but not at the expense of a relationship with Him. God's direct and personal interactions with us at the one-on-one level are the most powerful encounters we can have in life. Our discipleship to Jesus originates with simply being *with* him, alone and intentionally. Our face-to-face relationship with our loving Creator and Redeemer acts as the bedrock for all our lives.

Our communion with God equips us to engage more fruitfully in each of these four spaces of belonging.

Regardless of our current belonging, whether in the church or in other places, our strongest sense of belonging will have the strongest transformative effect on us. Whoever you find to be "your people" will transform you the most. We all need to belong to community. It's one thing we are all searching for, and we attempt to find that sense in many different places and people. My hope for our church is that your belonging in this community would deepen your discipleship to Jesus the most.

"Belonging" isn't only experienced at *one* level. We may think that it is experienced only when we have close personal friends, maybe the "Personal" or "Transparent" spaces. However, a sense of belonging should be felt at every level and space for us to find the fulfillment that comes from being a part of "your people." It's actually cultivating the sense of relationship and community at each level that contributes to a holistic sense of belonging.

Jesus in the Four Spaces of Belonging²

1. Public: the Crowds
2. Social: the "70"
3. Personal: the 12 Disciples
4. Transparent: the 3 (Peter, James, and John)

You can see each of these spaces in the life and ministry of Jesus. Each of these spaces became a space in which he related to people differently; spaces where he created different levels of belonging.

Divine (The Father) (Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12, John 5:19, John 17)

Public: The Crowds (Matthew 5:1-2, John 6:1-2, Mark 6:34)

Social: The 70 (Luke 10:1, Matthew 9:9-13, Luke 19)

Personal: The 12 Disciples (John 13, Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 8:27-33)

Transparent: The 3 (Luke 9:28-36, Mark 10:35-45, Matthew 26:36-38)

Jesus created a sense of belonging and care in each of the four spaces. He also leveraged each space to disciple people at different levels. Jesus loved everyone the same, but he did not treat everyone the same. He related to people differently based around these spaces.

² The original idea of spaces correlating with relationships came from sociologist Edward T. Hall in the 1960s. He coined this in the term "proxemics" to describe "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space." *The Hidden Dimension*. p.1

Four Spaces of Belonging³

1. Public: 100+ people (12ft+)
2. Social: 20–70 people (4–12ft)
3. Personal: 5–12 people (18in–4ft)
4. Transparent: 2–4 people (0–18in)

1. Public

These are large gatherings of people whose purpose for gathering or belonging is some kind of mutual experience. What we mean by that is something like an event (travelers on the same flight), an experience (a concert or movie), or some other influence (sports team fans, politics). Spatially speaking, people in this environment have a comfort level of about 12 feet apart. The sense of belonging in this environment is about engaging in the experience or event together, not necessarily about building relational depth person to person.

In the public space, there is a difference between being *anonymous* and being a *stranger*.

We may want to be anonymous, but we don't want to feel like a stranger or an outsider. When it comes to the church, this would be our weekend services and large gatherings of this sort. We gather to worship God and engage with His presence. In the public space of a church gathering, we participate and engage with worship, even if we do not know very people's names. We can be somewhat anonymous, but we do not want to feel like an outsider.

Public Space (100+ people): Focus: engaging with an outside resource

An author, writing about a time in college when he visited a friend's church, tells this story: "After the opening time of worship, the pastor stood up and rather bossily instructed all of the new people to raise their hands. That was pretty awkward, although it was a relief to see there were a few of us naïve lambs scattered around the room. There followed a long pause, and then at some mystical, unannounced command, the regulars stood as one, turned to face the nearest new person, and, with a helpful pitching note from the piano, began to sing a song of welcome to us. *Individually. In the name of Jesus*. It was as if a weird and creepy horror movie had been created by the makers of *VeggieTales* – a jolly tune, and some sweet smiles, which masked a seriously bizarre community. After what seemed like twenty minutes, the song ended and the congregation sat down, most of them looking about as relieved as I felt. We newbies glanced anxiously across the room at one another, with a shared expression of horror in our eyes. 'What on earth just happened here?' went the unsaid question."

2. Social

This space is the range between (roughly) twenty to seventy people. The "social" space is where we share "snapshots" of who we are, not necessarily a complete picture of our full identity. By sharing these "snapshots," this is a way we seek to build affinity with others. It's what we mean by "socialize." There is a real connection and sense of belonging in this space that may seem superficial, but in fact is real and genuine, even if it isn't that deep (think backyard grill-out). Believe it or not, there is actually a need in each of us to engage in "small talk," which Eugene Peterson defines as "the way we talk when we aren't talking about

³ Bobby Harrington & Alex Asalom. *Discipleship the Fits*. p. 59
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anything in particular.”⁴ In spatial terms, this is about 4 to 12 feet apart; think handshake, which is the preamble to testing these relationships out.

(I’ll talk more about this space in a little bit.)

Social Space (20–70 people, 4’–12’): Focus: Sharing snapshots that build affinity

3. Personal

This space forms in groups of four to twelve, where we feel able to share private information (think friends having a private dinner). This would be a space where people are close enough to see each other as who they really are, even within touching distance, where people feel like they can reveal their personal thoughts and feelings about their lives. The ability to be in close proximity and share acceptance indicates the emotional qualities of the relationship, experiencing genuine depth in friendship, people we would describe as “close friends.” Most often, when we describe “community,” the relationships we have in this space are what we model the idea of “community” after.

Personal Space (4–12 people, 18”–4’); Focus: Revealing private information

4. Transparent

This is the space where you are privately with one or two others, making this a very small group of two to four people of your closest relationships. Very few relationships are this level of transparency and intimacy. Most people only have the emotional margin for just a couple of relationships at this level. These are the relationships that are characterized by complete openness and candor, where nothing is held back because shame is not held here. This is the concept presented in Genesis as “naked and unashamed”—an ideal we live out literally in marriage and metaphorically with our best friends. “Ashamed” does not mean embarrassed. Embarrassment does not necessarily include shame.

“Shame is the experience of the intimate self exposed in an inappropriate space.”⁵

Spatially speaking, this is the closest proximity of 0 to 18 inches, and within this distance, it is too close for our eyes to focus too much on them. This is a way of being able to see the person, but not focusing on their flaws. “This blurring of flaws is a wonderful metaphor for what is going on relationally at these safest depths of human engagement.”

Transparent Space (2–4 people, 0”–18”): Focus: Living in vulnerability and openness

There may be some of you that assume that just because you don’t have very many people in this category (or maybe no one at all), you don’t have any sense of belonging. This space takes time to cultivate, and there may be no one who is yet ready to get this close to you, like coming over to your house. Though this may incite a sense of rejection, know that this is a very

⁴ Eugene Peterson. *The Contemplative Pastor*. pp. 112-113. He adds, “when we don’t have to think logically, or decide sensibly, or understand accurately. The reassuring conversational noises that make no demands, inflict no stress. The sounds that take the pressure off. The meandering talk that simply expresses what is going on at the time.”

⁵ Joseph R. Myers. *The Search to Belong*. p.51

intimate space and it takes time to build the kind of trust necessary to have this level of relationship. If you have no one, or only one person in this category of your life, I would encourage you to begin engaging in the other spaces to build connectivity and chemistry in relationships, believing that at some point, there will be someone whom your relationship with develops deeper into the Personal space, possibly even the Transparent space.

We invite the stranger in, not for intimacy at first, but at the right level so that they will no longer be a stranger.

People connect and can be motivated to connect in all four spaces. It is our charge to invite the stranger in. We do not invite strangers in for intimacy. We invite them in so they will no longer be strangers. We give space and they family, belonging, and community.

“True community and belonging is accomplished through the significant relationships we embrace in all four spaces.”

The Importance of the Social Space

The space that has taken the biggest hit culturally is the Social space. Older generations have the experience of what it means to have loose ties and strike up conversations with strangers, whereas young generations have struggled with this. The Social space is nearly impossible to cultivate through digital means.

The tendency for the church is to focus on only two spaces. The church’s worship gatherings are a “Public” space. The truth is that you need deeper relationships to belong in community, and because of this, the church offers small groups. Many of the church’s small groups are in the “Personal” space. For most, this can feel like “forced relational hell.” The significant challenge for most people is that this is a giant leap in relationship. Many people are comfortable in the Public space of worship gatherings, but are not ready to step into the Personal space yet. You are unsure if these are your “close friends.” You may not be ready for this kind of commitment. So you stay within the Public space, or in some cases, the pressure is too much, so you leave the Public space with this group of people because you feel too much like a stranger.

One of the most helpful bridges between the Public space and the Social space is small talk. Though this may seem easy to some and somewhat annoying to others, it actually plays an important role in moving from anonymity to a neighborly relationship. Eugene Peterson calls the role of small talk “conversational humility.” When discussing the role of small talk as it relates to pastoral ministry, he says, “Pastoral work...is that aspect of Christian ministry that specializes in the ordinary. It is the nature of pastoral life to be attentive to, immersed in, and appreciative of the everyday texture of people’s lives.”⁶

It’s the Social space, this in-between space with a much smaller group of people, where you experience the earliest stages of friendship and community beyond anonymity. In this kind of space, three things happen: we build *neighborly* relations (people we can call upon for minor favors), we start to *identify* those with whom we’d like to become closer friends, and we *reveal* elements of our identity and our life’s journey. Through small talk, socializing, and neighborly

⁶ Eugene Peterson. *The Contemplative Pastor*. p. 112

relations, we reveal enough about ourselves to build authentic community, building a greater sense of affinity for one another, and deepening that sense that you belong to a larger group, a shared identity. It's relationships and belonging in the Social space that some believe is credited for the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first three hundred years of the church, when the church was unpopular, and gathering was, at times, even illegal.⁷

The aspects to the Social space: 1. we build *neighborly* relations, 2. we *identify* potential closer friends, and 3. we *reveal* elements of our identity and our life's journey.

The Social space has become more important in our culture and in the church. The dissolving of the Social space is, in part, what is making our society weaker and our culture more toxic. Derek Thompson, in an article from *The Atlantic*, describes the disappearance of the Social space and its consequences like this: "All of this time alone, at home, on the phone, is not just affecting us as individuals. It's making society weaker, meaner, and more delusional. Marc J. Dunkelman, an author and a research fellow at Brown University, says that to see how chosen solitude is warping society at large, we must first acknowledge something a little counterintuitive: Today, many of our bonds are actually getting stronger...Home-based, phone-based culture has arguably solidified our closest and most distant connections, the inner ring of family and best friends (bound by blood and intimacy) and the outer ring of tribe (linked by shared affinities). But it's wreaking havoc on the middle ring of 'familiar but not intimate' relationships with the people who live around us, which Dunkelman calls the **village**. 'These are your neighbors, the people in your town,' he said. We used to know them well; now we don't. The middle ring is key to social cohesion, Dunkelman said. Families teach us love, and tribes teach us loyalty. The village teaches us tolerance."⁸

As it relates to discipleship, the community we belong to the most will have the greatest effect on who we are becoming. Our sense of belonging is connected to each of those four spaces. The church is called to cultivate belonging in each of these four spaces (one body), and each of us is called to engage in each space (many members).

Romans 12:5 (NLT) We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

We cannot expect to be discipled in only one or two of these spaces, because belonging to community exists beyond one or two, but in all four. God works within the relationships cultivated in each space, and we are called to take personal responsibility and have the courage to get out of our comfort zone and cultivate that sense of belonging in each space.

Conclusion // Integration

Identify where you are in your belonging within each space. What is the pushback to progressing within the spaces? Why? What is the Discipleship invitation within each level? What happens if we don't engage at each level? What opportunities do we miss if we stay comfortable?

⁷ For a larger discussion on this, see Harrington and Absalom's *Discipleship That Fits*, pp. 96-101, citing the work of sociologist Rodney Stark and his book, *The Rise of Christianity*.

⁸ Derek Thompson. "The Anti-Social Century." *The Atlantic*, February 2025, pp. 30-38. PDF file, *The Atlantic*, <https://cdn.theatlantic.com/media/magazine/pdfs/202502.pdf>.