

How Our Varied Rhythms Disciple the Empty Self

The modern self tends to feel empty and unsure of its identity and purpose, and therefore we shouldn't be surprised that the empty self gets easily confused about where to put its time, money, and attention. We ask our people to gather in the following three ways at least in part because each rhythm uniquely reminds us who we are and how we were meant to live.

The Family Meal. The family meal is a powerful enacted parable. Every time we plan a meal, and then prepare it together, eat it together, and clean it up together, we are reminded that we are a spiritual family. The lonely, empty, consumer self is adrift because it's been sold the lie that happiness means never being tied down or obligated to anyone, and being as free as possible to pursue any desire. In that view, commitment is a form of entrapment and the enemy of self-realization.

Randy Frazee, in his book *The Connecting Church: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community*, writes:

Princeton's Robert Wuthnow has found that small groups mainly "provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others. The social contract binding members together asserts only the weakest of obligations. Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied." In *Overcoming Loneliness in Everyday Life*, two Boston psychiatrists ... suggest that ... groups "fail to replicate the sense of belonging we have lost. Attending weekly meetings, dropping in and out as one pleases, shopping around for a more satisfactory or appealing group—all of these factors work against the growth of true community."

Discipleship Groups. Around the family meal, we build relationships so that we might know and be known, which is an end in itself. But knowing and being known also allows us to build each other up. At the risk of simplification, the family meal helps us build relationships with each other, and then discipleship groups allow us to build each other up. Have you ever thought about the reality that someday the only rhythm that will be left is the family meal? The only one of these three rhythms that we will still be observing in heaven is the family meal. Between Eden and the New Jerusalem, we have sin to confess and a message of reconciliation to proclaim to people far from God. Sanctification exists because glorification doesn't. Missions exists because worship doesn't.

Missional Gatherings. We gather because we're a spiritual family and we're becoming friends (the family meal), and we gather to become more like Jesus (discipleship groups). But we are also commanded by Jesus to gather for the sake of the lost—people far from God (Jn 13:35). Therefore, we don't just pray for our three in discipleship groups, but we also gather together in natural, neutral, and regular ways that will be humbly hospitable, provide the opportunity to make new friends, and introduce lost people to Christians loving Christians. Family meals become missional gatherings in a moment when a lost person accepts our invitation. Third places are part of the fabric of knowing and being known in our city—the golf course, a workout class, a college dorm, a coffeeshop, a neighborhood park, a PTA meeting. City partners help us serve our city by meeting real needs and building real relationships.

Why Varied Rhythms? Because we want to be as simple as possible, and no simpler. "One trick pony" groups do one thing well and many things badly. A traditional small group can merely become a place to hide in plain sight. An "accountability" group can be intense and candid, but fail to build long-term friendships. "Old Country Buffet" groups seek to be responsive to everyone's needs and passions by saying yes to every idea and format that is proposed, and in so doing tend to blunt the tip of the spear through a scattershot approach, such that little impact is made in the group members' hearts or in the community. Our rhythms are *varied* so we can move deeper into discipleship and farther out on mission. Our rhythms are *focused* so we can be faithful and fruitful—in part, by knowing to what we are saying yes and no.

