

A CHURCH RESOURCE

creating
a place
where people
naturally
connect

ORGANIC COMMUNITY

joseph r. myers

FOREWORDS BY RANDY FRAZEE AND BILL DONAHUE

“Once again, Myers hits a home run. Written in personable fashion and with highly informed common sense, *Organic Community* calls us all—church and congregants alike—to honesty about our goals and then offers us sophisticated, efficacious, and grace-filled ways to realize them.”

—Phyllis Tickle, contributing editor in religion, *Publishers Weekly*

“Most people think ‘deep’ and ‘practical’ can’t go together, as if being practical meant being shallow. Joe Myers brings the two together as well as anyone I’ve ever read. Looking back on twenty-four years of church planting and pastoral ministry, I wish I had thoroughly digested *Organic Community* before I got started. It would have saved so much wasted energy—mine, and those whose lives I foolishly tried to ‘master plan.’ Beneath its simplicity and practicality lie real depth, and from its depth will flow creative, practical action that will make a difference for years to come. This is a book I will reread and widely recommend.”

—Brian McLaren, author/activist; brianmclaren.net

“Helen of Troy may have had the face that launched a thousand ships, but Joe Myers has the furnishings of thought and design that will launch a thousand books, blogs, and briefs on growing ‘organic community.’ If a classic is something that has never finished what it has to say, then this little gem is a ‘classic.’ ”

—Leonard Sweet, E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism,
Drew Theological School; distinguished visiting professor,
George Fox University; www.wikiletics.com

“Anyone seeking to mobilize people to collective and cooperative effort or to promote organizational growth will find Joseph Myers’s *Organic Community* an invaluable resource. Whether educated about organizational systems or merely experiencing them in schools, sports, the military, work settings, or voluntary associations, we have all gotten used to and accepted many wrongheaded assumptions that run contrary to the organization’s goals.

“Myers acknowledges that his is a different kind of how-to book. As much, or more, it is a how-not-to book that exposes fallacies inherent in common organizational policies and procedures, which are all the more destructive in organizations relying on volunteer efforts.

“Myers offers nine tools, not ‘steps,’ the more of which one masters the more results are achieved. Application of even a few of these tools promises substantial improvement.

“The book comes out of a small groups perspective and is aimed primarily at churches, but the principles set forth have application in organizations of all kinds.”

—Ray Oldenburg, emeritus professor of sociology, The University of
West Florida; author, *The Great Good Place*

“*Organic Community* is packed with practical wisdom and experience about creating church communities. At a time when many pastors and church leaders flock to the latest models and methods for church growth, Joe Myers asks us to abandon master plans and new programs and, instead, concentrate on shaping social environments where people can thrive and grow and genuinely participate and where community can emerge naturally. This book isn’t a manual for church growth; it’s more of an invitation to an adventure—with masses of useful advice and guidance for those who take up the challenge. I’d make it required reading for all church leaders.”

—Dave Tomlinson, vicar, St. Luke’s Church, West Holloway, in North
London; author, *The Post-Evangelical* and *Still Waters and Skyscrapers*

“Joe has captured the essence of what it means for the church to be primarily an organism rather than an organization. She is in flux, constantly moving and growing beyond the limitations of the blueprints of a stale, innate object. This book is a ‘must read’ for preachers and church leaders whose overwhelming desire is to *grow* a church in the way God desires.”

—James D. Harless, senior minister, Tri-County Christian Church

“Joe Myers once again challenges people serving through the church to rethink the way people enter community. While providing nine practical tools for assisting people to enter community, there is no linear or formulaic structure, no promise of a ‘this is the silver bullet’ for ministry. *Organic Community* lives up to its name as it forces readers to reconsider master plan strategy, which rarely worked anyway, in favor of organic order as a means for people seeking community. The nine tools will cause cognitive dissonance for many folks who formerly accepted master plan tools for helping people find community. Such dissonance is valuable even if you don’t agree with the tools or the foundation from which Myers constructs organic order. We here at Southland Christian Church are finding many of the concepts Myers uses helpful in our own journey to community. This book will become a ‘must read’ for our people, as is *The Search to Belong*.”

—Myron D. Williams, study minister, Southland Christian Church



ORGANIC COMMUNITY

Emergent Village resources for communities of faith

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Joseph R. Myers

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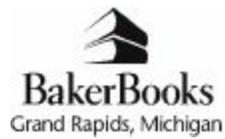
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joseph r. myers



Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Myers, Joseph R., 1962—

Organic community : creating a place where people naturally connect / Joseph R. Myers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 10: 0-8010-6598-4 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-8010-6598-9 (pbk.)

1. Communities—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Fellowship— Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Pastoral theology. I. Title

BV4517.5.M93 2007

253—dc22

2007000676

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To my muse:
Who sings to me with her eyes
Hugs me warmly with her smile
And keeps me alive with her love.

Emergent Village resources for communities of faith

emersion is a partnership between Baker Books and Emergent Village, a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The emersion line is intended for professional and lay leaders like you who are meeting the challenges of a changing culture with vision and hope for the future. These books will encourage you and your community to live into God's kingdom here and now.

Organic Community is a crucial book in this effort because the importance of pursuing new ways for people to connect and create commonality cannot be overstated. Joe Myers's ability to combine thoughtful insight with practical implications will be welcome among readers from a variety of different settings.

We live in a time when what is needed is not a simple rearranging of options or priorities but rather a clarion call to new frontiers of engagement, interaction, and practices that lead to transformative community. This is what makes *Organic Community* such a vital contribution not only to the emersion line but to the lives and thinking of Christians everywhere.

emersion

CONTENTS

[Foreword](#) by Randy Frazee

[Foreword](#) by Bill Donahue

[Author's Note](#)

[Introduction](#)

[okay, but how?](#)



[1 Organic Order](#)

[synchronized life](#)

[*moving from master plan to organic order*](#)



[2 Patterns](#)

[spatial observation](#)

[*moving from prescriptive to descriptive*](#)



[3 Participation](#)

[responsible anarchy](#)

[*moving from representative to individual*](#)



[4 Measurement](#)

[recalculating matters](#)

[*moving from bottom line to story*](#)



[5 Growth](#)

[progressive evolution](#)

[*moving from bankrupt to sustainable*](#)



[6 Power](#)

[authority](#)

[*moving from positional to revolving*](#)



[7 Coordination](#)

[harmonized energy](#)

[*moving from cooperation to collaboration*](#)



[8 Partners](#)

[healthy alliances](#)

moving from accountability to edit-ability



9 Language

future lingo

moving from noun-centric to verb-centric



10 Resources

mining wherewithal

moving from scarcity to abundancy

A Final Word

organic order

moving from programmer to environmentalist

A Special Thanks

Notes

Selected Bibliography

FOREWORD

by **Randy Frazee**

He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils.” Francis Bacon, a seventeenth-century philosopher, penned these prophetic words. Accepting a new reality and moving people toward it is the clarion call of leadership. But change and transition can be a difficult task. Machiavelli said, “There is nothing more perilous than change.” Because change is so difficult, we often delay moving in the new direction due to the mistaken notion that while things may not get better, they certainly won’t get any worse. Now, instead of making the necessary changes, we also must deal with the negative effects of postponing that change.

Twenty-first-century entrepreneur and Emergent Village resident Joe Myers has restated Bacon’s prophecy in his own words in this book. While the concepts will have a broad appeal to many leaders from many disciplines, Joe put his crosshairs on the formation of community. This pleases me greatly. A new reality is upon us, and change is already delinquent. For many readers the main idea of Joe’s book will be a brand new message. Brace yourself. For the rest of us, we knew it was here but were either afraid to face it or clueless on how to think about it, let alone what to do about it.

What is the main idea? It is a major shift “from programming community to using principles of organic order to develop an environment where community can emerge.” In the pit of the stomachs of most church leaders I know, there is this gnawing sense that Christian community has to be more natural, spontaneous, and life-giving. Yet most of us in ministry today have been trained to offer up models that are often overprogrammed and contrived.

Readers beware. Joe is not offering “Organic Community Kits.” That is not his style. Rather, he provides a solid framework and makes us think for ourselves. He even encourages us to challenge his thinking. After years of being friends with him, I know that Joe is less interested in people thinking he is right than in good, healthy, honest dialogue taking place on the real issues of community.

Let me tell you how I read this book, because I think it may be a good recommendation for you. Joe presents nine essential tools that capture the fundamental shift to organic community. As you read about each tool, first apply it to your own personal experience. Then, if you are responsible for creating community within your church or small group, honestly assess where your community is in view of these nine principles. Doing this myself has intensified my convictions, sharpened my focus, and given me some new remedies to apply.

Randy Frazee
teaching pastor, Willow Creek Community Church;
author, *The Connecting Church* and *Making Room for Life*

FOREWORD

by **Bill Donahue**

All learning is the result of failed expectations,” a teacher once said. When I heard that statement I began chewing on it, debating it, wrestling with its veracity, and reflecting upon my personal experience. It was provocative, forcing me to think deeply about learning and confronting my illusions about personal change and growth.

In *Organic Community* Joe Myers achieves a similar result—provoking and confronting the reader. Believe me, those are good things. To *provoke* means “to call forth,” and to *confront* implies “to turn one’s face toward.” Joe’s writing called me forth—to response, dialogue, debate, evaluation, and thoughtfulness—and challenged me to face my assumptions about planning, power, and leadership. This is why I enjoyed the book and value Joe’s friendship so very much.

Here you will be exposed to new language about organizations and new ways of thinking about how individuals and groups connect and thrive. Terms like “responsible anarchy” and “revolving power” will make you assess how you guide and develop people. The assertion that “story is the measure of community . . . the universal measurement of life” will make you ask, “Really? Do I agree?” Joe will invite you to envision the Trinity as a “dance of three verbs,” and push you to consider becoming an “environmentalist” instead of a master planner with a grand design for a predictable future. Will such ideas unnerve you? I sure hope so.

Interestingly, my friendship with Joe has often prompted his critics to wonder, “Bill, why do you invite Joe Myers to speak at your small groups conferences? The guy hates small groups, doesn’t he?” I can assure you that Joe does not hate any such groups. What drives him crazy, however, are formulaic and programmatic models of communal life that reek of control and manipulation, thrive on the abuse of power, and promote a one-size-fits-all approach to spiritual growth.

In reality, Joe and I agree on a number of issues, and he has influenced my thinking and increased my resolve to recover biblical expressions of communal life in the church. We agree that groups of various kinds have great value for churches, that community cannot be forced upon anyone, and that structures should serve people (not people serve structures). We believe that most individuals are seeking vital relationships with others in a grand mission, not looking to fill slots on someone’s prefabricated org chart. The invitation to “Come join us in the great adventure” trumps “Help us achieve our strategy” for both of us. And that is why *Organic Community* is such an important work.

This is an engaging read that will likely leave you disturbed by Joe’s assertions, refreshed by his ideas, challenged by his philosophy, and intrigued by his observations—before you even finish the first chapter! So don’t read it before bed, unless insomnia is your plan for the evening. I have chewed through it twice. And I know I’ll be back to gnaw on it again, because parts of it are still eating at me.

Bill Donahue
executive director of small group, Willow Creek Association;
author, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*,
coauthor, *Building a Church of Small Groups*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is filled with insights gathered from research, interviews, anecdotal observation, and a lab called settingPace. My wife, Sara, and I started settingPace in 1991. Begun as a part-time business, it has evolved into a vibrant community, constantly changing to meet the demands of our clients and marketplace. Together with our partner Minta Berry and our staff, we've had the opportunity to live out these concepts on a daily basis.

Most of these insights are shared through story. Every story is true. And if a story sounds like it is your story, it probably is—yours and a thousand others'. I have changed names and often chosen to merge several stories into one. This makes each story everyone's story, but no one individual's story.

Many have influenced these discoveries. I can't take sole credit. I'm also aware that I'm writing in the midst of a journey of learning. There are many more discoveries to be made, some that will contradict those I have expressed in these pages. So don't hesitate to disagree, argue, and rethink the ideas in this book. I know I will keep doing so as the journey continues.

Contact me and let me know what you find along the way as we continue to learn how healthy communities emerge.

Joe Myers
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INTRODUCTION

okay, but how?

A how-to manual? Depends on how you look at it.

During the past several years of traveling, speaking, and returning email related to my book *The Search to Belong*, I received many questions that centered on *how*.

“How do you create a place where people naturally connect?”

“How do you stop the tyranny of programs and meetings and become an ‘environmentalist’?”

“How can I plan and depend on spontaneity and synchronicity?”

“How can I make the switch and still keep my job?”

This book is a response to those questions.

In a way, this is a how-to book. But not one with step-by-step instructions. These pages do not contain a secret master plan only now revealed. Herein is no promise of grand success. This is a different kind of how-to book. This is a book that discusses a transition of thought.

Transformation comes more from pursuing profound questions than seeking practical answers.

—Peter Block, *The Answer to How Is Yes*¹

For me, that transition of thought became real in 1991, as my wife and I started our own company, settingPace. We had been in church ministry and seen how churches adapted business models to grow congregations. “Successful” business practices were brought into the church environment with barely a question asked. A good friend even wondered aloud after getting his MDiv if he should pursue an MBA to complete his preparation for ministry!

People seem to be longing for a more organic approach to life—even church life.

We did not find the business/church growth model to be particularly helpful. We wondered if there was a different metaphor. We researched, tested, and lived out our discoveries in our lives and in our business. When we tried sharing our insights with the congregations with whom we worked, however, we found that church growth practices were so entrenched that proposing a different process of thought was met with great opposition. Transition in a church setting seemed almost impossible.

It is our hope that those days are over. People seem to be longing for a more organic approach to life—even church life. Along the way I have met many leaders who are tired of the false promises made by the latest fad program. In our desire to help people with their lives and answer the question of *how*, we program community, which sometimes harms more than it helps. We are discovering that

it is more helpful to nurture environments where spontaneous community can emerge.

Praxis without thoughtfulness is functional fantasy.

We began our business hoping for a more organic foundation for growing a successful company. After fifteen years of living this way of life, I'm just now becoming comfortable with writing about organic order. Some books are written from the finish; they share the conclusions from the landing point. Others share an idea and a process from the point of conception. This book is written somewhere between the two. These are thoughts collected along our journey thus far.

I can't offer a neat and tidy answer to *how*, but I do think we can discover a lot from observation. Healthy observation combined with curiosity can lead to the development of practical insights. Praxis without thoughtfulness is functional fantasy.

This book will give you a framework for shifting your thinking. My work is informed by the architectural research of Christopher Alexander and his coauthors in *The Oregon Experiment*. Alexander and his team have influenced the way architects think about their practice. I expand on their studies and describe characteristics of environments where communities spontaneously live.

Another influence has been our friend and mentor Kennon Callahan. Sara and I owe him much for the rich sharing of his body of work on leadership. Our lives have been shaped by him.

In *The Search to Belong*, I discussed the organic patterns people use to develop a whole, healthy sense of belonging. Here in these pages, we continue the conversation. I introduce tools to develop an organic environment where community and belonging can emerge. I ask you to leave behind, as best you can, preconceived ideals—presumptions of knowing what's best.

This book will not build an argument from chapter to chapter. It is more like a mobile. Each chapter is independent in the sense that each has a self-contained message. Each chapter is dependent in the sense that each one is richer in the context of the other chapters. Each chapter provides some balance to the other chapters to keep the mobile swinging freely and in harmony as a whole. You can read them in an order that makes sense to you; I have organized them in a sequence that makes sense to me.

When we look for tools and techniques, which are part of the How? question, we preempt other kinds of learning. In a sense, if we want to know what really works, we must carefully decide which are the right questions for this moment. Picking the right question is the beginning of action on what matters, and this is what works. This is how we name the debate, by the questions we pursue, for all these questions are action steps. Good questions work on us, we don't work on them. They are not a project to be completed but a doorway opening onto a greater depth of understanding, action that will take us into being more fully alive.²

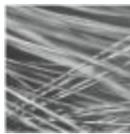
—Peter Block, *The Answer to How Is Yes*

I invite you to observe nature, think organically, hone your wisdom, and begin to ponder the pursuit of the profound questions of community before rushing to answer *how* too soon.

ORGANIC ORDER

synchronized life

moving from master plan to organic order



As I settled in at thirty thousand feet, I noticed the young woman seated next to me slowly scanning a brochure. I discreetly tried to see what she was reading. The brochure advertised a seminar titled “New Watercolor Techniques for a Digital Environment.”

End of this sample Kindle book.
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