

WHYZMEN • REWIRE RETIREMENT • SESSION 10 TAB • RECOMMENDED READING

Your Triad

A formative community: why three men, how it works, and what to do when life happens

Read it once in Week 1 of the Wilderness Between, about fifteen minutes. Read it again before Commissioning.

We spell it WhyzMen because the program keeps asking *why*. But underneath the spelling is an older phrase, wise men, and Scripture is plain about how a man becomes one: **“Walk with the wise and become wise”** (Proverbs 13:20). Not read about the wise. Not think harder alone. *Walk with*. Your triad is where that walking happens.

This reading does four things. It names what a triad is for. It says out loud the doubts most men carry into one. It shows you the science and the history behind it. And it tells you what to do when life gets in the way, because life will.

1 • What a formative community is

Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, the Stanford designers behind *Designing Your Life*, give a whole chapter of *How to Live a Meaningful Life* to what they call **formative communities**. Most groups, they point out, gather to have fun or to get something done. A formative community gathers for a third reason: **to help each member become who he is meant to be**. Its one requirement is that the men in it want to live more honest, meaningful lives and will help each other do it. Both authors have belonged to such groups for decades.

Your triad will do all three things. You will eat together, and laugh. You will serve together and take on a project. But the heart of it is the third. The breakfasts are the scaffolding; the becoming is the building.

The focus question

Burnett and Evans draw a line between a **presenting problem** (“my knee,” “my son,” “the house”) and the **focus question** underneath every meeting: **Who am I becoming?** A presenting problem asks to be fixed. A focus question asks to be heard. This is why the one rule of your triad is the one rule of the whole program: listen before fixing.

The rhythm: Engage → Reflect → Storytell

	What it means	In WhyzMen
Engage	Live the month on purpose.	Your Rule, the Practice of the Week, your First Steps, a serve day with the triad.
Reflect	Notice what happened, in a few written lines.	What did I do? What did I notice? Where was God in it?

	What it means	In WhyzMen
Storytell	Bring one story to the triad. The others listen, ask, and mirror.	Your fifteen minutes in the monthly meeting, opened with the month's question.

The soul question

When John Wesley organized his class meetings in 1742, each one turned on a single question, remembered as **"How is it with your soul?"** Open every man's turn in your triad the same way, in our words:

OPEN EVERY TURN

"How is it with your soul, and how is your Rule holding?"

Then the month's question from card T1. Two minutes on the first; the rest of his turn on the second.

2 • The honest doubts

Most men walk into a triad with at least one of these. Say yours out loud at your first meeting. A doubt named loses half its weight.

What a man thinks	What is actually true
"I'm fine. I have my wife and a few friends."	Good. This is not a rescue for lonely men; it is formation for any man. And many men discover that their friends were really workplace friends. The research below says relationships are not a nice extra in the second half. They are closer to medicine.
"I don't do sharing circles."	Neither does a triad. It is one question a month, fifteen minutes a man, and something you do side by side between meetings. Researchers led by Nicholas Epley at the University of Chicago found that people expect deep conversation to be more awkward than it turns out to be, and badly underestimate how much the other person wants to hear it.
"What if I don't click with these two?"	Chemistry is mostly hours, not luck. And you are not locked in after one meeting: at Session 11 each man tells a facilitator privately whether his triad is working. Changes are made quietly, with no reasons announced.
"I'm gone three months every winter."	You stay a member. Join by phone or video. The two at home keep meeting, and you are the first man they call.

What a man thinks	What is actually true
"I don't have time."	Monthly at ninety minutes is eighteen hours a year. You have those hours. The question is whether you give them a shape.
"What if someone talks?"	The seal holds: nothing said is repeated, and nobody follows up unless the man opens the door. It holds even if a man later leaves the triad.
"Faith talk out loud feels awkward."	At first it does. That is why the soul question is short. Most men find that after two or three months it is the part they would miss.
"We'll start strong and drift."	Most groups do, if nothing holds them. That is why yours has a charter, a rhythm, a facilitator checking in, and a second, freely chosen yes at Commissioning.

3 · Why it works: the science

No study we know of has followed triads of retired men. What the research does show, clearly, is the ingredients. A triad puts all of them in one room.

Relationships keep men alive

A 2010 review of **148 studies and more than 300,000 people** (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton) found that people with stronger social relationships had a **50 percent greater likelihood of survival** over the studies' follow-up. The authors put the size of the effect alongside quitting smoking. The Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has followed its men since 1938, found the same thing from the other end. Its director, Robert Waldinger, put it simply: it was not cholesterol at fifty that predicted health at eighty. It was **how satisfied the men were in their relationships**.

Wisdom is reached together

Psychologists Ursula Staudinger and Paul Baltes asked adults to think through a hard life problem. Some worked alone. Others first talked it over with someone they trusted and then took time to reflect alone. The second group gave markedly wiser answers (*Interactive Minds*, 1996), and older adults made the most of the conversation.

Igor Grossmann and Ethan Kross found why we need each other for it. People reason more wisely about *other people's* problems than their own. They called it **Solomon's Paradox**, after the wisest king, whose own life ran off the rails. Age did not cure it: men and women aged 60 to 80 were no wiser about their own dilemmas than people half their age. A triad gives each man the distance he cannot get from himself. Scripture said it first: "The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out" (Proverbs 20:5).

Deep talk goes better than you think

Michael Kardas, Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley (2021) paired strangers for deep or shallow conversations. People consistently overestimated how awkward the deep ones would be and

underestimated how connected they would feel afterward. “Human beings are deeply social,” Epley said, “and tend to reciprocate in conversation.” Go first, and the other man usually follows.

Small honest groups change behavior

The strongest evidence that a small peer community can change a life comes from an unlikely place. A 2020 Cochrane review of 27 studies and more than 10,000 people found that Alcoholics Anonymous and twelve-step programs led to **more continuous abstinence** than other established treatments, and the effect lasted for years. The mechanism is familiar: regular meetings, honest stories, men who have walked the road ahead of you.

4 • Proven over centuries: the history

Small groups of committed friends have changed the world far more often than their size suggests.

Group	What it was	What came of it
Wesley's class meetings England, 1742	Began in Bristol as a way to collect a penny a week toward a chapel debt. Wesley saw what the weekly visits were doing to people's souls and said, “This is the thing, the very thing, we have wanted so long.” Groups of about a dozen met weekly around one question.	The class meeting became the backbone of early Methodism and the model for most church small groups since.
Benjamin Franklin's Junto Philadelphia, 1727	Twelve men at most, Friday evenings, for “mutual improvement.” Each meeting worked through a standing set of questions about what members had learned and how they could help one another.	It lasted almost forty years and helped give Philadelphia its lending library, a fire company, the American Philosophical Society, and the academy that became the University of Pennsylvania.
The Inklings Oxford, 1930s–1940s	C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and a handful of friends reading their unfinished work aloud to each other.	Tolkien said what he owed Lewis was “not ‘influence’ as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement.” Without it, he believed, <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> might never have been finished.
Burnett & Evans' own groups California, today	The authors who named “formative communities” have each belonged to one for decades.	Their book on meaning is, in part, the harvest of those groups.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who led an underground seminary community in the 1930s, left a warning every triad should hear:

He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1939)

The men waiting for the perfect group never join a real one. Your triad will not be ideal. It will be *particular*, the way Session 2 taught: not friendship in general, but these men, this table, this month.

5 • The seasons of your triad

Your triad is formed at Session 10, but it is not locked in on that morning. It settles in stages, and at each stage you choose again.

When	What happens	Your part
Session 10	Triads formed; charter drafted.	Commit to one honest meeting.
Wilderness Between, Week 2	The first meeting: Month 1 question, charter finished.	Show up. Say your doubt out loud.
Session 11	The check-in. Each man privately tells a facilitator: keep, adjust, or let's talk.	Be honest. Changes are quiet and carry no blame.
Clearness Monday	Your triad runs the Clearness Room.	From here, you are locked in through Commissioning.
Session 13	A triad project, with a date.	Do something together for someone else.
Commissioning	Each triad recommits, out loud and blessed, for twelve months. Or a man steps out with thanks.	Choose freely. A second yes is stronger than the first.
First Fruits and after	Monthly meetings; reread the charter at twelve months.	Keep the rhythm. Keep telling stories.

6 • When life happens

Over a year, something on this list will touch almost every triad. None of it has to end yours.

If...	Then...
A man winters away	He stays a member and joins by phone or video. If he cannot, the two at home still meet and send him one line afterward.
A man is ill	The triad goes to him: the meeting moves to his living room or his hospital room. This is what the cord of three strands is for.
A man dies	The triad does not dissolve. Grieve together; tell his stories; do something for his family. After a season, the facilitators help you invite a third man.
A man moves away	He chooses: stay by video, or step out with thanks. If he steps out, the two invite a new man.

If...	Then...
You want to add a man	Anyone you meet through mentoring, church or the next cohort. Invite him only if all of you agree, and never past four. He reads the charter, and his first meeting opens with the Month 1 question.
A man goes quiet	Your charter names who calls him, and by when. Call him. Do not wait to be sure.

When it isn't working

- 1. Name it in the room first.** "I think we're stuck at a pleasant breakfast," or "I've been talking too much." Most stuck triads are one honest sentence from moving again.
- 2. Call your facilitator.** He checks in with each triad monthly anyway. He will not take sides, and he will not repeat what you say.
- 3. Leave well, if you leave.** A man may step out at a check-in point by telling his triad in person, with thanks. Never by disappearing. The seal holds after he goes.
- 4. Nobody is left alone.** If a triad comes apart, the facilitators place every man again, the same way nobody left Session 10 without a triad.

7 • Three lines to add to your charter

Add these at your first meeting, beside cells 5 and 6 of the Triad Charter.

CELL 5 • OUR PURPOSE

Each meeting we ask, together: **who are we becoming?**

CELL 6 • OUR COMMITMENT: WHEN A SEAT EMPTIES

If one of us winters away, moves, or is ill, we will:

If a seat empties for good, the man who calls the facilitator is:

From WhyzMen to wise men

A program can teach a man what wisdom looks like. It cannot make him wise. That happens slowly, between Mondays, in the company of men who know his story and still ask him one honest question a month. Even David needed a Nathan.

As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

— Proverbs 27:17

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

— Ecclesiastes 4:12

Sources

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