

WHYZMEN • COMPANION READING • SESSION 10

Building New Relationships After Retirement

The loneliness epidemic, the science of friendship, and how shared interests become shared missions

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. ... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

— Ecclesiastes 4:9–10, 12

How to use this reading

This is the long-form companion to **Session 10: The Fellowship Gap & Finding Your Circle**. The session gives you the headlines and the decisions: your five, your triad, the charter, the Listening Kit, and the Recipe. This reading gives you the reasons behind them and a set of pathways for the rest of your life. It does not repeat the session’s science or worksheets; those are in your Participant Guide.

Read Parts 1–2 any time. Keep Parts 3–5 for the Wilderness Between and beyond, when your triad is meeting and you are deciding what else to build. Part 4, From Interest to Mission, comes back in Sessions 13 and 15, when you choose your first steps and pathways.

The Loneliness Epidemic: Why This Matters Now

In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. It gathered what researchers had been warning about for years: Americans are more disconnected than they used to be, and the health consequences are serious.

The data on disconnection

- About **half of U.S. adults** report experiencing loneliness. (Surgeon General, 2023)
- Loneliness and social isolation raise the risk of premature death by **26% and 29%** respectively. (Surgeon General, 2023)
- Lacking social connection can raise the risk of premature death **as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day**. (Holt-Lunstad; Surgeon General, 2023)
- Poor social relationships are associated with a **29% higher risk of heart disease** and a **32% higher risk of stroke**. (Surgeon General, 2023)
- Time Americans spent in person with friends fell from about **60 minutes a day in 2003 to 20 minutes a day in 2020**. (American Time Use Survey, cited in the Advisory)
- The share of American men who say they have **no close friends rose from 3% in 1990 to 15% in 2021**. (Survey Center on American Life, 2021)

For men, retirement creates a perfect storm for loneliness:

- **Loss of work identity:** the role that gave you purpose and structure disappears.
- **Loss of work relationships:** the colleagues you saw every day become Christmas-card acquaintances.
- **Loss of third places:** the coffee shop near the office, the lunch spots, the conference rooms where relationships formed.
- **Loss of forced proximity:** you no longer *have* to be around anyone.
- **Underdeveloped relationship skills:** many men outsourced social planning to their wives and relied on work for connection.

Robert Putnam documented the long decline of American community in *Bowling Alone* (2000). Bowling itself was growing, but league bowling was collapsing, and that became his image for the collapse of shared community life. Smartphones, social media, and the COVID-19 pandemic have deepened the trend since then.

Here is the hope: **loneliness is not inevitable**. Connection is a skill that can be learned and a practice that can be cultivated. As Session 10 puts it, *this is a design problem, not a character problem*. The structures that used to produce friendship went away, and nobody handed you new blueprints. This reading is a set of blueprints.

Part 1: Why Connection Is Hard for Men

The unique challenge men face

Research consistently finds that men have a harder time than women keeping friendships going in adulthood. That isn't a character flaw. It's a result of how most men were raised:

- **Shoulder-to-shoulder vs. face-to-face.** Men usually connect through a shared activity (golf, a work project, hunting) rather than through conversation. When the activity ends, so does the connection.

- **Emotional vulnerability as weakness.** Many men learned that admitting struggle, fear, or need is “unmanly,” and that makes real connection nearly impossible.
- **Competition over collaboration.** Male friendships often carry an undercurrent of comparison. It is hard to be vulnerable with a man you are trying to outperform.
- **Outsourced social planning.** Many married men relied on their wives to keep the social calendar and never built the skill themselves.
- **Work as primary identity.** When “what do you do?” no longer has an impressive answer, some men withdraw rather than face the gap.

Therapist Terrence Real, in *I Don’t Want to Talk About It*, calls this pattern **covert depression**: men masking emotional pain with work, alcohol, anger, or withdrawal. Retirement takes away the work mask, and many men don’t know what to do with what is underneath.

The “gathered but not connected” problem

Many churches and communities run programs that bring people into the same room without creating real connection. You have seen it:

- Interest groups (chess, fishing, cigars, skeet shooting, smoking meats) that meet now and then and never go deeper
- Large events where you know many names but few stories
- Small groups that stay at the prayer-request level for years
- 55+ groups with plenty of programming and no path to intimacy

The activities aren’t the problem. The problem is that nobody designed them for connection. In *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker’s first principle is not to let a **category** (“book club,” “men’s group,” “fishing club”) stand in for a **purpose**. Most gatherings default to pleasant and forgettable because nobody decided what they were for.

Three conditions for friendship

Sociologists have long pointed to three conditions under which friendships form. Rebecca G. Adams of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, who studies adult friendship, is often quoted describing them:

Condition	What it means
1. Proximity	Being near the same people again and again. You can’t become friends with people you never see.
2. Repeated, unplanned interaction	Running into each other without scheduling it, over time. That is why neighbors become friends, and why retirees who don’t <i>have</i> to be anywhere struggle.
3. A setting that invites letting your guard down	A context where sharing struggles and fears is normal. That is why veterans, recovery groups, and cancer survivors often bond quickly.

Work supplied all three for free. Retirement supplies none of them automatically, so **you have to engineer them.**

Session 10 gave you the arithmetic behind this: Hall's hours, Dunbar's layers, and what it takes to keep a five. They are in your Participant Guide and the *Who Are Your Five?* explainer, so this reading doesn't repeat them.

Part 2: The Art of Gathering — Designing for Connection

Priya Parker's *The Art of Gathering* (2018) argues that gatherings fail when they are built around categories rather than purposes. Her principles, applied to men in the second half:

1. Define a specific, disputable purpose

Parker says a good purpose is *specific, unique, and disputable*. Not “a men’s group” but “a group where men can be honest about the struggles of retirement without judgment.” Not “a fishing club” but “a brotherhood that uses fishing as an excuse to talk about what matters.” If nobody could disagree with your purpose (“fellowship,” “fun”), it is too vague to shape anything.

2. Close doors to open others

A gathering thins out when anyone can join at any time. Consider:

- Closed groups that commit to a season together (twelve weeks, a semester, a year)
- Invitation-only gatherings where members bring guests they vouch for
- Specific criteria, such as “men within two years of retirement” or “couples married thirty-plus years”

This isn’t exclusion for its own sake. It creates the safety that makes depth possible. Your triad is the clearest example: three men, four at most, never two, committed for a year.

3. Create intentional beginnings

How a gathering starts sets the tone. Open with a question everyone answers: not “How was your week?” but “What’s one thing you’re wrestling with right now?” Name what kind of space it is: “*This is a place where we can be honest about struggle.*”

4. Host with generous authority

Parker’s phrase is **generous authority**: someone takes responsibility for the gathering, not to control it but to protect it. The host shields the group from men who dominate, draws out the quiet ones, holds the purpose when the group drifts, and sets up the conditions for connection. In your triad, this is the initiator named in the Triad Charter.

5. Design for escalating vulnerability

Connection deepens through gradual self-disclosure. Shasta Nelson (*Frientimacy*) describes three rungs: positivity, consistency, vulnerability. Most male friendships stall on the second rung: pleasant, reliable, and never deeper. Your triad’s twelve-month question arc builds the climb in from the start. It is on Card Three of your Listening Kit.

Part 3: Practical Pathways to Connection

A. Men with men: building brotherhood

Pathway 1 — Your standing triad (the anchor)

Structure: three men, four at most, never two. They meet monthly for ninety minutes at the same place, work from a written charter, and name a shoulder-to-shoulder activity between meetings. The initial commitment is twelve months.

Why three: a pair collapses the first time one man's life changes. Three has redundancy. Past five, men start performing instead of talking.

Why it works: it meets all three of Adams's conditions, adds the hours Hall says friendship requires, and climbs Nelson's ladder on purpose. This is the relationship your Harvest Charter names in §3.3, Accountability.

Pathway 2 — Activity plus conversation

Pair a shoulder-to-shoulder activity with deliberate face-to-face time. Examples: golf, then breakfast with one discussion question. Smoking meat while each man shares one thing he is learning about this season. A fishing trip with one evening set aside for real talk. This uses men's natural preference for doing things side by side as a bridge to depth.

Pathway 3 — The Barnabas conversation (inside the five, not instead of the triad)

Barnabas ("son of encouragement," Acts 4:36) is the model for a regular one-on-one: thirty to forty-five minutes over coffee, checking in on commitments, asking hard questions, praying together. It counts toward the **weekly touch** the Recipe asks of every man in your five. It is a good addition to your triad, not a substitute. A pair alone is fragile; a pair inside a cord of three holds.

Pathway 4 — Retreats and concentrated experiences

A weekend retreat or mission trip packs weeks of hours into forty-eight, and shared intense experiences create lasting bonds. **Critical:** follow up with an ongoing rhythm, or the bonds fade within months, just as Dunbar's decay curve predicts.

B. Couples with couples: a shared journey

Couples small group. Three or four couples meeting twice a month: a meal, a discussion, prayer. Split into men and women for part of the evening; each often opens up more without spouses present.

Double dates with a purpose. Two couples, a monthly dinner, one good question, such as "What's the best thing about this season of your marriage?" It is a lower commitment than a group, easier to schedule, and it can rotate through several couples.

Retreats and marriage enrichment. FamilyLife's Weekend to Remember, Marriage Encounter, or a church-hosted couples retreat.

If you are the energized one and she is the content one: Session 10's *Couple Dimension* separates introversion (wiring, which you design for) from isolation (a habit, which can shift). Negotiate a monthly "social budget" once, design for her comfort (smaller, at home, a defined end time), and reframe the conversation: *"My friendships matter to our marriage."*

C. Community: third places and wider connection

Volunteering with regularity. The same organization at the same day and time, weekly or every other week: Urban Impact, NCC Goes, Habitat build days, food-bank shifts, hospital visitation. This supplies proximity and repeated interaction with the same people, and working side by side beats sitting side by side.

Community-college and continuing-education classes. Woodworking, Spanish, photography, local history, writing. You see the same classmates for weeks, shared learning bonds people, and "I'm a student" fills part of the gap work left behind.

A regular third place. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg (*The Great Good Place*, 1989) coined "third place" for the informal gathering spots between home and work: the diner, the barbershop, the coffee shop. Show up at the same place at the same time every week and be open to conversation. You become a regular, and repeated unplanned interaction happens on its own. It takes little effort and builds slowly.

Interest groups, redesigned. This is where the biggest opportunity lies, and it gets its own part.

Part 4: From Interest to Mission — Gatherings That Last

"Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest."

— C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960)

Lewis goes further: *"That is why those pathetic people who simply 'want friends' can never make any. The very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends."* He saw friendship being born at the moment one man says to another, *"What! You too? I thought that no one but myself..."*

That is the whole case for this part. **Friendship isn't the destination. It grows along the road while men walk toward something they share.** An interest gives men a reason to show up. A mission gives them a reason to keep showing up, and gives the group a reason to exist beyond its members.

The Men's Sheds movement, which began in Australia in the 1990s and now has sheds across the U.S. and elsewhere, is built on this insight. Its motto: *"Men don't talk face to face; they talk shoulder to shoulder."* Men gather to fix, build, and make things for the community, and friendship comes along as a by-product of the work.

The Interest-to-Mission Ladder

Most interest groups stall on the first rung. Each rung adds hours, purpose, and depth:

Rung	What it looks like	What it adds
1. Gather	We smoke meat together.	Proximity. A reason to show up.
2. Host	We smoke meat, and someone brings a question.	A host, an intentional beginning, the first rung of vulnerability.
3. Serve	We smoke meat for the Urban Impact family night.	A shared purpose beyond ourselves, hours with meaning, and stories.
4. Send	We teach three younger men to do it, and they start their own.	Legacy. Generativity across generations. The group outlives its founders.

Marc Freedman (*How to Live Forever*, 2018; founder of CoGenerate) argues that the fourth rung, older adults investing in younger ones, is where the second half finds much of its meaning. A group that climbs to *Send* stops being a hobby and becomes a small movement.

How to design a recurring gathering that creates interest and offers value

Four books give you a practical toolkit. Use them together:

Charles Vogl, *The Art of Community* (2016): seven principles of belonging

Principle	In a men's interest group
Boundary	Who is in and who isn't. Not exclusion, but clarity about who the group is for.
Initiation	A simple way a newcomer becomes a member: his first cook, his first build.
Rituals	Something done the same way every time: the opening question, the toast, the closing prayer.
Temple	A place that belongs to the group: the same shop, the same porch, the same back table.
Stories	The group's shared history, retold. "Remember the year the smoker caught fire?"
Symbols	A cap, a patch, a name. Small markers of belonging men actually wear.
Inner rings	Deeper levels of commitment for those who want them: the host team, the triad inside the club.

Susan McPherson, *The Lost Art of Connecting* (2021): Gather • Ask • Do

Written for business relationships, but it translates directly. **Gather:** know your purpose and who you want in the room. **Ask:** lead with curiosity and questions (your Listening Kit is the rule book). **Do:** offer value first, with no transaction attached: an introduction, a skill, a ride, a meal. Groups that give before they ask are the ones men want to come back to.

Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008)

Block's central move is **invitation over recruitment**: a personal, specific ask that the man is free to decline. He also argues that the questions a host asks shape the community more than the program does. A group asking "What can we build together?" becomes a different group from one asking "What's on the agenda?"

Kat Vellos, *We Should Get Together* (2020)

Vellos's core insight, taught in Session 10 as "build a container": friendship fails for lack of structure, not lack of care. A recurring time and place *is* the commitment.

Gathering Design Card: fill this in before you launch

Our purpose (specific and disputable): _____

The value a man gets here that he can't get alone: _____

Our rhythm (same day, same place; biweekly or better): _____

Our host (generous authority): _____

Our opening question or ritual: _____

Our rung on the Interest-to-Mission ladder, now → in one year: _____

Who we will invite personally (not a flyer): _____

Friendship as a practice

Jeff Hamaoui, co-founder of the Modern Elder Academy, frames friendship as a **practice** rather than a possession: something you do, repeatedly, the way you exercise, not something you simply have. That matches the Recipe's logic: weekly keeps a five, and the calendar decides, not the feeling. His articles "Friending is a Practice" (Parts 1 and 2) and his TEDx talk are free on MEA's website (see Recommended Reading).

Arthur Brooks (*From Strength to Strength*, 2022) offers a sharper distinction for men who spent careers networking: "**deal friends**" (useful relationships built around work) versus "**real friends**" (loved for who they are). Many successful men retire with a full contact list of deal friends and very few real ones. His image for the alternative is the **aspen grove**: what looks like a forest of separate trees is one organism joined by a single root system. The trunks stand apart; the life underneath is shared.

Part 5: Overcoming the Barriers

“I don’t have time.”

You are retired, and you have more discretionary time than at any point in your adult life. This is about priorities, not time. **Reframe:** connection isn’t a nice-to-have. It affects health, longevity, and meaning. The Harvard Study of Adult Development found that how satisfied men were with their relationships at fifty predicted their health at eighty better than their cholesterol did (Waldinger & Schulz, *The Good Life*, 2023). Schedule relationship time the way you once scheduled meetings.

“I’m an introvert.”

Introversion means you recharge in solitude, not that you don’t need connection. Introverts often prefer fewer, deeper relationships, which is exactly what a triad is. **Reframe:** focus on your five, choose smaller gatherings, and prefer depth over breadth.

“I don’t know how to make friends as an adult.”

That is honest, and common. Most men haven’t had to make a new friend since college. **Reframe:** friendship forms in predictable ways: create proximity, invest the hours, be willing to be known. Psychologist Marisa Franco (*Platonic*, 2022) adds a finding worth remembering: people who **assume others will like them** tend to become warmer and more open, and so they *are* liked more. Walk in assuming the friendship.

“My wife is my best friend. That’s enough.”

She can’t be everything to you, and she shouldn’t have to try. Expecting her to meet all your social and emotional needs is unfair to her and unhealthy for you. And statistically she will likely outlive you; the friendships you build now become part of the support around her later. **Reframe:** other close relationships make you a better husband. They add perspective, support, and outlets that enrich your marriage rather than compete with it.

“People my age are set in their ways,” or “He probably doesn’t want to hear from me.”

The research says you are almost certainly wrong. In the “liking gap” studies (Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom & Clark, *Psychological Science*, 2018), people consistently underestimated how much their conversation partner liked them. In “The Surprise of Reaching Out” (Liu, Rim, Min & Min, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2023), people who sent a short, unexpected note to a friend underestimated how much it would be appreciated. **Reframe:** many men your age are as lonely as you are and would welcome an invitation. Someone has to go first. The worst case is a no; the best case is a friend.

A Word of Encouragement

Building new relationships takes time, intention, and a willingness to be known. It will feel awkward at first. Some attempts won’t work out. That is normal.

But the alternative, a slow drift into isolation, is far worse. Loneliness isn't just unpleasant; it is dangerous. And it can be reversed.

You were made for connection. *"It is not good for the man to be alone"* (Genesis 2:18). That isn't weakness; it is design. And Christian community isn't something you have to manufacture from scratch. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, *"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."* Our part is to show up, keep showing up, and go first.

The men who thrive in retirement aren't the ones who accomplished the most. They are the ones who invested in relationships that held them up once accomplishment no longer defined them.

Take one step this week. Then another. Over time you will build the community that carries you through this season and beyond.

"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity."

— Proverbs 17:17

Recommended Reading

On the loneliness epidemic

- Vivek Murthy, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (2020)
- U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* (2023), free at hhs.gov
- Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000)
- John Cacioppo & William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (2008)
- Robert Waldinger & Marc Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* (2023)

On the science of friendship

- Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships* (2021)
- Jeffrey Hall, "How Many Hours Does It Take to Make a Friend?", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2019)
- Marisa G. Franco, *Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make—and Keep—Friends* (2022)
- Shasta Nelson, *Friendtimacy: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness* (2016)
- Susan Pinker, *The Village Effect* (2014)
- David Brooks, *How to Know a Person* (2023)

On gathering and community (interest to mission)

- Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (2018)
- Charles Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging* (2016)
- Susan McPherson & Jackie Ashton, *The Lost Art of Connecting: The Gather, Ask, Do Method for Building Meaningful Business Relationships* (2021)
- Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2008)
- Kat Velloso, *We Should Get Together: The Secret to Cultivating Better Friendships* (2020)
- Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (1989)
- Marc Freedman, *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations* (2018)
- Arthur C. Brooks, *From Strength to Strength* (2022)

On men and friendship

- Billy Baker, *We Need to Hang Out: A Memoir of Making Friends* (2021)
- Geoffrey Greif, *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships* (2009)
- Terrence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression* (1997)
- Niobe Way, *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection* (2011)

Christian resources

- C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960), especially the chapter on Friendship
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1939)
- Drew Hunter, *Made for Friendship: The Relationship That Halves Our Sorrows and Doubles Our Joys* (2018)
- Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1975)

Free online

- Jeff Hamaoui, “Friending is a Practice,” Parts 1 and 2 — meawisdom.com (Midlife Compass)
- Jeff Hamaoui, “Why we overcomplicate friendship—and how to make it easy,” TEDxMedellín — YouTube
- U.S. Men’s Sheds Association — [find or start a shed near you](https://www.usmensheds.org/)
- WhyzMen companions: *Building Friendships in Retirement* • *Listening Well* • *Who Are Your Five?* (Dunbar explainer)

Wise Men Seek, Knowing Their Why’s

WhyzMen • Rewire Retirement • Companion Reading, Session 10 • r3

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