
The hord of commu

By Tobin Perry

People move to The Castro in San Francisco to belong. Sojourners, creatives, strangers, the lost and the found—all come to the center of San Francisco’s iconic Castro to find a place where they fit. First came the Fins in the 1870s looking for jobs and for those who spoke their language and understood their culture. Then came the working-class Irish in the 1930s for similar reasons. In the 1960s and 70s came gay men looking for a place to call home. In the 1990s came Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs. People don’t move to The Castro to get away from people. People move to The Castro to belong.

Squeeze 17,000 people into a square mile and building upon building in the heart of the 14th largest city in the United States and many think community will just happen.

But community never just happens. Community takes work and determination. Just ask Randy Wilson. Community stood at the heart of his family’s move to The Castro in the fall of 2013. Wilson, who served as a student minister in a

church in Central Florida before moving to San Francisco, didn’t move all the way across the country just to plant a church. He came to start a movement—a movement that was not about a place to go but about following Jesus and being the church in the midst of everyday life. They longed to provide an environment where people would belong, care for one another, impact the world around them together—and someday connect their story to God’s story.

work community



Building community in San Francisco's The Castro is rarely as conventional as planning a block party, but sometimes that's what is called for. Randy Wilson (center) shares coffee with Gordon Wohlers, pastor of First Christian Church, as the two coordinate a block party for their neighborhood. Wilson is working toward the launch of Lifepoint San Francisco, a missional community.

The Wilson family moved from Central Florida to San Francisco to forge a missional community in The Castro. Randy Wilson is launching Lifepoint San Francisco in his family's living room. The Wilsons are (from left) Connor, Morgan, Jilanna, Luke, Randy and Blake.



Wilson, who served as a student minister in a church in Central Florida before moving to San Francisco, didn't move all the way across the country just to plant a church. He came to start a movement—a movement that was not about a place to go but about following Jesus and being the church in the midst of everyday life.

“Our focus isn't just to bring people together in a specific time or place for a service. We believe that the local expression of the church is more about ‘being the church’ than about going to church,” says Wilson, who calls the missional community he is starting Lifepoint San Francisco.

It didn't take long for Wilson to realize that though he had moved into a community where many people had lived in their houses long term, they were still strangers to one another.

“We had neighbors who had been living here for years—sometimes decades—who said that the reason they wanted to live here was for community, but they didn't know their neighbors,” Wilson says.

Yet God is changing that.

A family of missionary servants

Already convinced of the power of gospel-infused community when the family moved in, the Wilsons started developing relationships in the community immediately. They hosted barbecues and invited friends to parties in their home. They looked for reasons to celebrate—and invited their friends over to do so. Strangers who had lived near each other for years became

friends. Neighbors became family.

“We try to function out of being a family of missionary servants,” Wilson says. “We began to pray about how we can be family to our neighbors. We looked for opportunities to treat others like they were a part of our immediate family. Simply put, this is what Jesus did for us.”

That meant everything from taking neighbors to the doctor to celebrating and praying for the milestones in their lives. But the Wilsons will be the first to tell you that what God is doing in their community to bring people together isn't about them. It's something God has done in one of the most extraordinary places.

The local neighborhood association affirmed the Wilsons' desire to bring community to their neighborhood when the newcomers were invited to join in helping make a long overdue block party happen.

“The idea of the block party was simply to bring our neighbors together to just celebrate being neighbors and what is going on in our city,” Wilson says. “Part of community is bringing people together, recognizing God's beauty in all things and being able to celebrate these things together. For us it not only gave us an opportunity to celebrate with our neighbors, but it allowed us to communicate that we are for and

Engage your community

Randy Wilson isn't alone among pastors and church planters throughout North America who are going out of their way to connect with their communities. Here are three tips from other leaders who are effectively engaging their communities.

1. LET LOVE MOTIVATE YOUR MINISTRY. Connecticut church planter Shaun Pillay and his church, Cornerstone City Church in Norwich, have become so entrenched in the community that the governor has met with him and other church leaders to discern how some of his ministry efforts can be replicated elsewhere. "If you're not doing what you're doing out of love, then [your community] will sniff you out," Pillay says.

2. BUILD ON A COMMON INTEREST. Church planter Leo Lisitsyn of Christ's Church in Federal Way, Wash., (suburban Seattle) started a soccer tournament and had 5,000 people attend last year. "Take an interest you have and find other people with that same interest," Lisitsyn says.

3. FIND YOUR BARNABAS. Tim Jackson, who re-planted Faith Fellowship Church in Johnson City, Tenn., in 2013, spends the first few months in every new location interviewing people in the community. He hopes he'll run across a "Barnabas" as he does this. This is a person whose support opens doors throughout the city. "Paul needed someone to speak well for him in the Christian community and the community at large," Jackson says. "God brought Barnabas alongside Paul to do that."

with this community."

Celebrate they did—with food, games, music and lots of laughter. Several neighbors suggested the block party had given participants an excellent opportunity to celebrate being neighbors and expressed a desire to have more opportunities to do so. In fact, the Wilsons immediately began working with their neighbors to throw another block party six months later.

From community to gospel-community

Yet just building community isn't enough for the Wilsons. They realize the deepest, most meaningful relationships humans can discover centers on the gospel.

Starting in the fall of 2014, Lifepoint began gathering people together on a weekly basis to eat, explore the story of the gospel, pray for one another and live on mission together. Besides the Wilsons, only one other family considers themselves Christians. Instead, they're explorers, sojourners, servers—and lovers of people. Wilson hopes one day those already exploring what it is to belong to the family of God will find their story in God's story.

This gospel community is creating opportunities for people to experience what the gospel looks like lived out in everyday life as the community joins God on mission. Wilson believes the greatest apologetic to the gospel is God's people living it out.

"People in San Francisco are seeing what it is to belong to the family of God before they ever know what it's like to be a part of the body of Christ," Wilson says of his neighbors. "We just want to treat people like family and let them see what it's like to be a part of the body of Christ—to

The Castro has long been synonymous with alternative lifestyles. Randy Wilson (left) is establishing Lifepoint San Francisco, a missional community, in the heart of the neighborhood.



taste and see what God's love is really all about."

Those in their community have recently begun exploring what it looks like to live on mission with others. Many people naturally have found excitement in exploring mission and serving with the entire community.

"People want to be involved in something bigger than themselves," Wilson says. "So we invite people to be on mission, to serve the needs within their own neighborhood, serve at the soup kitchen, share a meal with the homeless and be in on those conversations.

"Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else in the Gospels. He speaks about it being here and now. The kingdom of God is anywhere God has rule and reign in our lives, our neighborhoods or communities. So we're constantly looking and asking, 'What would it look like for God to rule in this place? What does it mean to have reconciliation in this community?'"

One year after their move to San Francisco and the Wilsons feel like they've lived in The Castro for years longer. Despite what outsiders think of The Castro neighborhood, Wilson sees God's beauty everywhere.

"The people in this city are some of the kindest people I've met in my life," Wilson says. "You can stop anyone on the street, and they'll not only stop and help, but they want to engage. They'll go out of the way to help people. You see people all the time pack up their leftovers from restaurants and hand them to people on the street. This city wants to be a part of something that is bigger than us all."

The Wilsons and their San Francisco neighbors and friends are just beginning to experience that something bigger. Thanks to a new, gospel-infused community in The Castro, God is using them to show how His story truly is good news. [\[OM\]](#)

Tobin Perry is a contributing editor for On Mission.



For more about how you and your church can be on mission in San Francisco, including a short video about the city you can show in your church, visit namb.net/SanFrancisco.



Discover your place on mission at namb.net/mobilize-me. To learn more ways your church can engage your community and love your neglected neighbors, visit namb.net/loveloud.