

A CIRCLE OF INSTIGATORS: THE ENTREPRENEURIAL POTENTIAL OF INVENTIVE FRIENDSHIP

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Some of the most significant ideas and institutions in history originated from loosely organized groups of friends. Yet friendship is often overlooked as a source of entrepreneurial and creative vitality.

In the *Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis wrote that major social movements from civilized religion to the Renaissance and the Reformation originated with small groups of friends. For Lewis, companions who share a common view of the world and stand shoulder-to-shoulder in some endeavor—he called them “little knots of friends”—harbor the potential for revolutionary creativity.

Distinct from the typical friendships that most of us are familiar with, there’s a particular kind of friendship that has unusual potency for originating creative and entrepreneurial endeavors. Neither clubs nor cohorts, these inventive friendships are united by a common hope for the world and a desire to take creative action toward that vision—whether through individual undertakings or collaborative enterprises. At their best, these inventive friendships are part of the redemptive fabric of faith in Jesus.

If these groups are instrumental in shaping our ideas and institutions, the question becomes: How might we reimagine the journey of entrepreneurship in light of inventive friendship—and not as an optional accessory, but integral to the creation of enduring value?

To begin, let’s look back across history for a glimpse of how these little knots acted as a significant source of spiritual, creative, and entrepreneurial force. Three groups in particular stand out as paragons: Jesus & the Twelve Disciples; the Clapham Sect; and the Inklings. After considering these historical examples and their shared traits, we’ll turn to two entrepreneur-specific case studies from the Praxis community.

Jesus & the Twelve

In a profoundly ordinary act following His resurrection from the dead, Jesus invited his disciples to “come and have breakfast” on the beach. Such commonplace moments juxtaposed with the miraculous were not out of character for this ragtag group of friends. Throughout their three years together, a rhythm of meals and miracles took shape as they devoted themselves to understanding the mysteries of God’s kingdom and proclaiming its approach. They were participating in the creative act of God’s Kingdom-come even as they broke bread together and lounged alongside Jesus at the table.

In the days prior to the cross, Jesus spelled out a radical dynamic for the disciples.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” He told them. In a few days’ time, Jesus’ words would culminate in a divine act of solidarity when he would literally lay down His life so that enemies could be transformed into friends of God. With Jesus as its head and enabled by the Holy Spirit, this informal group of twelve friends brought about history’s great pivot point.

The Clapham Sect

The Clapham Sect was an informal band of families in 19th-century London best known for bringing about an end to the slave trade in the British Empire. While not a formal organization, it nevertheless existed as a distinct entity. Stephen Tompkins, a biographer of the Clapham Sect, describes the group as:

“... a network of friends and families in England, with William Wilberforce as its center of gravity, powerfully bound together by shared moral and spiritual values, by religious mission and social activism, by love for each other, and by marriage.”

In addition to their legislative accomplishments, these friends used their influence as businesspeople, philanthropists, Members of Parliament, and clergy to advocate for public causes that ranged from prison reform to Sunday school. They also founded numerous schools, missions, and associations.

Not just devoted to an active public life, the families that made up the Clapham Sect regularly enjoyed one another’s private company. Tompkins writes, “These were people for whom family and friendship were of the utmost importance: they lived in each other’s spare rooms, married each other’s brothers and sisters, prayed together, worked together, dreamed and schemed together, consoled each other, and criticized each other with ruthless honesty.”

At the core of their communal life, though, was a commitment to their faith in Christ. Richard Gathro at the C.S. Lewis Institute explains, “The love of God was the very center of the group’s reason for being together and what became their legacy. From this love sprang a group that changed history.”

The Inklings

On the campus of the University of Oxford in 1930s England, a group of literary enthusiasts regularly gathered to share, shape, and critique one another’s work. With C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien among them, the group’s shared activities shaped modern Christian thought and revived imaginative literature as a widely read genre.

Meeting in university classrooms or at the famed Eagle and Child pub, this gathering of friends, known as the Inklings, shared a common commitment to the Christian faith (with varying degrees of orthodoxy) as well as a love of the written word. The group actively shaped each other’s imaginations through conversation, by critiquing one another’s work, and urging one another on in their creative endeavors. Without the friendship between Lewis and Tolkien, for instance, the Lord of the Rings would have never come to life nor would Christian thought have benefited from C.S. Lewis’ theological works.

In their debates, they explored ideas about the imagination, the revival of Western culture, and the power of story as it relates to the Christian faith—then diffused these ideas through literary works, philosophical treatises, scholarship, lectures, teaching, poetry, and other avenues. Philip and Carol Zaleski call them “an intellectual orchestra, a gathering of sparkling talents in a common cause, each participant the master of his own chosen field.”

The novelist John Wain, a member of the group, remembered the Inklings as “a circle of instigators, almost of incendiaries, meeting to urge one another on in the task of redirecting the whole current of contemporary art and life.”

And there are other inventive friendships whose below-the-radar influence we regularly experience. The self-styled Vagabonds of the early 20th century included the road-tripping “Titans of Industry”—Thomas Edison, Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone. The 18th century’s Lunar Society was a group of prominent industrialists who met regularly in each other’s homes and were responsible for a suite of discoveries and inventions during the Industrial Revolution. More recently, the famous friendship between Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky gave rise to the field of behavioral economics. Moreover, the NBA’s “Brotherhood” consisting of LeBron James, Dwayne Wade, Carmelo Anthony and Chris Paul overlap in their family and sports lives, spurring one another on to greater performance on the court as competitors and friends.

A Framework for Inventive Friendship

Despite all their varying personalities and disciplines, inventive friendships share common traits. Foremost is that they exist in the tension between rootedness and visionary

discontent—between the gravity of deep relationships and the thrust of entrepreneurial vision. Within this overarching tension, they share five additional characteristics: Friendship before Formality; Inclusiveness; Shared Vision of the Common Good; Mutual Care and Influence; and Creative Intent.

Friendship Before Formality

These groups are friendships first and foremost. Formal organizations and structures might grow from these relationships, but it's the informal, overlapping circles of friends that are the substance of their creative output. Colin Duriez, a scholar of the Inklings, writes,

The creative and constantly unexpected composition and output of [the Inklings], it appears, was only possible because of its informal nature and commonality of strong affinities rather than identical beliefs.

Likewise, Stephen Tompkins describes the informality of the Clapham Sect, which received its name by accident in an editorial headline: "It was not an organization at all: the people we are talking about had an insatiable passion for forming societies and committees, but the Clapham Sect was not one of them. Had they not been named by [Sir James Stephen], it is unlikely that they would be remembered as anything more concrete than the various friends of William Wilberforce." Likewise, Jesus and the Twelve lacked any formal structure as they preached and healed their way across first century Palestine.

Inclusiveness

Since these groups lack formality, what constitutes a "member" of an inventive friendship is ambiguous. The Clapham Sect consisted of a core of committed individuals and families but regularly welcomed others from outside their ranks to share in the life and endeavors of the community. Jesus lived most closely with his core twelve, but welcomed other disciples like Mary, Martha, and dozens of others into the redemptive narrative of the group. Among other personalities, the Inklings welcomed C.S. Lewis' brother Warren, a supply officer from the British Army, into their discussions.

Mutual Care and Influence

Inventive friends display mutual care for each other's personal well-being as well as their vocational endeavors. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien encouraged C.S. Lewis to consider the Christian faith as an intellectually compelling worldview even while influencing Lewis' core scholarly work. Tolkien's multifaceted involvement resulted in Lewis' conversion, which had significant repercussions on Lewis' work as a public intellectual. In like manner, Richard Gathro writes that "In spite of the Clapham Sect's many crusades, life in many ways was centered around their homes with family and friendships as priorities. This was undoubtedly one of the group's important sources of vitality." The disciples' relationship with Jesus was deeply transformative for both their vocations and their personal lives. Fishermen became preachers, and tax collectors became givers, while the disciples learned to love their neighbor as themselves.

Without the personal component, these groups might amount to trade associations. And if they lacked the vocational dimension, they'd be little more than a clique. The focus on each person beyond their role or vocation helps them build the grit necessary for their vocational endeavors.

A Shared Vision of the Common Good

While trustful relationships provide the connective tissue between individuals, a common vision acts as a nucleus for the group. That vision may take on different expressions among the individuals, but they are generally united by a desire to see the renewal of a city, an industry or discipline, a community, or even the restoration of essential societal values. For the Inklings their shared vision related to a revival of Western cultural values; the Clapham Sect dreamed of a moral revival of the British Empire; and Jesus and the Twelve sought after the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Creative Intent

The final factor distinguishing these groups from other friendships is their creative intent—that is, the desire to create toward their shared vision of the common good. Not content to just share a vision, these groups have a bias to bring that vision to reality through creative action.

Lessons on Inventive Friendship from the Field

Portland, Oregon

So what do these dynamics look like in practice for an entrepreneur today? A handful of Praxis Fellows are living out the realities of inventive friendship in their vocations as entrepreneurs. For example, Liz and Ben Bohannon, the founders of [Sseko Designs](#), have sought more intentional community in their Portland, Oregon neighborhood, which has enabled them to pursue new opportunities in their business.

Since moving to Oregon six years ago, the Bohannons have cultivated friendships that have coalesced into something beyond the typical “small group” arrangement. Building on years of gathering informally with friends, they now live in close community with six other families within two square blocks in the city.

Without losing the integrity of the relationships themselves, some structure has grown organically from the underlying friendships. For instance, as a community they agreed on five principles that would bond them: social justice, hospitality, generosity, prayer and meals.

The group also shares a common vision to renew community life in today’s fragmented society. Coming together as engineers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and physician’s assistants, the community itself is a creative expression of their shared vision. As Liz explained,

It is a community of people who want to create something new, and that is what entrepreneurs do, but more in the context of our community and reinventing how people live and work alongside one another relationally. It’s a very open-minded and creative group of individuals who are thinking in terms of redemption of community, but not exclusively in a business context.

That same vision of community has played out in the Bohannans’ business, as well. Eight years ago Liz and Ben founded Sseko Designs, an apparel company and lifestyle brand that has sought to cultivate a community of justice and opportunity among women in Uganda and the United States. Recently, they shifted their business model from e-commerce to direct-to-consumer retail. “When we decided to shift our retail program it was the biggest risk that we’ve ever taken in the life of our company,” Liz explained. “We had 75 percent of our revenue coming in from our wholesale channel. It was an incredibly risky move.”

Yet the pivot wasn’t oriented around the survival of the business as much as it was around love—that is, inviting a broader cross-section of women into new opportunities and community. In summary, both the creation of the Portland community as well as the Bohannons’ pivot strategy are expressions of creative intent toward their vision for community.

Moreover, the existence of the Portland group as well as the Bohannans’ business strategy were enabled by the mutual care they experienced through these inventive friendships. “We don’t have to juggle our personal and professional lives as much because there’s a community of people that share those burdens together. We see that as a direct correlation to the risks that we’re willing to take in our vocation,” Liz reflected. “One, because we know we have the backing of our community if things don’t work out. And two, the emotional energy that we’re not spending on stress, we can spend on questions like: How do we dream about the next place that the Lord’s calling us to in the workplace?”

Remember that inventive friendship exists in the tension between rootedness and vision. Faithfulness requires longer time horizons, consistency, and at times, a slower pace. Yet an

entrepreneurial vision pushes us to build, grow and create. “That’s one of the frictions in our community right now,” Ben explained. “In some ways we’re saying let’s slow down and practice small things. And then there’s the desire to think about scale...How do we affect the whole city of Portland?”

Their shared faith in Jesus supplies the tensile strength to hold everything together. “We share a commitment to Jesus in the sense that we actually want to follow Him in our marriages and in our families,” Ben said. “And if we’re faithful to what Jesus is calling us to individually and supporting one another in that, then things are going to happen.”

The Bohannons’ experience in many ways runs counter to the individualist mindset that pervades much of the startup subculture. Instead of seeing intentional community as a hindrance to entrepreneurship, could it be that community actually enables a higher tolerance for risk, engenders greater resilience, and allows our visions of the common good to bloom?

“When we walk alongside one another toward a common goal and do so in relationship with one another, that’s when we become more fully who we were created to be,” Liz said. “Those sentiments are equally true with what we’re doing for our business as it is in our local community, so I have a hard time believing that that’s coincidental.”

Cincinnati, Ohio

The array of initiatives and friendships that Johnmark Oudersluys and Joe Hansbauer share is difficult to track. In addition to leading two iconic organizations in Cincinnati ([CityLink Center](#) and [Findlay Market](#) respectively), they founded a faith-and-entrepreneurship cohort called LIFE and are in the process of opening City Kitchen Restaurant. Earlier in their friendship they helped to start a number of programs through GiveBack Cincinnati such as Fall Feast, Paint the Town, GiveBack Beyond, and others. They also started a small business to promote local enterprise called Distinctly Local. “We wanted to see what it would be like to run a business together,” Johnmark said. “We got the Chamber and a bunch of businesses involved, but it was break-even at best.”

This flurry of endeavors emerged from a lattice of friendships forged through GiveBack Cincinnati, a young professionals’ association. That original group of friends shared entrepreneurial vigor and a deep care for civic engagement. “This was a group of people who saw the potential of our city and didn’t wait for somebody else to act, and GiveBack gave us the construct to do that,” said Joe.

GiveBack may have been an initial vehicle for creating those linkages, but the friendships have continued to persist outside of that structure. While some individuals have moved on and others have joined, this inventive friendship has retained its cohesion with Johnmark and Joe embodying a shared desire for the flourishing of community in Cincinnati.

That common hope for the city is exemplified in their numerous endeavors directed at the city’s betterment including through the LIFE Group and City Kitchen.

LIFE (Life Innovation Faith Entrepreneurship), an entrepreneurial cohort for Christ-centered leaders, provides a framework for Joe and John’s inventive friendships. “LIFE is now what’s propping up those friendships,” Johnmark explained. “It’s based on the idea of creating an ecosystem for entrepreneurs of faith in Cincinnati.”

When Joe completed his Praxis Fellowship in 2012, he saw a need for a local community of faith-driven entrepreneurs. “I came back to Cincinnati and started calling my network to see if anything like Praxis existed in the area,” Joe said. “No one knew of anything, but they all seemed interested so then I hit up Johnmark and Craig, the Communications and Design Director at Crossroads Church, and the three of us got together to start something.”

The structure of LIFE provides a context in which individuals can relate around ideas and common struggles, but relationships are still at the heart of the group. “There is lots of

collaboration and folks who meet outside of the group for mentoring, discussing potential endeavors, and taking part in one another's organizations," Johnmark said.

Among those collaborations is City Kitchen, a restaurant that will provide training and employment opportunities to individuals with barriers to employment.

"We've been watching other models like this, which were used to help redevelop the urban core, but we needed the three pieces of culinary skills, soft skills, and real estate development to come together," Johnmark said. Fortunately, those three pieces came together through LIFE. Joe's Findlay Market will provide the hard skills, Johnmark's CityLink Center will offer soft skills training, and Steve Smith of Model Group is acting as the developer. And with a successful pilot pop-up restaurant under its belt, City Kitchen will soon open its doors across from Findlay Market in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.

In addition to the friendship's creative outputs and common vision for civic flourishing, they've enjoyed the personal aspects as well. Over the years, these friends have participated in home renovation projects for one another, they play sports together, and they spend time with each others' families. "And then there's the Dive of the Month Club, where there's rules and formal scoring based on the use of plasticware and beer signs on the wall," Johnmark said.

The relational stock they've cultivated through vocation and recreation has helped to lower the barrier to entry for starting City Kitchen. As Johnmark explained, "In new relationships it takes a long time to figure out somebody's core motive—do they have a scarcity or abundance mindset? What's their tolerance for risk? Even with our financial stuff, it was very simple to hammer out—it just doesn't take long when there's trust."

Aside from lowering the barrier to entry, could inventive friendships also increase the likelihood that a joint startup would succeed in the long run? While mixing friends and business carries its own risks, the strength developed through years of collaboration and recreation may enable a partnership to weather the hardship of a startup.

As a final note, Johnmark and Joe seem to have found a balance between rootedness and entrepreneurial vision. They enjoy the very ordinary aspects of their longstanding friendships and at the same time have initiated a suite of creative endeavors, which have all sought to better their city. Their companionship continues to produce opportunities for greater flourishing in their community and for those involved in their creative endeavors.

From Clapham to Cincinnati, there are friendships whose existence is consequential for the communities and institutions in which they are born. Bound together by trust and vision and enlivened by creative intent, these little knots of friends offer a glimpse of what it means to flourish as human beings: to share trials and joys together, to delight in the ordinary things of life, and to dream, risk and create.

Yet the friendships whose creative intent pushes beyond the humanistic and into an alignment with God's purposes in the world are best conditioned to originate enduring, meaningful institutions. This redemptive intent in some ways mirrors James Davison Hunter's notion of faithful presence:

Faithful presence in practice is the exercise of leadership in all spheres and all levels of life and activity. It represents a quality of commitment oriented to the fruitfulness, wholeness, and well-being of all. Faithful presence generates relationships and institutions that are fundamentally covenantal in character, the ends of which are the fostering of meaning, purpose, truth, beauty, belonging and fairness—not just for Christians, but for everyone.

The Praxis Fellows in Portland and Cincinnati showed us what this kind of entrepreneurship can look like in practice. It is an entrepreneurship that grows out of friendship enjoyed for its own sake; that embraces rootedness while imagining the potential for a new future; that is motivated by a creative intent to respond to a vision of the common good; and that derives its vitality from faith in Jesus Christ.

For those who might see inventive friendship as an extension of their entrepreneurial calling, consider some of these questions:

1. How can you create margin in your life and work that would allow you to invest time and attention into friendship?
2. Who in your current circle of friends do you share a common vision with, and/or what conversations could you have with them to develop that vision?
3. In what ways could you give as much weight to the ordinary aspects of friendship as the creative?
4. What resources could you activate to co-create some endeavor that's aligned with a redemptive vision?
5. How could you activate those resources in a way that directs them toward enhancing relationships and results in a creative enterprise?
6. What expectations do you need to adjust in order to create the space for relationships to grow within and even outlast the creative endeavor?