

The Importance of a Sense of Community to Health and
Growth in the Rural or Small Town Church
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One of the characteristics of Western culture is the loss of a sense of community. People in our culture are often isolated. Old social connections have become diminished. People don't get to know their neighbors or socialize over the backyard fence. Labor unions struggle to survive. Political parties do not attract as many members, nor do fraternal lodges or churches. In an age of mobility, company loyalty and team loyalty are relics of the past. People today cocoon in their gated communities barely acquainted with or interested in getting to know their neighbors. Television, video games and movies and the internet have replaced face to face socialization. Rodney Clapp says, "The social and economic demands of suburbia (*This is not limited to suburbia either*) create space for material attainment and status seeking but destroys space for the practice of friendship." (Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 205)

Yet, the human person has an innate need for relationships and new forms of community are appearing. Internet chat rooms and instant messaging are common. Internet mate-seeking is a booming business. Issue-related groups seem to be thriving. There are health clubs, sports clubs, hobby groups, environmental groups and more. There are purely social groups like the "Red Hat Society." Frankly, in a day when the nuclear family is fractured and the extended family split apart by distance and the complications of divorce people are looking for real love and real community. This is where a local church has a great opportunity to step into the gap and become a center of community for people longing for authentic relationships. A church can not only satisfy a person's need for a relationship with God by proclaiming the Gospel, but in the church people should be able to satisfy their need for a relationship with others that is based on love not economics, sex or manipulation

The Importance of Community in the Bible.

Humans have an innate need for relationships, and this is by divine design. Being triune, God himself is relational, and this aspect of God's nature is passed on to us humans who were created in his image. The divine rationale for the creation of a second person (Eve) was expressed when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." However, the ability of people to relate to each other in positive way was greatly damaged by sin. In the Garden Adam and Eve began accusing others for their own faults. The battle between the sexes took root (Gen 3:16) and selfish violence began (Genesis 4).

It should not surprise us that the redemptive work of Christ not only made reconciliation between God and humans possible, it was also intended to restore human community between those who come to know Christ. Racial, social and gender disharmony caused by sin have no legitimate place in the body of Christ.. (Galatian 3:38). All who believe in Christ are brought together in one body (Ephesians 2:11-22, 3:6).

Community is an essential part of the Christian faith. Not only do believers gather together in communities, community is a characteristic of genuine Christianity. In this sense *community is a sense of belonging and inter-relatedness which is evidenced by a feeling of attachment and acts of caring*. In the New Testament conversion is not seen as a purely individual matter. When a person puts his trust in Christ and is saved, he also becomes a part of a spiritual organism, a community of the redeemed. As Robert Banks puts it, “He (*Paul*) does not view salvation as simply a transaction between the individual and God....It is into a new community that this reconciliation with God in Christ brings them, however much they experience that event as an individual affair.” (Banks, Paul’s Idea, 17). This community to which the believer is joined is not only a heavenly organism, it is also a earthly social organization. In the New Testament new believers invariably are added to a tangible local assembly of believers. The New Testament knows of no such thing as a Christian who is unattached to a local church. (Acts 2:41-47).

In fact, so entwined is the organism (the entire body of believers, the universal church) and the local manifestations of it (local churches) that genuine faith is said to be missing from those who deliberately detach themselves from the local church. (1 John 2:19) It is clearly God’s intention that the church become the primary social group of the believer, supplanting all previous loyalties including loyalty to the biological family. The church becomes a sub-culture within the broader earthly, ethnic and national culture.

The Gospel binds believers to one another as well as to God. To embrace the gospel is to enter into community.” (Banks, 26)

How does community come to exist in the church? Constitutionally, it is the work of God. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Ephesians 2:15 says that God crafted us, regardless of our race, into “one new man.”

God makes us one. On the sociological level various aspects of language, actions and emotional expressions gave the early church cohesion and a new identity as the one people of God. There came into being a language of belonging, a language of separation (we versus them: sheep versus goats, sons of darkness versus sons of light, the world versus the chosen, e.g., 2 Corinthians 6:14-16) and a language of expressed affection. Every close-knit group develops a jargon that helps knit the participants even more closely. The Apostles also stressed the shared beliefs and standards of behavior.

The importance of community can also be heard in the relational metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the church. The church is described as a *household*. (Ephesians 2:19) The implications of this metaphor are complex and profound.

(See Verner, The Household of God) The church is also commonly described as family, entered by the new birth (John 3:3) and adoption (Ephesians 1:5). We are brothers and sisters (1Timothy 5:1-2). (Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:18-19, Mark 3:34-35)

We are also a living body of interdependent parts. (1 Corinthians 12:12-21, Ephesians 4:25, Colossians 3:15) We are all needed and we all need each other. None are to be spectators, all are to be participants.

Additionally, the importance of community is seen in the proliferation of commands which are relational in nature. Banks points out that “in every one of Paul’s writings aspects of community come in for discussion, and in a few it emerges as the main issue for consideration.” (Banks, 1) One only has to remind himself of the New Testament virtue lists (e.g. the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-25), the “put offs” and “put ons,” to recall how relational the New Testament commands are.

Even the mission of the church is carried out in a connected way not as an individualistic enterprise. Every aspect of life in the early church was communal. Baptism was a “family” event not a private ritual; it had testimonial value. Laying on of hands for healing and commissioning was an interpersonal touch. “The central worship ritual of breaking and distributing of the bread was the normal way of commencing such a meal, just as the taking of a cup was the usual way to bring it to a close.” (Banks, 81) To eat the Lord’s Supper while mistreating others in the church was a serious offense (1 Corinthians 11:17-29.) The exchange of kisses which was a part of everyday life especially among family and friends became a part of the practice of the church.

One key word used of life in the early church was the word *koinonia*. (Acts 2:42) The word meant partnership or sharing. That sharing was both spiritual (ministering to others by the use of one’s spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7, 1Peter 4:10-11) and material (Romans 12:13, 1 Timothy 5:3-16, James 1:27, 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, Galatians 2:10, 6:10).

Corporate prayer and mutual encouragement were also regular parts of early church life. (Hebrews 10:24-25, Acts 2:42) which contributed to the sense of community and oneness. It is in the interrelated life of the body that spiritual growth is fostered. (Ephesians 4:11-16) In fact, there is no biblical concept of spiritual development apart from participation in a local church. It would even seem that professions of faith often only become genuine conversions within the context of participation in the local church.

The Loss of the Sense of Community in the Modern Church

It seems to me that the modern church has lost much of this sense of community. People think of the church as a place to come for spiritual teaching and individual encouragement not for community. The life of the modern church centers around high-powered music and polished rhetoric but little community. The local church is longer the primary center of socialization for many believers. The reasons for this are complex and are tied to cultural patterns of social isolation and disengagement. Mobility (ability to relocate to different parts of the country or even different countries) and fluidity (the tendency to flow in and out of each other’s lives) and other factors which have led our culture toward social isolation affect believers too. We live self-centered lives.

Besides this, there are aspects of modern church practice which also contributes to believers finding their primary social identification in alternative social groups (sports

teams, hobby groups, weight-loss groups, issue-oriented groups--pro-life, environment, NRA, etc). Church factors contributing to the loss of the sense of community include:

- 1) The predominance of mega churches focused on public presentation.
- 2) The lack of demonstrated love.
- 3) Theological ambiguity. Theological ambiguity (being less specific about theological distinctives) can lead to ambivalence. The broader the grouping of people the less commitment: the more homogeneous the beliefs the stronger will be the sense of commitment and belonging. For example, if a believer, convicted of the truth of eternal security, comes to a church that teaches this doctrine unequivocally, he will feel more at home than if the church's message on this topic is ambivalent. (Whether this is the way he should feel is another matter.)

- 4) Another thing that has led to the loss of community is our dependence on para-church organizations and the government for services for which church members would otherwise have relied on each other. For example, how many congregations take care of their widows or the indigent of their communities?

- 5) Professionalization of the ministry also works against a sense of ownership and belonging. Instead of working together as a body to meet each other's needs we tend to hire professionals to do it for us.

we hire youth pastors, Christian education directors, worship pastors, musicians, counselors, contractors, etc. Ownership often comes through direct involvement. Bonding takes place as church members work side by side in the ministry, whether teaching vacation Bible school, shingling the sanctuary or raking the lawn of a shut-in.

How Do we Rebuild a Sense of Community in our Churches?

1. Organizational changes. For community to take place we must intentionally create opportunities for people to be together. One radical suggestion is to return to smaller congregations. Perhaps the mega church was not such a good idea. Shaller says that the natural size of a worshipping congregation is that of the small church. Ray adds, "For there to be a human community, the members must know and care about one another. The smaller the community, the more intimately the members can and should know one another and the more deeply they can care about and for one another." (Ray, Indispensable Guide, 51 and see also his Small Churches are the Right Size)

Another structural change that enhances community is increasing participation in small groups. Small group participation must be strongly encouraged. (If I could get away with it, I would mandate it! "If you attend this church regularly, you must be in a small group!") It is sitting in each other's living rooms discussing God's Word, praying together, eating together and playing together which builds community. In the mega churches small groups become the real place of community. However, it takes a lot of hard work and prayer to motivate detached people to get attached.

2. Community-enhancing language. We must intentionally re-emphasize the language of belonging and separation and the relational metaphors that pervade the

New Testament. The old Gaither song says “You will notice we say “‘brother and sister’ ‘round here”, but in few twenty-first century evangelical churches do you actually hear this. Of course, there are dangers in doing this. One danger is making the distinctives external (like the Amish) rather than the internal, ethical and spiritual matters of the heart. Another danger is developing a fortress mentality and disengaging from the evil empire of the world into safe evangelical monasteries.

3. Behavioral change. We must encourage and model love. Opportunities for caring need to be made known. Hospitality needs to be encouraged and modeled by leadership. We must hold people accountable for unloving words and actions. We must preach and teach the relational virtues which the Bible emphasizes. As Ray puts it, “Caring creates community.” (Note Ray gives seventy-nine caring strategies in his book Indispensable Guide, 159-167)

Some Cautions

Community is not the whole of the church’s purpose. If fellowship replaces mission as our focus we will miss the Great Commission. We are not here just to enjoy each other but to reach others with the Gospel. Also we must be careful not to over-emphasize the language of separation to the point that the church disengages from the world. Believers are to continue their participation in the broader life of their communities (1 Corinthians 5:9-13) There is also a danger of being so enraptured with the sweet fellowship of the local church that the local church disassociated itself from the worldwide church. One danger of small groups is that participants may bond with each other but not have a sense of belonging or community with the congregation as a whole. This is one reason the make-up of small groups needs to be periodically changed.

How Does This All Apply to Smaller Rural and Small Town Churches?

Isn’t a sense of community just natural to smaller churches? Not necessarily. Granted it is more naturally found in smaller churches, but the same societal tendencies toward social disengagement which affect urban and suburban communities are also impacting small towns and rural places. America in a real sense is a monolithic culture. Almost all of us eat at fast-food places and watch TV.

People in small places can still be isolated and have no sense of community. People in rural and small town churches can choose to disengage from each other and cocoon in front of their TVs. In communities where extended families still live in proximity to each other, people in these families may not feel a need to reach out to others beyond their families. Efforts to bring people together in significant ways are needed in small places too. The fact is that small churches can be unloving places where newcomers are shunned or resented. Long-term feuds and offences can be hidden under a facade of friendliness and never resolved. Unloving words and attitudes can be tolerated and dismissed with, “Oh, that’s just the way Uncle Ralph is.” The same kinds of pro-active measures are needed to maintain or rebuild a sense of community in small town and rural churches as in their suburban and urban cousins.

Resource List

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