

# Current Thoughts

*from Dwight's corner*

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*e-Current* 071030

The distinctive task of a pastor is to build a spiritual community. No one ever told me that. Apparently many others never heard it either, because when I say it they look puzzled.

Twenty years ago, while serving a troubled church (is there any other kind?) I realized that a lack of community was our underlying problem—and I have been studying community off and on ever since then. I read sociologists and anthropologists to learn about community in general. I read some good things about community in the church. But no one I read claimed building community as the distinctive, integrating task of a pastor.

Why do I say it is the “distinctive” task of a pastor? There are many gifts of ministry in a church, and all are called to exercise them. Some of those gifts duplicate and overlap with the gifts and tasks that are usually associated with a pastor (and that is not bad). But who is responsible for the whole Body? I am prepared to argue that must be the pastor’s role. If Jesus cared enough about the unity of the Body to pray for it as he prepared for the Cross (**John 17**), that should be a clue that we pastors should spend most of our time building and nurturing community.

But church is not just any community. Kiwanis, Scouts, street gangs, soccer teams and terrorists all have identifiable qualities of “community.” Sociologists and anthropologists have identified key shared components of any community. These are language, values, rituals, artifacts, structures (organization), and transmission (passing on the language, etc., to the next generation, primarily through stories and behaviors).

It is not hard to see these same components at work in church. But they are also present in godless communities as a reflection of the fact that we have been created by God for community. The impulse for community is still there, even if distorted and misdirected. It is because of distortion and misdirection that communities can become dangerous, violent groups.

McKnight describes community as a fabric that is woven on a loom of consent and care. The practice of “care” (what is best for the other person) is pretty elementary for Christians. On the other hand, the practice of “consent” may require some thought. For true community to be “woven” care must be tempered by consent. Without the consent of the other person(s) – a willingness to receive care – even the best intentions can distort into parentalism, control and oppression. “Consent” is about mutual respect.

All communities (even unhealthy, destructive ones) are formed and sustained by the mutual, reciprocal practices of care and consent among the individual members of the community. The warp and woof of consent and care is unending. And it is never unidirectional.

Christ adds the distinctive third dimension to the two-dimensional fabric created by the practices of consent and care. Christ makes the vertical connection with God. This living God connection sets church apart from these other manifestations of community. But that God connection is not

a single lifeline connected to each individual and anchored in heaven. The God connection is more like a net, connecting individuals to one another and to God at the same time, forming a distinctive community. This is the work of the Spirit indwelling you and me. God is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the church as community. God provides both the power and the standard for the community that we call “church.” That is why I say the distinctive task of a pastor is to build a spiritual community.

As best I can tell, community is not optional for the church. Creation in the image of the Trinitarian God stamps community into our very being. Christ does not visualize independent, free-range, disconnected Christians as his followers. Christ prays for community.

More than that, it is in our Christ-given community that the glory of God is made evident. The church—as community—is the visible manifestation of the presence of God. Corporately, we are proof of the presence of God. We are the community defined by the continuing story of God.

If that is the case, then it seems to me that intentionally building this community should be the chief concern of pastors. That provides a blueprint for me to use all the ministerial tools I have learned. Here is my evolving list of pastoral work when building a spiritual community is our chief calling.

- Be a steward of community identity. Remember the essential place of shared language (especially story), values, rituals, artifacts, structures (organization), and transmission (discipleship). Recognize that while all churches may hold some of these in common, there are stories, etc., that are unique to each church. Identify, elevate, and protect those as a good steward.
- Give prayer a personal priority. Actually all the spiritual disciplines are important, but prayer is foundational. If the distinctive characteristic of Christian community is the spiritual connection with God and one another, then we must attend to that connection. Otherwise we degenerate into one of those godless imitations of community. Pray in private; pray in public; teach others to pray; pray as a community.
- Make trust a priority and reconciliation a habit. These two go together. Reconciliation is the unending, unavoidable practice that builds and sustains trust. Trust is the “currency” of a community. Without it nothing happens. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation because it is essential to community. Without reconciliation disintegration is a certainty.
- Recover discipleship as spiritual formation, not merely information. In anthropological terms, discipleship has some analogy to the process by which one becomes a fully-formed citizen of the community. Every church is called to be a disciple-making, disciple-shaping community. We cannot separate building Christian community and building Christian disciples. Discipleship is spiritual, relational, narrational, behavioral, and continual.
- Make corporate decisions differently. The way we make decisions is as important as the decisions themselves. The preoccupation with voting as a means to make decisions overwhelms the spiritually-based practices of consent and care which are constitutive of community. Yes, there are some things that need to be voted on; but not nearly as many as people image. There are alternative decision-making practices that are more compatible with the work of the Spirit.

I am still struggling with the practical implications of it, but I am more persuaded than ever that the distinctive task of a pastor is to build a spiritual community. At the end of the day, if my preaching, counseling, teaching, praying, caring, etc., etc., does not contribute to a stronger spiritual community I have fallen short of my responsibility as pastor.

*This is an edited version of a message I delivered to a gathering of ministers in Maine.*

Resources:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer **Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship** Harper & Row: New York, 1954. If you don't read anything else, read this. Then read it again. My copy is so ragged it is held together with a rubber band.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer **Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church** Fortress: Minneapolis, 1998. Bonhoeffer's 1930 thesis. Heavy duty!

Robert Bellah, et al, **Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life** Harper & Row: New York, 1985.

Robert Bellah, et al, **The Good Society** Random: New York NY, 1991.

Anthony Cohen **The Symbolic Construction of Community** Routledge: New York NY, 1985.

Gilbert Bilezikian **Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness** Zondervan: Grand Rapids MI, 1997.

Stanley Grenz **Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living** Baker: Grand Rapids MI, 1998.

John McKnight **The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits** BasicBooks: New York NY, 1995.

Elizabeth Newman **Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers** Brazos: Grand Rapids MI, 2007.

Christine Pohl **Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition** Eerdmans: Grand Rapids MI, 1999.

Lyle Vander Broek **Breaking Barriers: The Possibilities of Christian Community in a Lonely World** Brazos: Grand Rapids MI, 2002.

