

Connections



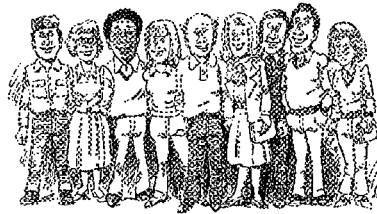
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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God calls us into community

Being the church means being a real community. It means functioning in some very specific ways. Merely having the name "church" doesn't make a group a church.



A loving community

Above all, God calls the church to be a loving group—one whose members know and care about each other. This means showing each other our real selves, not false fronts. It means acknowledging our differences but

**"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
—John 13:35**

**"Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up ... into Christ."
—Ephesians 4:15**



not letting them separate us. It requires addressing conflict openly instead of pretending that it doesn't exist or ousting people who disagree with the majority.

A supportive community

**We who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.
—Romans 12:5**

**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
—1 Corinthians 12:7**

God assigns part of the job of being the church to each one of us, and gives us the abilities we need for doing our part. As church members we have the God-given responsibility for helping each other to find and develop those God-given abilities and to use them in ministry.

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A fire-starting community

Recently I've reread some of the books that excited me nearly twenty years ago when I first started thinking seriously about the church and its purpose. One was *The Incendiary Fellowship* (Harper & Row, 1967). Its author,

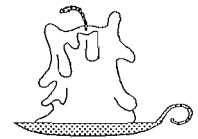


Elton Trueblood, reminds us that the church the Bible describes is a community of people in whom the flame of the Holy Spirit burns. Real Christianity, Trueblood observes, "is a faith marked by a burning conviction and the consequent desire to see it spread."



We prefer a damp wick

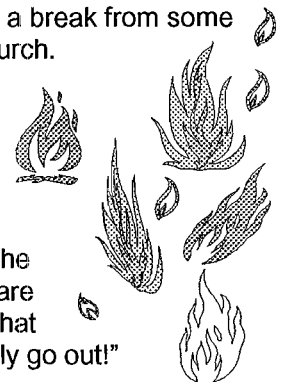
Trueblood finds, however, that what often passes for Christianity is not burning conviction but merely vague goodwill. "Though the New Testament describes a hot fire," he says, "we prefer the damp wick."



The church can't be brought back to life by the mere "rearrangement of the lives of uncommitted people," Trueblood warns. Official pronouncements won't revive the church, either. What it takes, Trueblood believes, is "becoming sufficiently dissatisfied with what we have come to accept as standard behavior." We must make a break from some of our old ways of being the church.

A real fire spreads

Just claiming that we're on fire isn't convincing, Trueblood finds. "The only adequate evidence that anything is on fire," he reminds us, "is that other fires are started by it." He adds, "A fire that does not spread must eventually go out!"



To keep our churches' fire from going out, we'll have to get busy fanning our feeble flames. We'll have to help some new fires get started. We'll have to risk letting God's fiery presence rekindle us.

(God calls us into community, continued from page 1)

This means we must help each other hear and respond to God's call. We must support each other's efforts to respond. And we must hold each other accountable for putting our time, money, talents, spiritual gifts, and other resources to use in ministry. When we're not doing this, we're not being the church.

An open community



When we're the real church we're not secretive. We're not a clique. We actively welcome newcomers. We fill them in on the group's history, inside jokes, and inner workings, so they'll feel at home.

A diverse community

Unlike the kind of groups that most of us tend to choose for our social activities and friendships, the true church includes people of all social classes, educational levels, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It includes people with different interests, viewpoints, and experience. It's not just for "people like us."

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
—Galatians 3:28

A fruitful community

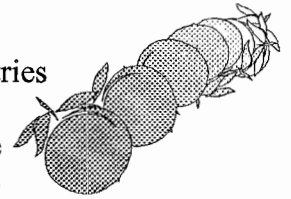
Being the church means noticing what Jesus did, and doing its equivalent in today's world. It means continuing and multiplying what he started during his earthly life. It means bearing fruit that shows what God's kingdom is like. Bearing fruit means producing results.



If an unfamiliar tree was in your yard, you would discover what kind of tree it was when a peach first appeared on it. Similarly, when you see Jesus you discover what kind of kingdom God's kingdom is.

I think this is why in the Bible Jesus is called the first fruit. He shows what the rest of the fruit—his followers—will be like. And Jesus says his followers will bear fruit. He

expects our lives and ministries to produce God's kind of results. As the church we're like an intermediate step toward a worldwide bumper crop of God's fruit.



Our fruit or the lack of it shows whether we are really following Jesus. We are following Jesus when we show compassion and promote justice. When we don't, we're not.

An appealing community

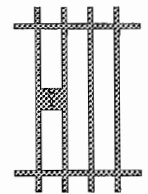
The fruit we bear works like the free samples of new products that sometimes come in the mail. The manufacturer sends samples so people will become aware of her product and will try using it. She hopes they'll like it so



well that they'll want more. In fact, she hopes they'll like it well enough to start using it all the time. That's what God wants to happen with Jesus' kind of behavior when we serve as samples of it.

A liberating community

Jesus said his job was to give good news to the world's suffering people and to free them from the sinful forces that overpowered,



[God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of [God's] favor.
—Luke 4:18

imprisoned, and blinded them. That's our job now. It is one of the main reasons for our existence as the church. If we're not doing it, we're not really being the church.

A worshiping and learning community

If we're really being the church we do most of our ministry out in the world where people live, work, suffer, and enjoy social and recreational activities. Little of our ministry happens during our Sunday-morning

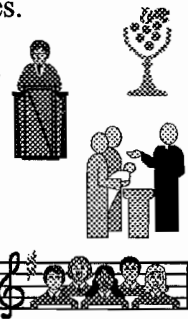
They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
—Acts 2:42

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

—Colossians 3:16

gatherings in our church buildings or in other church meetings. But we need gatherings to feed and train us for doing our ministries.

We also need gatherings for worshipping God together. In worship we celebrate what we see God doing. We express our praise and thanks to God. We recall what God has done in the past, and we're reminded of what God is calling us to do today.



A disciple-making community

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

—Matthew 28:19-20

Being the church means making disciples, in addition to being Jesus' disciples ourselves. And making disciples doesn't mean just adding names to the church roll. It means letting people know about Jesus in a way that will make them want to commit

their lives to following him. It means making them part of a community in which we show them how to live like Jesus and we help them to live that way.

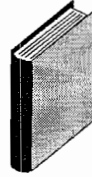


When the church is a community . . .

- Strangers meet, and fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with
- Conflict occurs and is resolved
- Opinions are expressed and claimed
- People get a vision of what life should be
- People are empowered and are protected from unjust power that is used against them
- Mutual responsibility is evident.

This is what Loren B. Mead says, in his book *Transforming Congregations for the Future* (Alban Institute, 1994). What's your opinion?

Developing real community



Scott Peck, a Christian physician and author, has spent years investigating what real community is like and how groups develop it. In his book *A World Waiting To Be Born* (Bantam Books, 1993), Peck says that although the early church was a model of community, churches are the hardest kind of groups in which to build community today. Peck sees most of today's church congregations as groups that are merely pretending to be communities.

Community requires work and discomfort

Peck sees two main reasons for churches' unwillingness to become real communities.

- First, building community requires time and work, and few people are willing to give that much time and work to the church. It isn't where we see our lives as being on the line. The workplace is, and secondarily the family.
- Second, church congregations are rarely willing to go through the pain of times when everything seems to be falling apart, yet such times are necessary. To achieve real community, tension and conflict about the group's purpose, standards, and communication patterns must be openly dealt with, but in the church they are usually glossed over, submerged, and denied. Church congregations, Peck observes, usually see conflict as terrifying because they think it is evidence of disintegration. Thus they try to avoid it at all costs.

In real community, Peck finds, people don't feel they must constantly hide their real selves or stifle conflict. They feel free to speak of what really concerns them most. They don't feel pressured to have the same opinion as anyone else. Everyone doesn't like each other equally or even trust each other totally, but they care about each other.



Community must have support at the top

Scott Peck finds that community cannot be brought into an organization without wholehearted support for it at the top. If there is such support, community can be accomplished under almost any circumstances. Many other observers of organizational behavior say the same. When denial and hiding are standard operating procedure for a group's leaders, the group is unlikely to become a real community.



Community lets God be in control

Community is scary at first, Peck reminds us, because it requires giving up some control. "But the outcome," he points out, "is freedom and creativity. And God." We need more of those in the church.

Like other groups, but also different



In some ways churches function like all other groups, so we need to use information about how groups operate. But we can't stop there. Unless we're the kind of community the Bible describes, we're just one more social club, service club, or business. How can we help our church groups become real communities? ❖

Barbara

Community—a vain enterprise for Americans?

John Wesley observed that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.

However, in *The American Religion* (Simon & Schuster, 1992) Harold Bloom says, "The American finds God in herself or himself. . . . Salvation for the American . . . is a one-on-one act of confrontation." Bloom therefore thinks that "urging the need for community upon American religionists is a vain enterprise." What do you think?

Next month . . .

Seminaries—the church's seed beds



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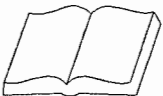
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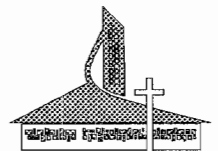
God calls us into community

A community, or just buildings and programs?

I've recently reread *The Emerging Church*, by Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne (Word Books, 1970), a book that was life-changing for me years ago. I was struck by the fact that although nearly 25 years have gone by since these authors wrote, we've still done little about the issues their book



urges the church to address. Larson and Osborne find that congregations too often emphasize minor aspects of being the church and ignore essential ones. They remind their readers that for the early church there were no special buildings, no pews, no printed liturgies, and no strict time schedules. "Rather," these authors observe, "there was celebration of a living Christ and His quite astounding victory over personal failure and death. There was an assurance of belonging—to God and to one another."



In addition, they point out, there was "an openness of home and purse," an opportunity for healing "heart-and-head wounds," and "an encouragement to go back into the world as leaven and salt and light, to transform, flavor, and illuminate the way for others." Larson and Osborne remind us that the building was unimportant but the community was essential. They find that we unfortunately have reversed this order in today's church.

Although the "today" that this book refers to is now yesterday, its observations are still true for far too many churches. How can we bring about the changes that our churches still so urgently need?

