

# THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF LIVING IN COMMUNITY

## *Introduction*

I have been asked to address how to help teams and team members relate to each other better. We are all aware that being on a team is one of the best experiences we can have and potentially one of the worst. Most of the time, it is some of both.

I have chosen to refocus our attention to what really lies behind a good team experience, *community*, because it seems to be a thoroughly Biblical concept. The Greek word *koinonia* means fellowship, partnership, communion, participation. It has roots in a word that means common, belonging equally to several. Scriptures do not speak directly to the team experience or relationship. However, it seems to indicate that the body of Christ is a holy community, and as Christians working on teams, we have the opportunity to experience the best community possible. Unfortunately, our experience is often the opposite.

We come to community with multiple expectations.

- *Would you please take out a piece of paper and write down what some of your expectations were when you joined your team.*
- *Are they different now?*
- *Would some of you be willing to share what you have written with the group?*

I would like to read you a story, mythical I am sure, before we dive further into what a community is and how it functions:

## **“The Rabbi’s Gift”**

### ***I. What is a community?***

- *What comes to your mind when you hear the word “community”?*
- *How does “community” differ from “team”?*
- My team experience in Quito
- The experience at Reba Street Fellowship

In my reading I find that no one really defines it, rather they describe it. So I turned to the dictionary, which states that a community is a unified body of individuals. Many things can unify them: location, characteristics, linkage by common experiences or interests, joint ownership, joint membership, joint condition or social state.

This seems to me to be a very broad definition. Almost any cohesive group could be considered a community.

In this sense, community is whenever a group of people relate in such a way that they come together around something that unites them. The definition does not tell us how many are needed to form community nor does it qualify whether or not that is a pleasant experience. Neither does it inform us as to how community is formed nor how it is maintained.

For our purposes we need to narrow what we are looking with the term “community”. We are interested in Christian community, especially MTW team community. The difference between community and team is that a community exists to unify and a team exists to produce or perform.

So our question becomes more specifically, what is Christian community?

- What unifies us is our membership in the larger community of the Body of Christ. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ
- When we come together as a smaller expression of the Body of Christ, it means that we need others because of Jesus Christ, we come to others only through Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.
- Simply put, I think Christian community in its most powerful expression is when persons who acknowledge deeply and humbly their sinfulness choose to unite with other sinners who also acknowledge this, and who together seek to honor and glorify God by loving and serving each other as Christ commanded.

This does not come easily, as we are all deeply aware. Even the most foundational of communities, marriage and family, are fraught with much that is painful and dysfunctional. Is it surprising that in the church, and on our teams it is hard to relate when we can't even get along well at home? How can we get to true community when it so hard?

Let's look in general at how a community comes together—what are the stages of community formation then we will reflect together on Christian community.

## ***II. How does a true community form?***

Who remembers the stages of team formation you heard about at MTW assessment or training? There were four:

- Forming
- Storming
- Norming
- Performing

Those who write about community building use similar stages, with a notable difference. Community may not be the same as performing. It tends to be more about being rather than doing.

Scott Peck is an author who has written thoughtfully on the subject of community. You may or may not be familiar with this author. He was army psychiatrist during and after the Vietnam war. He wrote a book, The Road Less Traveled in the 70's that became an enormous best seller. In that book he examines and brings challenging insight into the nature of love, the disciplines of mental and spiritual growth, and the ever present resource of divine grace. Interestingly, he wrote the book on the verge of becoming a Christian, and it is full of Biblical reflection. His theology doesn't fit ours very well, yet many of his concepts are powerful and ring true.

He wrote a number of subsequent books. One of his books that I read in the late 80's was called A Different Drum, on the experience of community making and peace. I found his discussion of community and the stages of coming to true community interesting. As best I can, let me present his stages of community making.

Any group seeking to come together to form community passes through several common experiences or stages before reaching what he calls true community.

1. The group starts at what Peck calls "*Pseudocommunity*". This is experienced when people join and are first getting to know each other. They generally really like each other, they are very nice to each other, and they avoid disagreement. They really are faking true community and it never works even though it can go on for some time. Basically, they avoid conflict whereas true community resolves conflict, and they deny that they have individual differences.
2. When the group acknowledges individual differences, the group begins to experience conflict, a stage Peck calls "*Chaos*". Those differences are out in the open and the group attempts to obliterate them. Underlying efforts to either heal others' pains or to convert them to someone's point of view is the motive to both make everyone normal and to win the fight over whose norm might prevail.

The stage of Chaos is painful and frightening, and many are tempted to give up on the group. It feels as if the group has degenerated from the enjoyable, if boring, first stage of their relationship. However, chaos may not be the worst place for a group to be. It is far better than pretending they are not divided.

3. Peck encourages next an unusual and crucial stage he calls "Emptiness". Groups can move away from chaos by organization, something the team building model indicates by its norming and performing stages. True community is not formed by organization. Peck encourages the members attempting community to empty themselves of barriers to communication. In the Chaos stage their feelings, assumptions, ideas, and motives have so filled their minds as to make them impervious to anything else. As they empty themselves of these barriers, they transition from a hard and rigid deflection of others' input and ideas to a soft and flexible openness.

The barriers that people need to empty themselves before entering genuine community are several:

- Expectations and preconceptions: when we stop trying to fit others into our molds. Until we let go of these, we cannot really listen, hear or experience what others are saying.
- Prejudices: the unconscious judgment of another person without any or very limited experience of them.
- Ideology, theology, and solutions: letting go of "the one and only right way" to do or to think. Emptying does not imply forsaking or obliterating our beliefs and understandings. It does mean coming humbly with our ideas to the group and hearing the others out with grace. A sense of humor always helps.

- The need to heal, convert, fix or solve: when a group comes to realize their desire to do these things as well as the attempt to solve their interpersonal differences comes from a self-centered desire for comfort through obliterating these differences. Community happens when they begin to realize there may be another way: the appreciation and celebration of interpersonal differences.
- The need to control: this major barrier to communication and community is mainly fueled by fear of failure. Emptying ourselves of the need to control by learning the capacity to surrender our way and to appreciate others goes a long way to improving interpersonal relationships and leads into true community.

Emptiness is a sacrifice that feels like death, a death necessary for rebirth. However, it can be a terrifying and painful experience. The sharing of brokenness that is allowed to surface and not ignored and that is not attempted to be fixed or healed moves the entire group to wholeness. The challenge is for the group to embrace not only the light of life but also life's darkness. Joy and sorrow have their place in our lives in their proper proportions and by extension into relationships.

4. At this stage the group is ready to enter into "*True community*", which is joyful but also realistic. Accepting one another with all their differences and feeling truly and deeply accepted in return is one of the most rewarding aspects of true community. Even the resolving of conflict becomes lively and intense and leads to increasing levels of closeness.

The challenge comes in maintaining long-term community experience. There may be repeated experiences of chaos and the need to move through emptiness again. The temptation to return to pseudocommunity is ever present. However, once the way to true community is experienced, the members have a road map to how to keep it going.

### ***III. Christian community***

Is there any sense in which what Peck has described conforms to Biblical teaching?

1. **Pseudocommunity** (not to force the issue)
  - The early days of Jesus' disciples when they brought others to Jesus and did not want to hear of his death.
  - The early church, the incident with Ananias and Sapphira
2. **Chaos** (many examples)
  - The murmuring Israelites in the desert
  - The argument among the disciples about who would be the greatest
  - The complaints in the early church about favoritism in serving the foreign widows
  - The Corinthian church's divisions
3. **Emptiness** (one I have wondered about the most)
  - Eph. 2: the Incarnation, Christ emptying himself of his

Godhood, not relinquishing it but letting go of the control, placing Himself into God's control

- Jesus teaching: He who would save his life must lose it, and he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it.
- Matt. 20:26-28 Jesus teaching that "whoever wants to become great in His Kingdom must first be your servant; whoever wants to be first must be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

#### **4. True community**

- Christ's command: "Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jn. 15:12-13
- Christ command's again: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jn. 13
- The church after Pentecost
- The early church resolving the dispute over the widows with the appointment of deacons.
- The council of Jerusalem resolving the dispute over the salvation of the Gentiles

### ***IV. How do we live in Christian community in our team experience?***

We as women live the experience of community along with the men on our teams. However, we experience areas of team life that we have no power to control. What do we do then to influence for good our lives together in the team community?

I asked you to share what your expectations were of team life at the beginning of our seminar. Since then we have learned that part of community formation is the letting go of control and expectations. What is left then for us to do? I want to focus on a couple of aspects of what the Bible teaches that we have noted above.

1. The principle Christ taught was that servant-hood is the way of greatness in His kingdom. Becoming servants to our teammates is a high and noble calling and is part of the relinquishment of control that is necessary for community to be formed. This means we do not attempt to fix or rescue them. Perhaps we can be like Brother Phillip in the story I read at the beginning who somehow always seemed to be there when one of the others needed him. Being present in another's time of woundedness is of great comfort and helps build the trust on which true community can be built.
2. The second principle is to focus on how I can minister to my teammates rather than on what I expect to get from them.

*Please take a minute and write down several ways you can serve and minister to your teammates when you return to your fields.*

Let me share a few ideas from a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer on living in Christian community. In his book Life Together, written when he taught at an underground

seminary in Nazi Germany, he writes about different aspects of ministering to each other in community. He later was executed by Hitler for his opposition to the Nazi movement

- ***The ministry of listening:*** When we empty ourselves of the things we can say, when we stop trying to be right, when we stop thinking we can fix or heal another person, then we can listen intensely to him or her. Just being heard and knowing one is listened to deeply have amazing power in healing another's heart and soul.
- ***The ministry of helpfulness:*** Allowing God to interrupt our plans and schedule by sending us people with claims and petitions helps develop the discipline of humility. The person who thinks herself too good or too busy with important matters to help another is often missing out on what God wants to accomplish.
- ***The ministry of bearing:*** Just as Jesus bore our burdens on the cross at great sacrifice to himself, it is the fellowship of His suffering when we experience the burden of our brothers and sisters. We are called to bear with our brothers and sisters. To bear the burden of the other person means being realistic with whom she is--the reality of her personality, her opinions, her experience, her needs. It is to accept and affirm these, and in bearing with them, to break through to the point where we take joy in that person. It also means to bear the sin of the other person through forgiveness and thus demonstrate plainly the grace of God. In community, the person who is bearing others knows that she herself is being borne, and only in this strength can she go on bearing.
- ***The ministry of proclaiming:*** This is the unique situation in which one person bears witness in human words to another person, sharing the consolation of God, the admonition, the kindness, and the severity of God. Only a person who has demonstrated true listening, can speak the right word. Only as it is accompanied by sincere helpfulness will a word be convincing. Only as it issues from a spirit of bearing and forbearing will it be a liberating and healing word. The basis for speaking the truth in love is that each knows the other as a sinner, who, with all his human dignity, is lonely and lost if she is not given help. The glorious fact is that though we each are sinners, we share in God's grace and glory and are God's children. When we focus on those truths about ourselves and each other, then the "truth" we need to proclaim to another comes bathed in love.
- ***The ministry of authority:*** "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" Mk. 10:43. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the other ministries, of hearing, helping, bearing and proclaiming, are carried out. As women in our church and mission, we have limited possibilities of power. This may be a good thing though we can be manipulative and seek after power "under the table". What we can have in abundance as women is influence, when we have demonstrated our trustworthiness in offering ministry to those we live and work with. A simple but important principle of living with others is "Whatever you want...give it away".

## ***V. Closing***

As we wrap this up, please return to both lists I have asked you to make, the first list of expectations, and the second list of possible ways to serve and minister to your teammates.

- *Take a moment in silence to review these.*
- *Do you want to change anything? Do you want to remove anything? Do you want to add something?*
- *Would you be willing to share with the group any reflections you have about how you want to live in community in the future?*

Living in community and working together on our teams is a challenging proposition. Some people think we may spend too much time working on our relationships as a team and not enough time doing the work that God has given us to do. I really think it is not an either/or proposition. When you go to either extreme, and believe me MTW teams have done both, something is out of balance. Only God can give you the balance to live out our Lord's instruction to his disciples: "By this will all men know you are my disciples, if you love one another". If we demonstrate true community to the watching world, they will be attracted to our Gospel.

## ***Questions and discussion***

### ***Bibliography***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Life Together, The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community. Harper. 1954.

M. Scott Peck. The Different Drum. Community Making and Peace. Simon & Schuster. 1987.