

# Building Community With the Church

The formation of home groups as the basic fabric of church life is squarely founded on the most basic of human needs – the need to be a part of something.

The word Community is derived from the root word "commune". From this word we get communicate, communist and community. Coming from two Latin words meaning "with gifts," the term community suggests a general sense of purpose, reciprocity, and mutual benefit that comes from **working together**. The meaning of community as defined in numerous dictionaries is as follows; Community is a place where ideas, goods, work, lifestyle and ideology are shared. It is a place of intimate relationship encounters by openly and honestly sharing feelings or thoughts, without fear of rejection.

**Definition: A community is a group of two or more people who have been able to accept and transcend their differences regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds (social, spiritual, educational, ethnic, economic, political, etc.). This enables them to communicate effectively and openly and to work together toward goals identified as being for their common good or of common interest. "**

Community exists when;

- a) Each member feels like they are a part of a larger social whole;
- b) Where they can contribute to and learn from others of like interest.
- c) It is a place where relationships are created that last through time creating shared knowledge, personal growth and memories.
- d) Its vitality and longevity is maintained only through the addition of new members and the pursuit of new ideas and goals.
- e) Above all it's a place where everyone feels accepted, worthwhile and comfortable.
- f) Its a place of affirmation and support.

Communities help generate a shared language, rituals and value system along with their own set of rules of conduct. This has been the reason why we have so many divergent ethnic and church groups (denominations) found around the world.

Based on the above definitions it becomes obvious that large groups of people do not form healthy communities – because there can be no intimacy. However, large "communities" are often formed by networks of a multitude of small communities who interact with, connect with and add to the whole.

The importance of community to humanity is seen all over the world and manifests itself in the formation of clubs, associations, political parties, gangs, teams, etc. Below is a list of primary factors that characterize healthy communities as it relates to church and the body of Christ.

1. **Common Interest.** The primary basis of building community is that the community must have a common interest. Human interests vary greatly based on economic status, career or work, religious views, political views, hobbies, marital status and family status, recreation or education. It is not only or strictly limited to the common fact that everyone is a believer or Christian serving the same God. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

Before embarking on creating any kind of community it becomes necessary to identify that which is going to be the focal point of common interest. The formation of a home group then necessitates a clear identification of what that group's common interest or shared values or status will be. For example a home group may be built on the basis of age, marital situation (singles, divorced, married with kids, married without kids, married with kids grown up etc.). Other more specific ideas are as follows;

- a) Business people – sharing ideas, helping each other to prosper and effecting changes in commerce.
- b) New believers – needing to learn what it is to be a Christian.
- c) Seekers (non- believers who would attend something like Alpha to learn more)
- d) Retirees – people who have the financial freedom and time to make a difference and who are seeking purpose at this stage of their lives.
- e) Geographical commonality – this is how gangs form and “take over” a territory. Interested persons care about their neighbourhood.
- f) Sports groups – Sharing the love of sports and learning how to benefit others through it.
- g) Marriage enhancement – groups formed to help each other through marital difficulties and to build stronger, happier and more fulfilled marriages. It may also include divorce care groups, pre-marital groups, or single mothers .
- h) Parenting groups. These groups will be formed to help each other, make friends and learn how to best raise children and deal with problems associated with child raising.
- i) Bible study groups. These groups will focus on learning specific things taught in the Word of God.
- j) Evangelistic groups – these groups will be formed by those who have a calling and passion to win the lost. They will pray for, develop plans for and reach out to the unsaved.
- k) Empty nester, “second half” groups ready to find new focus and direction for life now that the kids have all grown up and left home.
- l) Arts groups. These may include musicians, actors, painters and sculptors, crafts and more.
- m) Recreational groups. The common interest may be fishing, hunting, swimming, hiking, camping and so on.
- n) Kids clubs. Traditional Sunday Schools are mostly as ineffective at creating close community between the kids as church has between members. Age groups and their interests vary widely. We can teach our children community and building friendships by developing “home clubs” for kids during the week.
- o) Youth groups. It has proven to be a very effective method of helping young people by forming home groups of smaller numbers of boys only or girls only groups where more intimate and personal needs can be met. This will build friendships among our youth which in itself will cause spiritual and personal growth in our young people. It will also attract significantly more youth to church and to serve God.
- p) Prayer groups. This group could focus on all aspects of prayer and thus become a highly effective ministry in their church or city. Small committed prayer groups meeting together in homes would be far more effective than church based prayer meetings with many people present.

q) Care groups. These groups focus on practical caring such as feeding the poor, hospital or jail visitation. Caring for the less fortunate or providing disaster relief.

*It would be wise to have each group carefully think through and write out what exactly its common interest is along with goals and plans. These plans should include things such as growth plans, structure and activities. In short what exactly is the vision of the group leader for the group? Like most things in life we don't plan to fail but often fail to plan. Home groups should be planned not operate on a whim.*

Sometimes a community may have a combination of special interests, but it may be more beneficial to have members belong to multiple groups of interest thereby connecting with a wider range of people and communities and causing bonding between groups that may otherwise become exclusive cliques. People caught in these cliques stagnate in growth and influence and lose vision preferring rather to maintain the status quo and their comfort zone.

For the most part the diversity of church programs or ministries can and should be operated within a smaller "Home Group" where community can be developed causing longer lasting growth and benefit derived from the program.

For example youth ministry should be developed through small home groups of youth who come together at times, collectively to connect, share with and enjoy the overall community – like concerts, youth meetings or outings etc. This would also apply to prayer groups or Bible Study groups.

2. **Identification.** In order to build community each member of the group must come to feel like they can identify with others in the group, that they feel a part of the group (not an outsider) and that they have something to contribute which is valued by others in the group.

This aspect is one that will take careful cultivation by the leader of the group. It would be an utter failure if the leader became the hub or center of the group. Remove the leader and the group falls apart. Instead the leader needs to connect every member to each other in community by encouraging contact and activities outside the formal group meetings.

In addition every member should be given opportunity and should be encouraged to participate in group functions instead of one or two people doing all the talking or decision making. Shy people need to be coaxed into participating as well as those who feel that they are not as knowledgeable or well spoken as others in the group. Fear of saying something embarrassing or fear of rejection can hold them back.

One of the most powerful ways to relate to someone else is to learn about them. Their background, education, experiences, likes and dislikes. Their family situation, work, recreational likes or dislikes and so on. When we feel like we have something in common with someone else it becomes easier to communicate with them, share thoughts and ideas and build loving caring friendships. For this reason it is important in the home group

environment to allow time for people to just chat to each other, and really get to know each other. There are numerous ways also to get everyone to know each other. One group I belonged to had a person or couple every week share their life story. Specific things are covered in this sharing that would not be too personal but would help others to get to know and relate to them.

3. **Frequent communication.** We all know that when we don't keep in touch with friends or family on a frequent basis, the relationship deteriorates and is lost. But communication is something few people pursue "On purpose". Instead it is something that "just happens" in day to day life and pretty soon we wonder how it is that we feel left out, alone and that nobody understands or cares about us. This has even become a problem within families and couples who both work outside the home. Less time is spent on communication. The resulting break down in communication breaks marriages apart, parents from children and pretty soon we feel all alone while being surrounded by a lot of people. This problem appears to be more problematic for men who by nature tend to minimize communication whereas women thrive on it.

So how frequently should we communicate with each other? There is no pat answer to this and therefore should be gauged continually. Time is always a factor in our busy lives and making time to keep in touch with people does take effort and commitment. Yet we tend to give our time to those things we value most and give us the greatest pleasure or satisfaction. If people in the community are passionate about that community – its goals and purpose, its plans and its people, they will make time regardless of their schedules outside, to communicate.

4. **Tools or methods of communication.** Today's world more than ever has provided more and assorted methods of communication. The global nature and possibilities of communication provide better tools to form communities than ever in history, yet the church has mostly missed this to their detriment. Below are a number of known methods used in communication today. How many of them do you employ now? Which ones should you consider using that would be more effective in building your community?

- a) Blogs
- b) Email
- c) Text messaging
- d) Cell phones
- e) SMS communications
- f) Internet websites
- g) Telephone
- h) Printed materials – books, magazines, bulletins, newspapers etc.
- i) Visual communications – video, DVD's, television
- j) Audio – radio, CD's and such
- k) Online gaming
- l) Online forums
- m) Regular mail

Young people have grown up using the internet effectively as well as cell phones to connect to their friends and other people. Therefore if the community (home group) you are building is comprised mostly of this age group you would be most effective in harnessing these methods of communication between group members.

5. **Privacy.** One of the quickest ways to destroy community is to use what you learn about members of your group to gossip to others. It is critical if you intend people in the community to feel safe in sharing very personal things, to know that it will stay within the community. That those who know will use the information to pray for you, care for you and love you. Becoming vulnerable is a very difficult thing to do and we would never consider doing that in a group of strangers. That is why building friendships based on honesty and caring is so very important. Many people are carrying things that they really need to share with someone and get off their chest. The Catholic church recognized this many years ago and formed the confessional as a way of providing privacy while giving opportunity to confess. Can we learn to love and help one another regardless of what horrible things one of the group may think or have done in the past?

A friend is someone who knows everything about you – warts and all, but still loves you and would defend you and help you anytime anywhere. This is a true test of the success of the community being formed within a home group.

6. **Study or learning.** We were created to learn and better ourselves and those around us through knowledge and understanding. However, when attempting to build a cohesive network of smaller communities, the difficulty of allowing diversity while focus on the overall objectives of the larger community as a whole becomes more difficult. This then requires that the church leadership must have and present a clearly defined overall vision for the church into which all the small groups can build or contribute their part of the overall vision. Scripture says that without a vision the people perish and I would say that this applies to the church as a whole or any particular home group.

One of the problems of teaching is that without any form of direction groups can quickly go off on tangents, get into false doctrines or maybe even split from the church to form their own groups. Many churches over the years have experienced splits that have started with small groups of dissidents.

It is therefore imperative that the church leadership provide a wide array of resource materials to teach and learn from that can be selected and utilized by the leaders of home groups. This may be specifically designed and prepared study guides on a wide array of subjects or else the usage of books or study guides written by others that meet with approval by the leadership of the church. What I have found is that home group leaders sometimes flounder, not knowing what to focus on. Once the leader has thought through and prepared their vision for their group, the leadership in the church should provide them with the resources and materials they need to help them teach and reach their objectives.

By having a large resource of study materials, the church leaders can help home group leaders to lead and teach whatever they feel on their hearts to do with their group. It is my personal opinion and experience that by providing materials that ask key questions and

provide Bible verses that would answer the questions, that the leader can assign one question or group of questions to one person in the group who will study them and report the next week with what they learned and then open it up for discussion. This gets every member into the word of God personally and gives them an opportunity to share with the group.

7. **Extent of care.** Logically it is impossible to care for too many people as many pastors have found. There are only so many hours in a day and days in a week. Demands by the needs of church members always exceed what is possible for a pastor to provide adequately. So how are needs for community and care met? Its really quite simple. The answer is to appoint home group leaders who care for a manageable small group of people. Ideas vary on what that looks like, but in my experience a group of 10 -15 people is optimum. After that it is too large and the group should be split – which is a good thing. Once again the leader should not be doing all the connecting and ministering but rather everyone needs to minister to and connect with each other throughout the week. The leader should encourage and support this in every way possible. A larger group does not allow intimacy in the group or opportunity for everyone to participate.

Once there are 5-10 groups, the church needs to appoint captains (as sports team captains), who will guide and minister to the home group leaders. They will need training, encouragement and learning themselves. The Captains will have the responsibility of ministering to, and teaching leaders of home groups.

If the church grows to become massive with many groups like these then the church should see to it that there are elders who will give oversight to the captains, who give oversight to the home group leaders who give leadership to members of the church. Here is the leadership schematic;

Group of 10-15 people led by a home group leader

5- 10 home group leaders ministered to by Captains

5-10 captains overseen by a church elder.

Senior pastor oversees board of elders.

By limiting the sphere of care each leader will be able to give personal and adequate care to everyone in their sphere of care. This frees the senior pastor to prayer and minister the Word as was the job of the early Apostles. This way nobody falls through the cracks or gets lost in the crowd. Every member is important – no, critical to the whole. We all need each other.

8. **Growth.** As with all living things, the objective is and always must be growth. We tend to so easily settle into ruts or comfort zones. The overall objective of every group is to pursue growth to the end that the group will need to split in order to form a new group. This means that home group leaders need to identify, pray for, encourage and train someone from their group to lead a new group. The leader needs to duplicate him or herself so that growth will become the order and we see more people added to God's kingdom and into community within the local churches.

There are several ways a group can be split – maybe in half or else a few (I suggest 4) to start a new group and invite new people to join that group. Whatever is appropriate the group needs to know from the outset and continually that growth is vital and the objective. That way there is no surprise and people are expecting this change. This will most certainly lessen the pain of splitting the group – but there will be some pain involved either way.