

# 10 **Community**

Created for  
Community?

“ This is the duty of our generation as we enter the twenty-first century—solidarity with the weak, the persecuted, the lonely, the sick, and those in despair. It is expressed by the desire to give a noble and humanizing meaning to a community in which all members will define themselves not by their own identity but by that of others.”

Elie Wiesel (b.1928 in Sighet, Transylvania, now a part of Romania) Author, Professor and Winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986

## Questions

*What does the idea of community mean to me?*

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*What communities do I belong to?*

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A young man committed suicide. Took an overdose of sleeping pills, sat down in a chair, and—with the TV going—just died.

That would be bad enough, except that no one knew. Though he lived in a big city, had a phone (two when you count his mobile), a computer, broadband internet, e-mail, and even a satellite dish, he had very few friends, and his relatives lived far away and didn't talk with him much. This guy was so “connected” in that he had all the right wires and devices but still so isolated as well.

You know how they finally knew he was dead? A neighbour called the landlord to complain about the stench coming from what they thought was this guy's apartment. No one really knew him in the apartment building. Few people ever saw him. Only when his body began to rot did anyone take notice of him. . . .

“The most  
terrible poverty  
is loneliness  
and the  
feeling of  
being  
unloved.

Mother Teresa of  
Calcutta (1910-1997)  
—Albanian-born Indian  
missionary and founder  
of the Order of the  
Missionaries of Charity.  
Awarded the Nobel  
Prize for Peace in 1979

In an age where economics connects us to each other through resources and consumerism, we can still feel isolated; and while a common cause like saving the environment connects us globally, we can still feel cut off from the people in our own lives. Indeed, despite all the means of communication, no matter how wired we are to each other, so often we just aren't connected. It's kind of ironic: the world is connected as never before, and some of us are still so isolated, so lonely.

Janis Joplin once wrote:

*Every day when I walk home  
I see loneliness been a-waiting for me,  
baby.*

*You know I open my front door,  
I said Mr. Loneliness is waiting for me  
at home*

*There ain't no hideaway from here, man . . .  
I ain't got no any kind of friends, man I  
ain't got none . . .*

*When I come home there's nothing  
Nothing, man, there's no animal moving  
There's nothing, man . . .*

Loneliness. In a world with billions of people, that just keeps growing, we're often crammed together in massive urban centres. We live pocketed next to each other in vast metropolitan jungles, yet we are still lonely, unconnected, and hurting. We're so close, yet so afar apart. We crave human contact, we crave companionship, we crave to be accepted and to belong. Our cities have created vast chasms in our lives that no bridge seems large enough to span.

“What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

Kurt Vonnegut  
(b.1922)—Author

## Question

*Does loneliness affect my life? When do I most feel isolated?*

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Historically, communities were bound by geography. People didn't have the modes of transport that we have today and either had to rely on animals to transport them or go by foot or water where possible. Thus their community usually comprised all the people within a few square miles. They shared common grocers, pubs and churches. Our communities today have changed radically. Although there are still smaller communities in the country areas, today a community could involve people with a common cause spread over a huge area. It could be a group of people working for peace who gather once a year to exchange ideas, or maybe a group of researchers who are in constant email contact swapping their latest findings. Community is no longer bound by geography, only by a sense of commonality.

What does the Christian faith have to offer? How can it affect the culture of isolation that has been fostered in our cities?

One of the most important aspects of Christian faith, of what it means to be a Christian, deals with the idea of “community.” Of course, Christian faith means nothing unless a person has a one-to-one relationship with God. That’s crucial. But it’s directly out of that vertical, human-to-God relationship, that a person is also established in a relationship with a community, a church.

We’re not talking about joining cloisters or monasteries or nunneries. These are extremes of a wonderful principle found in the Bible; and that’s the principle of what is called in Greek, *koinonia*, of “fellowship,” of community.

*Koinonia*, “fellowship,” is God’s way of helping us because we were not meant to be alone. We were created for community, for fellowship, for human interaction, but not just any kind of human interaction. After all, if you want human interaction you can go to a nightclub, or a pub, or a football game and interact with other humans. The biblical idea is human interaction of a different kind, an interaction arising from a community of people who, out of their love for God, have pledged to love and care for and help each other. That’s what it’s all supposed to be about; people sharing common views, common goals, common dreams and a common purpose—but most of all, people who care about each other and who are dedicated to helping each other.

we  
were not  
meant to  
be alone

Imagine belonging to a community of people who had joined together and who dealt with each other like this:

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.

Philippians 2:3,4

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples. John 13: 34, 35

We know what real love is because Christ gave up His life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. But if anyone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help—how can God's love be in that person? Dear children, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. 1 John 3:16-18

The greatest among you must be a servant. Matthew 23:11

## Question

*Do I feel loved, cared about and important in my community?*

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The original meaning of the word for church in the Greek language means “a calling out.” The church was called out of the world to be a special place, a place of fellowship, of community, of worship, a place of mutual support and love and caring for each other. And, yes, I admit it’s not always like that now, but bear with me!

The church was “called out” of the world and the kind of fellowship and community that so often defines world interactions: interactions based on greed, on ambition, on looking out for number one. The church was “called out” by God to represent Him, and one of the main ways it achieved this was through the kind of community that was created, a community that would reach out and serve, not only each other but the entire world.

Look at this depiction of the early days of the church:

***And all the believers met together constantly and shared everything they had. They sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with those in need.***

Acts 2:44, 45

Wow! What a close community; what a selfless community. Imagine being a member of a group like that!

But let's get real, in today's society that sort of community would be seen as pretty extreme. I suppose we would probably see it as a commune and dismiss it. But hold on, should we dismiss it completely without looking at the founding principles? Shouldn't we at least see how these principles could be relevant to our lives today?

## Questions

*How would my life change if I treated people with more generosity, if I cared more, if I shared my things instead of holding onto them so tightly?*

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*How would I react if people treated me this way?*

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Who can make it alone? Who has, in and of himself or herself, all that he or she needs? We all come with strong points, we all come with weak points, we all come with gifts in some areas and deficiencies in others. We need each other, just like members of a team need each other. Our lives are often full of turmoil: problems arise, needs arise, crises happen that we can't always handle. And sometimes we just don't know where to turn; where to get help. But if you are part of a community, a caring community, you can find help. And not only that, if you are part of a church community, you can be in a position to help others.

Joining a church is not exactly like joining a sports club. The church isn't just a place you go to *get*; on the contrary, it is a place where you go to *give*. It is like working in a team that has the same goals, values and principles. As in many teams, we have to give to the team for the team to prosper. Anyone who has ever experienced what self-less giving does knows that the more you give of yourself, the more you receive.

The apostle Paul, talking about the unity of the church, used the analogy of a human body:

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ.

Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit. Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand, that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, I am not part of the body because I am only an ear and not an eye, would that make it any less a part of the body? Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there

are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, I don't need you. The head can't say to the feet, I don't need you. In fact, some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary . . . . So God has put the body together in such a way that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally.

1 Corinthians 12: 12-25

## Question

*What does it feel like to be part of a team?*

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The church, ideally, is so much more than a team. It's called out to be a witness for God; it's called out to point people in the world to something better than what this world offers. The church is called out to serve: each member is called to serve the other, and the church as a whole is called to serve the world, to reveal to the world who God is and what He is like. So, yes we are a team, but our goal is divinely appointed!

In a real sense the church is called to represent Jesus to the world. And if you study the life of Jesus, you can see the model the church is called to emulate.

You need to pause for a moment to acknowledge that a church experience is not always great. Sometimes the team just hasn't got it together and is distracted by other things than their main goal. And if this has been your experience, I'm sorry. Church is supposed to be much more than that, it's about acceptance, forgiveness and love.

“ For a community to be whole and healthy, it must be based on people's love and concern for each other.”

Millard Fuller (b. 1935)  
—Lawyer, social activist,  
humanitarian

First and foremost, Jesus forgave people their sins, and perhaps more than anything else, the church should be a place where we come to get forgiveness. The world can be a very unforgiving place, can't it? The church, in contrast, has been “called out” to offer forgiveness to those who can't get it elsewhere, because those who are part of a church ought to realise how much they have been forgiven by God. And it's out of a realisation that they have been forgiven that they learn to forgive others and are able to point them to the *source* of forgiveness. And when you have a whole community, a whole fellowship like that . . . there's power!

A Christian writer told about when he was working in an inner city in America. He came across a woman who had been forcing her eight-year old daughter to work as a prostitute in order to support her crack cocaine habit. At one point, he said to her something about going to a church. “Church!” she replied, “That would only make me feel worse!”

From that moment on, that Christian had a whole new understanding of what his faith, of what grace, and of what church meant. The woman didn't need more guilt. She needed a community of people, themselves knowing what it means to be forgiven, offering her forgiveness and then giving of themselves to help this woman and her daughter discover a way out of their situation.

“ Without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.

Anthony J. D'Angelo  
—Creator of *The Inspiration* book series

That's what church is supposed to be all about, a community giving of themselves because they have been given so much themselves. As Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is expected." A church should be filled with people who, because they understand just how much they have been given through Christ, are willing to give of themselves for others.

This is what church is supposed be like, a place of forgiveness and support and not of judgment. But here is where things go a little crazy. Historically there have been some major problems within the church.

Often churches, when they've been around a long time, get so caught up in their own traditions and rules, creeds and dogmas that they forget what they've been "called out" for. Sometimes they are more concerned about the church building itself, the bricks, the mortar, the stained glass, than they are about what really matters, and that's representing the loving, healing, forgiving ministry of Jesus. Indeed, sometimes things can get so bad that those who want to follow Christ as part of a community are "called out" of a church and have to join another or start another.

I can't promise you that all churches are loving, caring communities. All I can tell you is that this is the ideal that churches are to strive for; this is what they all should be about, and that, however defective, there are communities like that around.

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 Yes, I see the  
 Church as the  
 body of Christ.  
 But, oh! How  
 we have  
 blemished and  
 scarred that  
 body through  
 social neglect  
 and through  
 fear of being  
 nonconformists.”  
 Martin Luther King, Jr.  
 (1929-1968)  
 —American Baptist  
 minister and  
 civil-rights leader

## Questions

*What is my experience with church?*

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The church exists to represent Jesus to the world. Jesus healed people, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. And according to the Bible, the church is equipped by God with gifts that will enable it to offer emotional, physical, and spiritual healing as well. Again—that’s why you need a body of believers, a community, a fellowship, because no one has *all* the gifts. Maybe you have the gift of compassion, a personality that knows how to love, how to listen, and sometimes all people need is a compassionate and sympathetic ear. Maybe you have the gift of hospitality, and are able to help people who might be in need of shelter for a little while. Maybe you have building skills that can be put to use for those who might need just what you happen to have. Maybe you have training in healing arts; maybe you have the gift of encouragement. The list goes on and on. Who has all of these things, and more? That’s why there’s a community; people get together, united in a common bond of teamwork and love for God and for each other, and out of that they pool their gifts, their resources, their talents and their time for the good of others.

Jesus once said these words:

For I was hungry, and you fed Me. I was thirsty, and you gave Me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited Me into your home. I was naked, and you gave Me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for Me. I was in prison, and you visited Me. Then these righteous ones will reply, Lord, when did we ever see You hungry and feed You? Or thirsty and give You something to drink? Or a stranger and show You hospitality? Or naked and give You clothing? When did we ever see You sick or in prison, and visit You? And the King will tell them, I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these My brothers and sisters, you were doing it to Me!

Matthew 25:35-40

“Individual  
commitment to  
a group effort,  
that is what  
makes a team  
work, a  
company work,  
a society work,  
a civilization  
work.”

Vince Lombardi  
(1913-1970)—American  
football coach

How much easier is it to do these things as part of a dedicated team! This is the purpose and mission of the church. This is what a church should be about; this is what it has been “called out” to be and do. But it’s even more, because if this is all a church does—it’s just a big social service agency, and though that’s part of it, and that’s good—there has to be more.

Just like car parking attendants, the church and its team members are guides. The job of car parking attendants is to point you in the direction of your goal, a car space. The church and its members are there to point people to Jesus, to the eternal life that He offers because, in the end, no matter what the church does for a person, there are some things that only God can do. The ultimate question—the question of death, the church can’t solve. It can only point people to God’s promises. At one level the church can minister to people’s needs, but ultimately, the answers to each person’s problems aren’t found in anything a church can do for them. They’re found in God, in the being who created us, who loves us, and who we believe died on the cross to offer us a new life now and the promise of eternal life in a world made new. More than anything else, the church has been “called out” to point people to God because you don’t have to be a Christian to give the hungry food, or the naked clothing, or the homeless a place to stay. Anyone can do that. It’s Jesus, and the promise of eternal life that He offers, which makes the role of the church unique.

But who needs a church to do all that? Why can't someone just go out on their own and minister to others?

As in football, it's impossible for one person to do all the work. We can't all be goalies, we can't all play defence or forward positions, and if we tried to, we would soon be exhausted and unable to finish the game! No one has all the gifts. What good would an eye do unattached from the rest of the body? Or an ear, or a heart, or a lung? They need to work together in order to make a functioning body. Maybe you're an eye, but unless you're attached to a body, you're not going to allow anyone to see anything; attached to a body, you can perform your tasks in a way you couldn't otherwise.

But there's another reason, too. We can all complain about the crusty, calcified church. But at the same time, when you have a body of believers, working together, in an organized structure, (like a team maybe?) there's a certain amount of stability. There's a mass, a weight, which at times can be cumbersome but which also offers a foundation, stability, something secure. And sometimes people need that. When you are part of something bigger than yourself, and are accountable to that something, you have protection and counsel. It might help prevent you from doing things that are really not in your best interest.

there's a  
certain  
amount  
of  
stability  
there

“Church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of non-members.”

William Temple, Sr  
(1779-1881)  
—English Author

There's a collective strength and wisdom that one can find only in being part of a larger group. That's the beauty of being part of a community, part of something bigger than any one individual, something more than what you can be on your own. The church can function as a bridge between you and others, enabling you not only to receive from others the things that you need to function and cope, but it also offers you a place to use your gifts, in turn helping others function and cope as well.

Unlike a team, community and fellowship really happen when people embrace others who are not like themselves. So often teams are self-selective, that is they fit together naturally, their common interests/goals define the type of person suitable for the team. With true fellowship, definitions like these don't dictate membership. True fellowship builds communities that accept all people; rich or poor, old or young, black or white, conventional or not quite so conventional!

I can't help but think of that young man who died in front of his television set. You don't have to be a prophet to believe that had he been part of a community that truly cared, he wouldn't have died in such utter loneliness and despair. Who knows where he'd be today and what he'd be doing for others. What a waste!

***We are telling  
you about  
what we  
ourselves  
have actually  
seen and  
heard, so that  
you may have  
fellowship  
with us. And  
our fellowship  
is with the  
Father and  
with his Son,  
Jesus Christ.***

1 John 1: 3

The church, a *koinonia* of believers. It might just be what you've been looking for all along.

## **Questions**

*What do I have to offer a church community, how can I give?*

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*What can a church community bring to my life?*

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## **My Answers**

*What does the idea of community mean to me?*

Community means people knowing each other, looking out for each other. Somewhere where I know I belong.

**Your Answer**

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*What communities do I belong to?*

I belong to a gym, a book club, my local neighbourhood and a church community.

**Your Answer**

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*Does loneliness affect my life? When do I most feel isolated?*

Yes, I do get lonely at times. I feel most isolated when I know most of my friends have plans and I have none. Also at social gatherings when conversation can be very superficial.

**Your Answer**

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*Do I feel loved, cared about and important in my community?*

I feel cared about when I'm with my friends and family. The gym, book club and my local neighbourhood don't make me feel cared for.

**Your Answer**

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*How would my life change if I treated people with more generosity, if I cared more, if I shared my things instead of holding onto them so tightly?*

I think my life would probably benefit. I think I would end up receiving just as much as I gave out. I think I would feel more satisfied and happy about life.

**Your Answer**

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*How would I react if people treated me this way?*

I would be amazed and very thankful. I would feel warmer towards these people and probably feel more open to developing a relationship with them.

Answers

**Your Answer**

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*What does it feel like to be part of a team?*

I love being part of a team when everyone is pulling their weight and giving of their expertise towards our common goal. It's great! However it's terrible when people don't put the effort in or have other agendas.

**Your Answer**

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*What is my experience with church?*

My experience with church is that sometimes it is the best place to be and other times it loses its focus and people get distracted. It's hard to enjoy the team experience then.

**Your Answer**

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my answers

*What do I have to offer a church community. How can I give?*

I can offer them my organizational and writing skills if they can use them. Also I can give them time to help clean or repair things if needed.

**Your Answer**

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*What can a church community bring to my life?*

A church community can hopefully bring acceptance and a sense of belonging into my life. I'm sure it would also bring me new friends.

**Your Answer**

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my answers

## **Further Resources**

### **Community of Faith**

*Russell L. Staples*

Review & Herald Publishing

Copyright: 1999

### **Church: Why Bother?**

*Yancey Philip*

Zondervan

Copyright: 2001

### **Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church**

*Philip Yancey*

Hodder & Stoughton Religious

Copyright 2003

### **Why Bother With Church?**

*Simon Jones*

Inter-Varsity Press

2001

### **Why The Church Matters**

(for teenagers)

Group Books

1998