

Community & Covid-19

Expressing Church life in pandemic times

Now we are all concerned about the 'second wave'. And we are told that other waves may follow. We are also told that once the vaccines arrive life will return to normal. But can these new intrusive vaccines be trusted? We hear that Covid-19 is not unique, that it is only a matter of time before other viruses will follow. We sense fear, also in Christian circles. For some time now governments are restricting our free movement. Only last year we all thought that such severe restrictions could only happen in totalitarian states and never in our free democracies. We sense frustration and anger, also in Christian circles. Among some Christians I also sense a movement towards a comfortable self-centred existence.

A few weeks ago, my wife exclaimed, "I am tired of reading my Bible and praying at home alone. I want a different kind of Christian life!" I could empathise. I continue to teach God's word via Zoom, Facebook and Skype. This way I have the privilege of reaching saints other countries. A message takes hours to prepare. I give it my best. And yet, after I have preached my heart out in front of my laptop, I press the 'End Meeting' button... and there I am, alone in my office. Often a feeling of emptiness comes over me. Some, however, rejoice in this new era of e-Church. How is your walk with the Lord Jesus developing during these months? I notice that some of the new Christians in our church are slipping back into their old ways. Loneliness makes pornography more difficult to resist. As a church we provide a 70-minute online service every Sunday. Yet even established Christian families find it difficult to sit together round the TV to follow it. There is a growing trend among some to shop for alternative church services that better suit their own interest, style or schedule. For others the temptations to stay in bed or watch another series on Netflix is difficult to resist. We are losing healthy rhythms. Our hearts are cooling. We are losing our sense of 'community'. Does this matter?

What is a community?

The word 'community' has its roots in the Latin *communitas* and was initially used to refer to a group of people who lived in a particular geographical area, like a town or neighbourhood. Today we also have internet or virtual communities, groups of people who interact on some social media platform. Clearly there are different levels and types of community. How does it feel to be part of your local church? What is it that turns a group of people into a community?

Something in common: An essential feature of a community is that they have something in common, and this 'something' that distinguishes them from the rest. That 'something' could be that they come from the same country, work for the same company or support the same football team, political vision or religious faith. What do the members of your church feel they have in common? What things bind them together?

A sense of belonging: In large communities, most individuals are invisible. Commitment to a community grows when a member feels seen, accepted, appreciated and valued. There is an emotional connection. Each member feels that being part of the community fulfills some of her deep needs. Do you feel that you belong? How do other members of your church know they are valued?

Shared ownership: Integration in a community grows even stronger when a person sees himself no longer as a welcome-guest or a faithful-member but as a co-owner of the community. When this happens, a member invests more than time, energy and personal resources into the community, he is willing to invest *himself*. Of course, the church belongs to Christ. We never own it. But something happens in the heart of a believer when she chooses to affirm: 'this is *my* Christian family, *my* local church'. How do you view your local church? Have you taken that 'ownership' decision?

What is needed to experience community?

With diverse commitments and busy lifestyles, it is easy to share a house without experiencing any real sense of community. In family seminars my wife and I regularly encourage families to aim to eat together at least once a day. And then not in front of the TV but sitting together around a table. They create the moment to talk together as a family, to ask each other about the plans for the day ahead or how the day went. What is needed to make these times happen? *We must value each other*. You must love your family members enough to show some interest in their life, to bother asking them some questions, or to use the questions asked to share something about yourself. Regularly eating together is the best way I know to foment and experience family-based community.

When our four children were young, we would sometimes watch a children's film together. We parents would obviously prefer to watch another type of film. But we chose to spend part of our afternoon watching a children's film for the joy of being together as a family. That points to the second attitude that is needed to promote community: *valuing being together*. When children grow older, it is more of a challenge to find a film or a table game that we all enjoy, or to find a holiday destination that fits the expectations of each family member. Community requires flexibility and sometimes self-denial. If we insist on our own preferences, we will spread around the house and each will watch his own film on his laptop or mobile phone. You may enjoy the film but you will not taste community.

How important is community?

While walking with a friend recently he remarked, 'This pandemic is good in that it brings to light the quality of our personal relationship with God. Each Christian needs to learn to walk alone with the Lord.' There is truth in this statement, and yet I think it undervalues the role of community in our life. In the beginning of the Bible God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone..." (Gen 2:18). He then gave Adam a wife, He then gave them both children, then a family and then a society.

When speaking through Moses, God ensured that the nation of Israel would have healthy social rhythms that would encourage community life. God gave them the *Sabbath*, a day in the week in which they should stop work and give attention to their Creator, to their soul, to their friends and family. It was a day that would enrich community. When God gave instructions for the first *Passover* feast, he instructed smaller families to share this barbecue-type experience with others: “If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbour...” And to encourage that sharing, the Lord added, “If some is left till morning, you must burn it” (Ex 12:4,10). No meat could be kept for tomorrow’s soup or sandwiches. What was not eaten or shared, had to be destroyed. This also encouraged community.

The yearly Jewish calendar was marked with other feasts. These, like the Passover Feast, had didactic, symbolic and perhaps prophetic significance. But they were also clearly designed to promote community. God ensured that these feasts were taken seriously by calling them “sacred assemblies” and “the Lord’s feasts” (Lev. 23:4-6). He was the host. The Feast of Weeks, now called *Pentecost*, marked the beginning of the harvest: “And rejoice before the LORD your God... you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widow living among you” (Deut. 16:11). Everyone was invited! The last annual feast was in October, the *Feast of Tabernacles*. It marked the end of the harvest season. For seven days the whole nation would stop working, build tents and then... eat, live and sleep in them! A national camping week! (Deut. 16:13-15). Can you imagine how the children and young people would look forward to that special week? The Lord God wanted His people to experience the joys of being a community. He wanted them to be a people who valued and celebrated community!

In the New Testament we meet a new type of community, the *church*. Paul refers to the church as the “family of believers” (Gal. 6:10). While preparing his disciples for His departure, the Lord Jesus promised, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mat. 18:20). We know that the Lord Jesus dwells inside every Christian. What then do these words of Jesus mean? He wanted them to know that something ‘special’ or ‘extra’ happens when Christians meet together. Believers in the early church took these words seriously and “devoted themselves” to fellowship together. They met in the temple courts. “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:42, 46). They came together regularly in order to “spur one another on towards love and good deeds” (Heb. 10:24-25). Meeting together, experiencing community, is no small issue in God’s eyes. The Lord will always give the needed grace to those who are alone due to sickness or persecution. But the Christian life is not designed to be lived alone. Experiencing community is vital. We need it!

Can community exist without rules?

During this year, every country and region has been exposed to a changing set of Covid-19 related social rules. In some places these can be very strict. Opinions, perspectives and interpretations about these rules abound, not only on TV and social media but also among Christians within local churches. There is something inside our human nature that does not like rules. Even good rules. Even God’s rules. We seem to have a problem with authority. In the Holy Scriptures we find support for authority structures, such as that between parents and children, governments and citizens, church leaders and their congregation. How should we Christians respond to this recent interference of secular governments in the affairs of local churches? Should we calmly submit and follow the rules? Should we ignore them? Should we protest?

Christian civil obedience: Christians are called to be good citizens. Read carefully the message written by Paul to the Christians in Rome, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Rom. 13:1-2). These instructions were inspired by the Holy Spirit in the days when the Roman Empire ruled. This Empire was far from perfect. Wherever you live, those in authority will pass rules that you will not be happy with. But unless they directly conflict with God’s Laws, He asks to respect them.

Apostolic civil disobedience: Sometimes leaders may exceed their God-given authority. If a church leader, a parent or a government official forbids a Christian to do what God asks of him - or seeks to force a believer to do something that clearly dishonours the Lord - the Christian must remain faithful to the highest authority. Peter and John were commanded not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Their answer was, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:18-19). And once released they continued to preach Jesus. I call this *Apostolic civil disobedience*. And every Christian needs to be prepared to follow their example, and if necessary, like them, pay a price. Is this something new? No! The friends of Daniel disobeyed and did not bow down to the image. During WW2 many Christians also chose to disobey the imposed German government. Today Christians in China, North Korea and in Muslim lands at times also disregard the government in order to please the Lord. And we admire them for doing so. But please notice that civil obedience is the norm and civil disobedience the exception.

Before you decide to ignore your local Covid-19 rules, ask yourself if the rules limit your comfort or traditions or the essential elements of your faith. Did early Christians enjoy the comfort of meeting in large church buildings? Did early Christians enjoy worship concerts? These may be good things, but they are clearly not indispensable to Christian community. The early church met in small groups in houses. Could this also be done in your church today? What effect would it have? Small house groups ensured that each one was seen, it made the ‘one-another’ Bible texts easier to practice and it created the environment for the active participation by many.

How can we express community today?

Recently a local believer, tired and frustrated with all the Covid-19 restrictions, said to me: “I do not want any further contact with the church until all this corona hoo-ha has passed!” I can empathise with her frustration. But what if these limitations last another year or two? If community is important, waiting at home for better days is not the way forward. We need to learn to live our personal and collective Christian life in the midst of adverse conditions. How do our brothers and sisters in China, North Korea and in Muslim countries manage? How did the early church manage? Like them, we need to be creative, flexible and willing to adapt to multiple small-scale conditions.

A few weeks ago, Mark Rutte, the Prime Minister of The Netherlands, said at the end of one of his national TV presentations on the new Covid-19 social restrictions, “Stick to the rules and make the most of what can be done!” That is very good advice for most Christians in most countries. Explore the possibilities to the limits. If small groups can meet in churches, then go for it. Organize those small meetings. Don’t stay at home behind a screen. Meet your fellow believers. Are some visitors allowed in your home? Invite them. Can you get out? Go

for a walk with a fellow believer. Are schools open? Maybe it is time to organize children's events at church. The children need it! Is a scaled down youth camp possible? If yes, organize one! Your youth need it! Is a bring-your-own picnic in a park legally possible? Organize one. And if something is organized by fellow believers, leave the comfort of your home, break that custom of staring at a screen, and happily join the event! If necessary, use a face mask. If necessary, sit 1,5 meters apart. If necessary, make the meeting shorter. But go for it! We need community, and community is something we do together.

Singing has always been an important part of our collective worship. The early church was encouraged to "sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). In some regions singing is allowed in churches if facemasks are used. In other parts only a music team can sing, the rest must hum the songs or limit themselves to listening. If the current rules make singing in a group impossible, you may need to follow Ephesians 5:19 literally: "*Speak* to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music *in your heart* to the Lord". Perhaps more is possible than you think!

Conclusion

Community is and has always been an important part of life, including for families and churches. Current Covid-19 rules may restrict or force changes in the way we express community. No one should feel guilty for being careful or for staying at home. This may be what the Lord expects of you. But whatever you do, do not let laziness, fear or apathy destroy your experience of Christian community. Your family and your fellow brothers and sisters need you!

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