



Greater Sydney SDA Conference

Thinking About Loving Relationships

Christ called the Church to be a community that demonstrates God's love for the world.

Community is at the heart of God's plan for humanity. All of God's commandments and what we believe about God can be integrated in the context of community.

Doctrine of God:

1 – Word of God

- The Bible is God's plan for community
- God's plan for community (creation)
- Sin Destroys that community and God's plan to restore it.
- Community in the Old Testament (children of Israil)
- Community in the New Testament (church)
- Community Forever (new earth)

2 - 5 – The Godhead

- The trinity is the ultimate expression of community
- Made in his image includes an expression of community
- If the study or series is right this is an entry point for linking a study on a theology of sexuality and what it says about God.
- Jesus teaching was about establishing the new community
- The Holy Spirit is only expressed in community.

The Doctrine of Man

6 - Creation

- The creation story embodies community including the Sabbath to celebrate it.
- God creates us to find our expression in community

7 – Nature of Man

- We were created for community with God and each other
- Sin destroys community.

The Doctrine of Salvation

8 – The Great Controversy

- God's community of oneness v's Satan's anti-community selfishness and the resulting worldviews.

9 – The Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ

- Jesus yearning for community, unity and oneness
- Jesus teachings on the kingdom point to community at its best
- Jesus incredible love for you and his desire to spend forever in community with you.

10 – The Experience of Salvation

- Jesus deals with the implications of sin and makes a way for reconnection.

The Doctrine of the Church

11 – The Church

- The church is community
- The church is to model a community that lives life God's way

12 – The Remnant

- Is the community that shows that world what happens when a group lives out God's commandments.

13 – Unity in the Body of Christ

- How we go about living in community

14 – Baptism

- Dying to self and becoming part of God's community

15 – The Lord's Supper

- Modelling the new community

16 – Spiritual Gifts and Ministries

- Working together as a serving community

17 – The Gift of Prophecy

- God guides His community (Ellen White and how God used her in establishing the Adventist community)

The Doctrine of the Christian Life

18 – The Law of God

- Groundrules for community

19 – The Sabbath

- A celebration of community

20 – Stewardship

- A lifestyle or partnership with God

21 – Christian Behavior

- Holding our community together and modelling God's community.

22 – Marriage and Family

- The Building blocks of community

The Doctrine of Last Things**23 – Heavenly Sanctuary**

- God's plan for community restored

24 – Second Coming of Christ

- The new community realised

25 – Death and Resurrection

- We all go to heaven in community

26 & 27 – Millennium and end of sin/and New Earth

- Living in the fullness of God's community

God's Design For His Church - Community

If you had to answer in a single word what God's dream for human beings is, what would you say? The Bible writers would say Community

Jesus' prayer in John 17, just before He goes to the cross, reveals His deep dream for community. He desperately wants the disciples to experience God deeply and then reflect that love to one another. He then prays for future believers - that includes you and I. Jesus prays: "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in you so that the world may believe that you have sent me." For Jesus, the light shines through future believers when they demonstrate community based on God's love.

In the Old Testament, God's plan for the Children of Israel was to be a healthy, truth-revealing community. As they followed the light literally, they were to be a community that reflected light to the nations around them. God says: "I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." (Isaiah 42:6) In the New Testament, the apostle Paul often writes about the church working together as a body and being a community of believers – in fact he refers to it as a community of light (I Thessalonians 5). Jesus' life was oriented around community. He shared his life closely with twelve others. When the disciples wanted Jesus to hurry along he was more inclined to talk to children or a woman at a well who had been married five times but still felt empty. Jesus offered her living water that springs out of community with God and His family.

The whole Bible is the story of God's ongoing attempts to create community; how sin destroys it and how God does whatever it takes to make a way for that community to be experienced again. The way community is expressed among believers is central to lighting our world and showing that there is a group of people who live by God's plan and shine His character to the world.

Community is at the very essence of God's nature. God, as expressed in the trinity, already existed as community. God created us for community and until we understand how this works we will keep chasing the wrong things. God is expressed as we live out his dream of community where there is a love for God that is reflected in a deep love for His other children.

The Need For Community

Community is not optional for Christians. We are called to belong, not just believe. We are not meant to live isolated lives; instead, we are to be a part of Christ's family, to be members of His body.

"The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved is the fiercest longing of the soul... Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and air and water are to the human body." John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, 18

"No matter how little money we have, no matter what rung we occupy on the ladder of 'success', in the end we discover that what matters most is people. Human beings who give themselves to relationship building – who have friends they laugh with, cry with, learn with, live and love and grow old and die with – these are the human beings who lead magnificent lives." John Ortberg, *Everybody Is Normal Till You Get To Know Them*, 31

The Sabbath is a weekly reminder that relationships are the big deal. A relationship with God that is reflected in living life deeply with others. The Sabbath reminds us that this world is not ultimately about our work, consumerism or whatever else we use to define us. The big deal is growing in our love for God and our love for people.

It's ironic, sad and dangerous that in our quest to get ahead by societies standards we most often sacrifice the things that matter most.

Time spend in a growing relationship with the God of the universe.

Time spent in stewarding a vibrant marriage

Time spent in parenting children who need Time over more things

Time spent with our church community and wider community, connecting with the people God has called us to impact.

Sacrificing Community

We live in a society that puts more emphasis on individualism then it does on community. You and I get caught in this self-serving trap and with it lose the vitality that comes through genuine community. We look for happiness in places where God did not design for us to find it. We think that achieving the next goal will take us closer to happiness. The truth is that happiness comes from experiencing community with God and others. We sacrifice life-giving community in our quest to 'get ahead'?

Individualism, isolation, and consumerism all work together to ensure we do not have the time to live in community. Today architects design homes intentionally to promote privacy and seclusion, not connection. There was a time when homes were constructed with front porches so that when people went for their evening walks it was commonplace to run into the neighbors sitting out the front. People actually took time for one another and saw value in spontaneous interaction. Today, retreating from the busyness and intensity of work life, we come home, put the garage door down and escape. Not outside to the openness

of our front porch, but inside to the TV in our living room. And if we go outside it is not to the porch at the front of the house, but the deck at the back. The harsh truth is that after a long day and perhaps a crowded commute home, we don't want to see more people. We want to get away from them. We shun unplanned interactions by hiding. Our goal is to avoid people – and what they potentially want from us – at all cost! And cost us it does. While solitude is important as a spiritual discipline, to go off and live a life of isolation somewhere, or to live in spiritual isolation within the church family, cuts us short of experiencing what God made us for. It also drastically reduces our ability to light our worlds. (Andy Stanley, *Creating Community*, 21-22)

In the midst of overcommitted schedules and congested cities, we feel alone. Although we drive on overcrowded freeways we live in isolation. We live and work in a sea of humanity, but we end up missing out on the benefits of regular, meaningful relationships. We end up 'groping in the world's agenda of darkness' because we do not value the time that it takes to experience God's light in the context of community. The answer: "People need to be involved in meaningful and constant community or they will continue on indefinitely in a state of intense loneliness." Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, 33.

Community Is Forever

Only community is forever. Sin is a brutal attack on community. It leaves us short of experiencing the complete fulfilment of relationship. Often we think as individuals when God thinks in community. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 we find that even in death God still works in community. We do not arrive in heaven in dribs and drabs but as a community raised or joined together at the second coming. It is at this point we will really understand the community that God created us to be part of.

Our Church as a Community of Light

Our church is primarily called to be God's Community.

When we think of the word 'church' we often pictures of a building, service or organisation come to mind. While these are aspects of what it can mean to be a church, they are not primarily what the church is called to be. When Paul thought of the church, his first picture was of a living, growing, functioning body, a community on a mission. Paul describes the church as Christ's body where we all join together. The word that we most often translate 'church' in the New Testament is actually the Greek word for community. The New Testament describes the church in terms of serving, worshipping, sharing, growing and serving *together*.

God has called the church to create environments where authentic community can take place. As a church, it is only when we live in authentic community that we can model what happens when people live by God's guidelines. The church must run counter-clockwise to the world and in place of individualism value interdependence, in place of consumerism value service, in place of things value deep relationships with people. This would truly be the revolution our society desperately needs..

The church is to be a place where, in the face of a self-oriented society, a light would shine that allowed people to see what life really is all about. Our church is called to be a city on a hill that shows Sydney what can happen when people connect with the light and allow that to transform their relationships.

"The development of meaningful relationships where every member carries a significant sense of belonging is central to what it means to be a church. This is a God-ordained gathering of people that is so strong the even 'the gates of hell will not overcome it'." (Randy Frazee, *Making Room For Life*, 31)

A brick by itself is largely useless, but in a wall and as part of the architects plan it supports and is supported and it looks beautiful. When Christian purposefully decide to go it alone they are usually ineffective and can actually do harm. They help each other and achieve the purpose. Church is held together in Christ

God's Light – Expressed through Relationships

Loving relationships are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are His disciples by our love, John 13:35. Loving relationships are the mark of the Church that will tell the world of a loving God. While programmes may draw people to a church event, it will be the supportive relationships that are developed which will provide the glue that will enable people to stay and engage in greater spiritual growth.

While Christians should care for the welfare of everyone, they will take special interest in fellow members of the community: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers," (Galatians 6:10) The New Testament devotes considerable attention to this theme.

The future of our church depends on how well we develop true community. Imagine being part of a church that really did take loving relationships seriously? We can only get by for a while on skilled communication and programmes to meet needs. Unless we sense that we belong to each other we will become stale, irrelevant, and a place where people suffer alone. The price for not being in community is enormous - lonely unaffected lives, a church full of people warming

pews and looking on but never being changed. Light rarely being shone and a world that continues in darkness.

In Hebrews 10:25, Paul writes: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." The development of meaningful relationships where every member carries a significant sense of belonging is central to what it means to be the church. We have been given the incredible privilege of being Jesus' hands, His feet, His eyes, and His heart together. He works through us to light the world.

John writes:

If we walk in the **light**, as He is in the **light**, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.
(1 John 1:7)

He who loves his brother abides in the **light**, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. (1 John 2:10)

A part of God's purpose for us is that we live as a loving church family. When people are introduced to our community they will see God's love reflected and find it attractive. In a world where love and forgiveness is not always evident and where people are too busy looking out for number one to put others first, a community that runs counter to this has got to be appealing. That sort of family is a light to the world.

John uses some pretty strong language when talking about the church being a family. "Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20) Jesus said that it was love that would identify God's community, the church. "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:35)

Over fifty times in the New Testament the phrases 'one another' or 'each other' are used. We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, serve each other, and teach each other. We are called to accept each other, honour each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, submit to each other, be devoted to each other, and so the list goes on. These are our 'family responsibilities' that God expects us to fulfil through our local congregation. We grow together by learning from each other and by being accountable to one another. When others share with us how God is working in and through them, we grow too. When these 'one-anothers' are happening people will see the light and glorify God.

In our noisy, fast paced society we have to intentionally choose to live out the 'one-another' command of Scripture.

Choosing To Be Children of Light

If you can't think of people with whom you share significant relationships then now is the time to re-order your life around God's priority of community. If we are to light our worlds it must start right here, at this time and place with you and I making a commitment to growing deeper in community with our church family.

In his book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren writes that only the Holy Spirit can create real fellowship between believers, but He cultivates it by the choices and commitments we make (p 145). Everyday you and I choose to build, neglect or actively destroy community. What would it take for you to start now and consciously set out to light your world by deepening relationships with other people in our church family? Maybe it means phoning the person who comes to mind and you intend to do something about but in your hurry leave as a good intention. Maybe it's spending time in prayer with and for your church family or just going out of your way to let someone else know you care about them.

Community grows in our church every time someone chooses to pick up the phone and check how another church member is doing rather than race to the next chore. Community grows every time someone sends a note of encouragement, gives away baking, invites a group of people for a meal or social get together, or finds some other way of putting people above things or those jobs that always need to be done.

Being a light-revealing community starts with you – right now.

Jesus said people will know we are his disciples by our love (John 13:35). Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God's kingdom.

Loving relationships will be the mark of the Church which will tell the world of a loving God.

An authentic loving relationship with God overflows to authentic loving relationships with others.

Authentic Christian community will develop compassion for the lost and build a desire to bring more people into the community of Christ.

The 'one anothers' exhort us to be in loving relationship with each other, giving practical ways to show that love.

Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:2, 32, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 5:21, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:24, James 5:16

While preaching and programs may draw people to church, it will be supportive relationships which provide the glue for attenders to stay and engage in greater spiritual growth.

Ideas to Get Started

It begins with a passionate love for God, but it must result in practical loving relationships with each other.

Pastors need loving relationships too. Too often pastors are lonely people – so many working relationships and so few friends.

Model loving relationships

Small groups are the best environment for people to experience community

Provide ways for people to get to know each other better.

- encourage personal interaction between meetings
- serve each other by filling needs – serve together
- Play together – laugh and have fun

Facilitate the removal of masks

- speak the truth in love
- extend grace to those who stumble

-celebrate successes together

-uphold each other through crisis

Be inclusive

- Visitors are followed-up
- Seekers and believers are integrated together
- People are facilitated into relationships

Studies have shown that unless a person can develop 5-7 relationships within the church, they probably will not stay.

- Assign a sponsor
 - Invite them to newcomers class
 - Invite them to a small group
 - Ministry involvement
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Reflection Questions:

What indicates an atmosphere of love in your church?

What is the reputation of your church in the community?

When was the last time you went out to do something "just for fun" with another person besides your spouse or significant other?

How are you assimilating newcomers into the existing community?

How does your small group facilitate friendships?

How do you consistently and systematically invite newcomers to be a part of a small group?

A common vision helps to develop a common ethos or culture and a common effort.

How do you train small group leaders to develop community?

What is the quality of relationships among people on ministry teams?

How can you strengthen those relationships?

(Summarised from Releasing Your Church's Potential – Bob Logan)