

WBC Re-Visioning Process Sunday 10 Oct 2004

Theme: Our Community Life

Reflection by Geoff Wraight

“Acceptance is the Key to Community”

Acts 2: 42-47

..... The newly baptised believers threw themselves wholeheartedly into studying the teachings of the apostles, and into sharing their lives with one another, breaking bread together, and gathering for prayer.

..... Everyone was mind-boggled by what was going on, and especially by the miraculous things the apostles were doing — things that clearly bore the signs of God’s involvement.

..... All those who had put their trust in Christ lived a common life and shared everything with one another. They sold off their personal assets and possessions, and pooled their resources so that there was plenty to provide for everybody’s needs. Their daily pattern of life revolved around praising God, both at gatherings for worship in the Temple and while breaking bread in their homes at meals which were eaten in a generous and festive spirit. Everyone thought they were alright, and every day their numbers grew as the Lord added more and more people whose lives were being put on track.

Today we are wanting to reflect a little on the quality and shape of our life together as a community of people. What are our strengths as a church in the way we relate to and care for one another? What are some areas of weakness and potential growth? How well do we not only welcome but integrate new people into our social and group life?

In the initial responses we gathered at the beginning of our process there were 88 positive comments and 34 negative.

Here’s a sample of some of the positive:

A haven in a world that feels out of control and scary at times.

A strong community of faith, story, people and leaders.

Caring, supportive people

Diversity of ideas, beliefs and backgrounds brings refreshing insights, learning and growth.

Encouragement of others.

Friends who are strong, faithful, supportive and encouraging.

Generosity of spirit of some through good and tough times – inspiring to me.

Home Groups.

Honesty and integrity

People who are generous, loving, supportive and fun.

Sharing in soup lunches and yummy morning teas!

That I can rely on finding help in moments of need or crisis for myself or for other hurting or struggling ones I know.

Westgate is a very accepting people – broad in its theology, not rigid (like some Baptist Churches) in searching for truth! I wouldn't be afraid to articulate my deepest and best thoughts here

And Some of the things we find harder or miss:

More opportunities to come together.

Not nurturing out own. Too much outward focus

More Focus inwards on our own Christian education – nurture ourselves.

Friends who remain friends but become disillusioned or hurt or uninspired by Westgate and move on.

Lack of people to take on tasks.

Need more people with time to give.

Ways for people on the outer to become more involved

We miss the friends that have stopped coming.

I think some of these comments give some clues about how we might build on our strengths as a community of faith. There is as some honest and open acknowledgement of the pain and loss that some of us feel and some areas where we could do things better.

I would like to suggest some ideas about future directions but first I want to reflect briefly on the question of what makes our community life different. What is being a Christian community mean? How are we any different than the local bowling club or social group?

I want to suggest that the key to our life together is **acceptance**.

Being accepted for who we are. Being welcomed as a part of the group. Being known and knowing others. It is a basic human need that we all long for and many of us have experienced this sense of belonging at some point in our lives.

You walk into a room where you are greeted by a handful of people whom you have known for many years. They all know you very well and you know them. You relax, you can be yourself – you can share openly how you are feeling without any hesitation or embarrassment. In that sense of security you are more free to listen to others too..

As someone once confessed, “I was a neurotic for years. Anxious, depressed, selfish. And everyone kept telling me to change. I resented them, and agreed with them, and wanted to change; but simply couldn't, no matter how I tried. What hurt most was that, like the others, my closest friend kept urging me to change. So I felt powerless and trapped. One day she said to me, “Don't change. I love you as you are.” These words

were music to my ears: “Don’t change. Don’t change. Don’t change... I love you as you are.” I relaxed. I came alive. And suddenly, I changed!”

M. Scott Peck is pertinent on this point..

Paradoxically, a group of humans becomes healing and converting only after its members have learned to stop trying to heal and convert. Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. Instead, the members accept you as you are. You are free to be you. And being so free, you are free to discard defences, mask, disguises; free to seek your own psychological and spiritual health; free to become your whole and holy self.

(M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, p.68.)

There is a cheeky story told as a bit of a dig at religious types..

God walked into heaven and discovered that everyone was there. This didn’t seem fair, as some of them had done terrible things in life. So everyone was summoned before God, where an angel read out the ten commandments. When the first commandment was read, God said, “Everyone who has broken this commandment will have to leave.” The same happened with each of the other commandments. By the time the angel had finished reading the seventh, there was hardly anyone left. God looked up and saw a small group of grim self-righteous ascetics looking very smug. For a few minutes God considered the prospect of eternity with them, and then suddenly shouted out, “All right everyone, come back!”

Acceptance grows from the deliberate short-sightedness of love. It recognises that one word of encouragement to a fragile person is worth more than a thousand lectures on their faults. Acceptance provides the air which makes it possible for a strangled life to breathe and grow again.

And, acceptance is at the very heart of the Christian faith. The very nature of the God of our faith is expressed in the idea of the trinity – that God is identified in relationship – That God is not fully God except in the relationship of love that is God in Community. This is what we profess when we say God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself.

It is not surprising then to me that as we learn to accept and love one another in the name of Jesus we will draw close to and be touched by the very heart of God and visa

versa. And it is not surprising too, that the shared meal and the table is such a powerful symbol of both God's and our own hospitality and welcome.

But human groups where this kind of acceptance happens don't just happen overnight. There is no MacGroup outlet that I know of where you can buy a quarter pounder of acceptance with a bottle of instant companionship and trust.

It takes time. It takes perseverance. It takes patience and tolerance.

What we seek and long for in being accepted and experiencing true community often eludes us if pursue these things for their own sake...

It was Jean Vanier who said, "People who love people create community. People who love community destroy community."

Which echoes and even more profound observation made by Jesus himself when he said, "5 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matt 16:25)

In other words, if you love the idea of community more than you love the people in a community you will diminish it. Community is not a product and it can't be bought. In fact I would be willing to go out on a limb and suggest that it even doesn't depend on interest rates!

We forgive, we love, we accept and we support people because we have known the forgiveness, love, acceptance and support of the grace of God. When the acceptance and love spills out of the edges of our community we will be pleasantly surprised that the sense of community and belonging we seek will emerge with out even being named.

In the light of this, what are some of the challenges we face together as a church to develop our community life and relationships:

1. Increasing a sense of ownership and belonging to our church. How can we increase a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for the health of our community? I would suggest a few ways:

- Be more regular in attendance.
- Do a roster duty with a sense of joy.
- Make a positive contribution to a least one major event or project each year. eg. hospitality events, Karen Students homework group, assist in youth group, visit FRIENDS group, a new mission initiative.

2. Building relationships and inviting others. Both Attractional or Outward oriented mission always depends on building real relationships with others.

3. Small groups are still a key part of our story and ongoing life.

The six or so small groups that currently meet regularly here at Westgate represent a wide diversity of size, style and frequency. Some have been together in one form or another for over 20 years, some are still new. Some are struggling to find the way ahead others feel very comfortable. Some issues that will strengthen and enhance our group life:

- Growth as a goal
- Connection with the wider group
- Table sharing still central
- Short term and purpose focussed groups.

4. Breaking across barriers

We naturally gravitate to a our own subgroup or friends and sometimes it takes a conscious effort to break out of this and communicate across natural social barriers whether they be age or background ethnicity, political perspective or education. Here's a few suggestions:

- Why not deliberately talk to or visit someone different each week/month.
- Allow yourself to be cared for – let the pastors be pastors.
- Our young people need to hear about and experience justice and mission opportunities – you can provide these.

A Symbol of new growth and new friends who will join us.

“The Mentored” - our senior young people will come forward and place a candle (unlit) in the sand as a symbol of new people and new relationships that will be established in the future of our journey as a community of faith.

**Prayer for Others and the future of our Community Life..
(including prayer for the New Parliament)**

Loving and accepting God, we give thanks today for the privilege and peace that we enjoy in this nation of Australia. Despite its flaws, we are deeply grateful for the rule of law and a democratic process that at its core gives value to the right of every citizen to participate in the choosing of our leaders.

We pray for the new parliament that has been elected last night. For Prime Minister Howard and Mark Latham. As people of justice and peace we ask that we may find new energy to continue to challenge our leaders to greater integrity and positive leadership. Give us courage to stand against the tide of fear and self-interest that still grips this nation. We long for the day when integrity and moral leadership are again the primary criteria by which our leaders are elected.

We pray for a sense of adventure and openness to new ideas and new groups, new ways of meeting together that go against the culture of speed and individualism we live in. We acknowledge that not everyone in our Community is able to be in a small groups but we are all in relationships with others and we pray for a vision of deepening and enriching relationships where healing and conversion and strengthening faith are an outworking of our life together.

We pray for those who are in special need again today. We thank you for the faithfulness and faith of people like Dawn Gregory – be with the family as they grieve the loss of their mum. For Daphne Holden as she recovers in hospital, for others too ??

Most of all we ask that we may be a church community that is peppered with grace and seasoned with love. Let us always be a looking for the gift in one another and willing to share our lives in order to gain them. Amen.