

No family left outside: a call to community

A little while ago now I attended a conference where a man by the name of Gary B Melton gave a presentation. As vice chair of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in the early 1990s, he led the board's development of a neighbourhood-based strategy for child protection. This strategy was based around the idea of building strong communities, and the results were fascinating. Aside from the radical implications for child protection systems and government policies, something in the presentation resonated with me. I keep returning to the key phrase: "Every child and every parent should know that if they have a reason to celebrate, worry or grieve that someone will notice and someone will care. No family will be left outside." It is the word "celebrate" that should draw your attention.

As a nation we watch the news or current affair shows and see families in crisis. Sometimes we grieve for them. Sometimes we criticise them. Sometimes we wonder what will become of our society. Sometimes we even ask what a government department is going to do about the situation. Or wonder where the education system, the welfare system, the health system failed them. Perhaps it's time we asked instead, "Do those children and parents know that someone cares?" Not that the system "cares," but that *someone* cares? What can we do about these families that have been "left outside?"



The great encouragement of Melton's presentation was that we can do something. Something very real and very valuable. Christians in local churches are some of the people that are best placed to take that action, with wonderful results. Strong communities result in safer, healthier and happier children. Strong communities result in stronger families. The only downside to such an outcome is that commercial current affairs shows would have nothing to report!

Christians are, by and large, good at community. We understand the need to meet together, to talk together, to support each other, to mourn *and celebrate* together. Both the Old and New Testament put an obvious emphasis on God's people in community. Many of us are ready and willing to offer help to those in need. Indeed, some of us actively seek out those who are in need and provide practical and pastoral care. I know of young families, separated by circumstances and distance from

grandparents, that find comfort and support in their church grandparents. I know of teens struggling with their home life that find wisdom and stability in their youth group leaders. I know of children whose lives are bleak but for the few hours they spend with their Sunday School teachers on the weekends.

The growing reality around us is that this kind of community is something that the broader population is less and less involved in. It is not just families from lower socio-economic backgrounds that are being "left outside". Many well educated, financially well off families are increasingly isolated from the communities they live in. In Australia we are on the whole more and more connected through electronic communication and travel; with each other and with the world. But we are also more and more time poor, leaving little space for anything other than work, educating our children and weekend sport.



The isolation of being "left outside" places stress on individuals and families that can then be expressed in a variety of negative ways; depression, abuse, boredom, a lack of respect for others, increased crime, less engagement with the community and ultimately more isolation. As a society, our response has been to implement programmes to increase engagement, and develop systems that attempt to address the results of isolation. Melton pointed out that this response means that we have started seeing people more and more as clients and cases, and that help is something that people must seek for themselves. Help has in many ways become a commodity to be purchased, not something offered and received.

Melton argues that the level of trust in many communities has declined to a point where people feel they have to go it alone. It is true, I think, that there is a sense that families should be able to cope, and a growing criticism of them when they show signs of not coping. There is a sense that if someone has to ask for help that they have failed. There is a sense that an offer of help may not only be unwelcome, but may actually be dangerous. There is a sense that the safest place to be is barricaded in my safe, isolated home.

The great risk is that Christians and local churches will also become more isolated from the communities in which they live. The risk is there because we too are time poor, sometimes because we are too busy with church community. The risk is there because sometimes we become afraid of the broader community and how it has changed around us. Sometimes we too rely on the "system" to address the problems of others. Sometimes we too see the problems of our young people and families and feel that it is too hard for us to address, or that they should take responsibility and address the problem themselves. Sometimes we feel that the safest place to be is barricaded in our own safe, church family.



There is no doubt that our social systems play an important role in caring for people, nor that policy makers and governments need listen to the likes of Melton when they seek to address the problems of those systems. However there is also a place for each and every Christian, and each and every local church, to take action. Can we be the ones in our local community that notices the families that are isolated? Can we be the ones to ask "Do those children and parents know that we care?"

As Christians in our local communities, we must continue to strive for community. Don't stop! Don't be discouraged and don't be afraid. We must continue to actively pursue community outside our church family as well as within. Here are a few questions to ponder:

- Can you think of one family in your local area that is struggling? Who is helping them? Now... the hard question, who is there to *celebrate* with them?
- Do you know a grandparent who lives a long way from their grandchildren, with whom you can share your family life?
- Have you seen young people in your area "at a loose end"? Are you critical of them? Who is it that is engaging them in the community?
- Do you have a skill that you can share with your community?
- Is your church building a venue where you can engage the local community?
- If you called in to your local Police station and asked what would help them address problems in your local area, what do you think they'd say? Could you help?
- Is there a group of people in your community who are particularly vulnerable? Who is looking out for them? Who is *celebrating* with them?



As Christians we need to be committed to remaining in our communities, and not become part of the retreat into isolation. And we don't necessarily need to start a programme or some grand venture to make a difference. We need to keep engaging

with the community around us, seeing people as they really are: made in the image of God. We need to be salt and light to the world.

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:13-16

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Bloss Wright, Member of Winmalee Presbyterian Church, responds

We have been studying John's gospel in Bible Study recently, and part of what keeps striking me is just how counter-cultural Jesus was. I think that Christians are generally pretty good at helping in times of crisis or obvious need, but I don't think we are so good at living open and transparent lives without masks, and I think we shy away from celebrating successes or achievements for fear of encouraging pride. That is sad.

I think that, in a sense, Christians buy into putting too much value on being independent. You know that oft quoted African proverb about it taking a whole community to raise a child? I don't think that's literally true. One or two people can raise a child if they need too. But, to raise a secure, loved, confident, social, servant-hearted, God-honouring, gracious, honest and thoughtful child... well that takes a community.

The article touches on it, but that whole need children have for mentors outside their parents is so crucial, and many children simply do not have someone they trust and to whom they can turn in times of need and in times of joy. Someone to ring and say "you know that Maths test that I was freaking out about? I got 80%!!"

I think Christians need to take the lead here and be communities who are in the community celebrating, comforting and just plain living and loving openly, joyously and honestly. Looking out for the disenfranchised and making it safe for them to just be.

Thinking about this had me thinking about how marvellous a community transformed by Christians in Christ could be. As I have mulled it over, I have realised that this is what I have been looking for! There is a sense in which my life, although based on different motivations and priorities, looks like the life of any "moral" person in the community and I want it to look different.

This is the way. Encouraging genuine sharing and 'realness' in both the sad times, when help should be there without you needing to ask, and in the good times when success should be celebrated free from the burden of 'bragging'. But it will take a huge amount of humility and grace. It is so exciting to think about the potential impacts!