

Community

Dear Pedro,

He was so timid, yet so talkative. He displayed some awkwardness socially and emotionally, likely related to an accident when he was younger. He would wander the halls at our church, sometimes sit in on a class, and even volunteered a bit. No doubt he was looking for *family*.

One day he attended one of our Adult Bible Fellowships (our Sunday communities, or congregations as some churches call them). After the lesson, as the class was beginning to dismiss, one of the men asked, *Eric, would you like to join our group?*

Two days later, Eric related to me the following, *No one ever asked me to join a group*, he said. *All my life I've been in and out of different things, even trying churches, yet no one ever asked me to become a part of their group.*

Eric's amazement illustrates the hunger for community that is all around us. His amazement makes me realize that we can always do a better job of extending Christ's invitation to become a part of his Body.

Do you remember how children wanted to sit on Jesus' lap? Do you remember the lepers? They had a saying that He was one of them. Not because He healed everyone, but because He cared for them. And He went to the home of Zacchaeus, a despised *tax collector* . . . and then He ended up at mine.

When Jesus asked us to join His group, He also asked us to demonstrate the same attitude toward others that He extended to us—love, forgiveness, acceptance and fellowship. He desires that many more know His fellowship, which is found in Christian community.

Pedro, you and I both know what true friendship is like. Sometimes we've just sat with a buddy, no words being exchanged, comfortable together even in our silence. On other occasions we've needed to vent, perhaps share deep frustrations, or even our sin struggles, yet not feeling any less respected or loved by our friend.

But so many people miss this kind of community. They don't know the love of a friend or the joy of fellowship. More troubling still is that they may never understand much of Christ's love, if they don't see it embodied in us, the Church.

Let me explain. The only way many people experience church is in the worship service. Worship is essential and good, for it is what we were created to do. However, we were also created for community, and the typical worship service is not designed for relationship building. So as leaders, we must emphasize the importance of Christian community.

Community is where people can know each other, where they can be honest and where they can ask questions. Community is where people can pour out their hearts, and where they listen with a sympathetic ear. Community is where folks are allowed to straddle a fence on little issues that aren't clear in the Scriptures or say, *I don't know*, or even differ respectfully with a brother or sister. Community is where friends overlook offenses, or follow Matthew 18 when

confrontation is necessary. Community is an atmosphere of cooperation that majors on the gospel and its love and concern for the world. Community is discipleship, fellowship and accountability carried out in love.

Pedro, long ago I noticed if I preach about love, but don't show it myself, I am just a *loud clanging cymbal*. Likewise, it's true, if I merely talk about loving relationships, and encourage people to build them, but do not establish a system within the congregation to accomplish this, our people will be hindered from the fellowship they need.

Sure, some folks will take the required initiative to build relationships with others. But as you are aware, too many people simply *fall through the cracks* when we leave this to chance.

Therefore, I urge you, friend, to build into your church many small groups and mid-size communities. Personally, I like the Adult Bible Fellowship system, where classes that meet on Sundays also gather during the week as extended families for discipleship, socials and outreach. These groups notice when someone is missing, and they care for those who are sick. They have become the vehicles in our church for carrying out all of the *one anothers* in Scripture.

As team leaders in our churches, the most important thing we can do to enhance community is to cultivate an overall atmosphere that communicates we are family. That atmosphere begins with our own modeling. For example, sometimes I refer to my own small group from the pulpit, just to remind people that pastors also need fellowship and accountability.

The example of our executive leadership is also important. Therefore, I ask our leaders which community or Adult Bible Fellowship they're in, because I think all of us need that smaller group where we contribute our gifts and love, or where we meet people out of work, in pain, or perhaps fighting cancer.

The bottom line, Pedro, is that people will recognize authentic community by the way we greet others in the hall, talk from a heart of love, send notes or work together as a team. Our daily demeanor will reveal whether we're just interested in numbers or looking good, or if we really value people. My prayer for each of us is that we guide our churches in extending Christ's community to one another.

In the Good Yoke,

Knute Larson

The Chapel, Akron, Ohio

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.

Hebrews 10:25