

Chapter 12

Nurturing Community

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SABBATH

What is Nurture?

The Sligo Church mission statement, which is difficult to miss the moment we step into the sanctuary, identifies three basic tasks of the community of faith: worship, nurture, and outreach. The statement implies at least two important things about nurture. *First*, nurture is one of the very few essential tasks that should occupy us, and it is difficult to exaggerate its importance for the community of faith. *Second*, even though nurture is not everything that the community does, without it, there is no community of faith. In fact, there would be no worship of God and no outreach to the world without robust Christian nurture.

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also that they may grow and leave the ways of childhood and become adults. The Bible uses the language of nurture and care to speak originally and fundamentally of the instructing, providing, disciplining, encouraging, and empowering actions of our God toward His community. God is our first and ultimate Nurturer. However, the community of God, inasmuch as it obeys the instructions for nurture in the Word of God and emulates the work of God in the world, takes up this same task and embraces it with passion and faithfulness.

Theologian Edmund Clowney argued that the goal of Christian nurture is, “. . . to know the Lord, to do the Lord’s will, and to be like the Lord.”¹ Thus, nurture can be defined as a whole range of the instructing, providing, disciplining, encouraging, and empowering actions of the community of faith in order to ensure *union with Christ, obedience to Christ, and Christlikeness* in its members. Through the attitudes and habits of nurture, the community and its members are brought to bear fruit for God (John 15:2).

We cannot define nurture in exclusively spiritual terms, separating it from practical daily life. To know the Lord, to be obedient to His will, and to be like Him means that we will live our embodied, daily, practical lives in distinctive and recognizable ways. We will have a different work ethic; we will eat different food; we will watch different television programs; we will spend our money differently. Nurture affects every area of our lives. At the same time, it has a fundamentally spiritual foundation—it inevitably begins with and essentially stands on our

¹Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 143.

relationship with God.

How do you understand Christian nurture? Did this section challenge your view of nurture? In your mind, how effectively do we nurture one another in the Sligo community?

SUNDAY

Nurture and Community

Nurture establishes and strengthens the community of faith, but, at the same time, the community is best equipped to extend nurture and care to its members. As mentioned in the previous section, God is our first and ultimate nurturer. Spiritual care is always fundamentally and authentically the ministry of God to His people. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God transforms us into different people and a different community. But this spiritual care is extended by God through the means of community and in the context of community. God uses us all together to build the community of faith.

The Apostle Paul makes this point in Ephesians 4:16. This verse is long and complex in both the original Greek and English translations. Grammatical analysis of this verse indicates that the subject of the long sentence it consists of is the body, or the community of faith, and the object of the verse is the growth of the body. So, the verse says that the body causes its own growth. The community grows the community. Neither pastors, nor elders, nor gifted ministry leaders have the decisive role in the nurture of the community of faith. This role belongs to the

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community as a whole. It is the New Testament model of nurture and care.

God's vision for the community of faith is that it builds itself in love while it functions as a community. The community is not built by individual and isolated members, but by all members together, connected, and cooperating in harmony. The growth of the community takes place as all parts of the body work properly and as they are connected together. The community needs all gifts and talents and it needs full participation of every member. The purpose of God is accomplished when no one stands by or remains passive.

Therefore, every one of us in the Sligo community needs to rethink our own investment and involvement in the Body of Christ. We have to understand that we are not together in the Sligo community by accident, but by the providence of God. God assembled us together as we are, and He fully expects that each one of us will make a vital contribution to the building of the community. That is why we are together. We all need to ask ourselves an urgent question: Am I harming the Body of Christ with passivity and indifference?

Why do you think community is the best context and means for Christian nurture? How can you ensure that you will not deprive the Sligo community of the unique nurturing gifts that God gave you?

MONDAY

How Community Nurtures

There are a number of ways our church community can

nurture its members for communion with Christ, obedience to Christ, and Christlikeness. An obvious method that we employ every Sabbath is the preaching of the Word of God (Romans 10:17). God gave to His church the gift of pastors and teachers and expects that this gift will be used to nurture the community of faith (Ephesians 4:11-12). Preaching should focus on explaining and teaching the Word of God. The Word of God is powerful (Hebrews 4:12) and our preaching should allow it to do its work among us. Such preaching instructs, edifies, and encourages. But it also weans members off relying predominantly on secondary devotional sources and encourages them to study the Bible for themselves. We should not teach each other to be predominantly consumers of thoughts, but to be creators of thoughts.

The spiritual gift of teaching is also employed in a vigorous program of Christian education in the community of God (Titus 2:1; 2 Timothy 3:16). The program of Christian education in the church is an important strategic method for a community of faith to nurture its members. We pride ourselves on being people of the Book, so we need to know it well and be skilled in studying it for ourselves. We have to teach each other how to make full use of this primary source of life and instruction. We also should engage in a robust program of education in personal spirituality, ethics, theology, church history, and other vital areas of Christian life.

A simple but absolutely essential way of nurture is direct personal relationships among the members of the community. When informal personal conversations and interactions become an important element of the

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church culture, they serve as a powerful and effective method of nurture. There are many opportunities for conversations and interactions among community members on a regular basis. However, the relationships that are truly transformational go beyond gossip, sports talk, and exchange of cooking recipes. They are intentionally spiritual in nature and grounded in spiritual realities and perspectives, even when they revolve around mundane issues of life. They provide opportunity to the members of the community to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and stir up one another in love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

Are you involved in any of the three ways of community nurture discussed in this section? If yes, how would you describe and evaluate your experiences? If not, what stands in your way?

TUESDAY

Gospel Nurture

In an important way, the human element in Christian nurture is indirect and incidental. The help and support within the community of faith is not based on human wisdom, eloquence, argumentation, or charisma. All of these traits are helpful and could have an important role in getting people to follow Christ. But none of them has the power to change lives. Only the gospel of a crucified and risen Christ has this power. "Only Jesus the Messiah can fix what has gone so wrong in us and around us . . . He alone touches deep enough to untangle the roots

of everything else that troubles us."² This is why Christian nurture is fundamentally gospel nurture and it is centered on Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the water and the air of Christian nurture. The death of Jesus on the cross radically transforms the way we live our lives (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). It enables us to see ourselves in the true gospel light and it shows the way to personal and community transformation.

There are two fundamental transformative lessons we learn at the cross. The first is the lesson of our inherent sinfulness. At the cross we learn the truth of our transgressions in all their odious colors. We were sinful before we met Christ, and we still remain sinful; we are in daily need of grace and forgiveness. This lesson dispels the illusions of our innocence and moral superiority, and it makes us humble. The second lesson instructs us that God forgives our sins at the cross of Christ and cleans our moral and spiritual slate. This astonishing truth of God's grace fills us with joy and hope and dispels pessimism and depression about our spiritual prospects. The cross teaches us that it would be an affront to God if we refuse to embrace his mercy and hope for the future. Therefore, our preaching, our education programs, and our informal interactions have to rest on and continually point to the cross of Christ. The cross has to have the central place among us and we have to commend it to one another continually.

The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms our nurturing relationships as well. The cross of Christ is not only our story but it shapes our conversations and interactions

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²David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2005), 41.

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in the community of faith in very fundamental ways. Those who have not ceased praising God, because they have received the grace at the foot of the cross, cannot turn away from that grace when they interact with others. We cannot lead one another to the cross by being rude, indifferent, and insensitive. We have to relate to one another with the same grace, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and patience extended to us by Jesus. It is not easy to live by these principles, and that is why the biblical vision of nurture is based on costly love.

How does the gospel function in your life? Do you talk about it often with your friends in the church? What would it take for the gospel to completely reshape your conduct and your attitudes in life?

WEDNESDAY

Nurture in Small Groups

The biblical mandates for the community include speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), confronting sin in one another (Galatians 6:1-2), watching over one another's hearts (Hebrews 3:12-13), and stirring up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).³ These mandates imply focused, individualized, and customized concern for each member of the community. They require undivided attention, frequency of interaction, unhurried attitude, and confidentiality, which cannot be accomplished either in large church gatherings or even in ministry groups and church committees.

While there is no doubt that spiritual nurture

and spiritual mentoring can take place indirectly in church board meetings, choir practices, book clubs, or financial committee, such venues cannot be and should not be the primary vehicles of nurture. They do not provide sufficient time, undivided and focused attention, and requisite trust and confidentiality that is essential to spiritual nurture. The community should pursue nurture in forums that are specifically designed for unhurried interaction and that are focused exclusively on spiritual growth.

One such forum is that of small groups. Arguing for the benefits of small groups, Ellen White wrote, "We meet together to edify one another by an interchange of thoughts and feelings, to gather strength, and light, and courage by becoming acquainted with one another's hopes and aspirations; and by our earnest, heartfelt prayers, offered up in faith, we receive refreshment and vigor from the Source of our strength."⁴

Small groups give us courage to stop pretending to be who we are not, and become real. We need an intimate circle of fellow believers who will hear out and hold in confidence that our faith is shaken, that our marriages are struggling, that we are caught in a vortex of addiction, that we are heartbroken about our wayward children, that our prayer life is non-existent. Deep down in our hearts we all yearn to be real and small groups offer us this opportunity.

Moreover, small groups enable us to be much more strategic and efficient in the way we nurture each other. In the Word of God, we are urged to encourage each other daily (Hebrews 3:13). This is

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⁴Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2. (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1871), 578.

³In addition, there are more than fifty other instances of so-called one-anothering in the New Testament.

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only possible if we exist as a church of small groups. Philip Ryken writes, “A church that met only weekly might be a teaching church and a worshiping church, but it could hardly be a caring church.”⁵

What is your opinion on the potential of small groups to be the forum in which true Christian nurture takes place? Would you like to belong to a small community where you can be real? Elaborate on your answer.

THURSDAY

Secret and Besetting Sins in Community

The passage in Hebrews 3:12-13 implies that sin is deceitful and that it has hardening effects on our lives. Sin deceives us by offering powerful gratification and happiness while hiding its destructive side-effects and consequences. To use a fishing metaphor: it offers us a desirable bait and hides the hook. When we do not seek joy in God, the gratification of sin becomes the escape on which we rely. As a result, our God-given resistance to sin is weakened and our hearts are hardened in the life of rebellion. That is how besetting sins oppress us.

Besetting sins thrive in secrecy. On one hand, when we are estranged from our community there is a lack of accountability in our lives. We quietly tolerate besetting sins and do not acutely feel the obligation to live holy lives because we are not very close to anyone in particular. Sedated by unending self-deception, we do not see ourselves, nor do we hear from any one else, the truth of our spiritual condition.

No one reminds us of our death to sin and of our new life of freedom in Christ. On the other hand, when we drift alone, we are deprived of close association with people who live free of the same sins that oppress us. If we would closely associate with them on a regular basis, their lives would serve as a powerful motivation for our fight against besetting sins (Proverbs 27:17).

We are created to live in community and grow in community. We need community—both the entire congregation and a small group. Just as much as our worshipping community is essential for our spiritual maturity, so is a small group. Small group is the place where it is difficult to hide, where we are truly known. It is the place where we are able to share on a deeper level what is happening to us and what are the patterns of sin against which we struggle. In a small group we can be transparent, without fear that our trust will be violated. In a small group, we can fight against our besetting sins much more efficiently.

Small groups that support people in their struggles with secret and besetting sins must be deliberately planned, built, and nurtured. Members of small groups need to have some essential spiritual traits and attitudes. *First*, it is essential that they not be judgmental or easily offended by the depth of human brokenness. *Second*, since it is impossible to deal with besetting sins without vulnerability, each member needs to exemplify vulnerability and be open about their own struggles with sin. *Third*, they have to be unflinching in keeping conversations confidential.

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⁵Philip Graham Ryken, *City on A Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003), 87.

What are your besetting sins? Why do you think these sins still plague you? Do you fight against them, or did you make peace with them? How can participation in a small group help you in your struggle with these sins?

FRIDAY

Commitment to Nurture and Small Groups

Even though we are instructed to live our lives by the principles of the Word of God, the reality is that we are influenced by the spirit of our times. Many Christians live deeply individualistic and distracted lives, giving the community of faith little attention and a marginal amount of time. We are just too busy with our own lives and prefer to be left alone to pursue our own interests and pleasures.

Much too often we reach out and offer help to our fellow believers only after tragedy strikes: once their marriages fall apart, their children have issues with law and addictions, their health completely deteriorates, or their faith fades away. We are quite exercised, active, and generous to one another once the crisis comes to the head. It is the right thing to do. But, we are not doing well at all on being proactive and faithful in extending Christian nurture. When a crisis is in its inception, hardly anyone of us is aware or available to offer instruction, advice, discipline, prayer, and love. Few of us act as a faithful presence in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

How long will we tolerate this condition? How long will we remain passive and indifferent? How long will we defy God's purpose for our own lives and

for our community of faith at Sligo church?

Let us respond to the call of God and refuse to tolerate isolation, passivity, and indifference in our lives. Let us honor God by wholeheartedly embracing the vision of a nurturing and caring community within our Sligo church. We should hide no longer. It is high time for us to abandon the life of secrecy and suffering in solitude. Is it not true that there is not much joy in this kind of life after all?

Our church is about to launch a small group initiative and we count on your gifts and your participation in this initiative. We want to journey together, care for one another, and nurture one another. We want to give opportunity to everyone in our church to be known and to know others, to serve and be served. When the call is extended in a couple of weeks, please join us.

In what ways are you being nurtured in the Sligo community? How would you evaluate your spiritual growth in the last year?

How can you reorganize your daily tasks and responsibilities in order to help other members of the Sligo community grow in faith? Who are the people in our community that could use your nurturing help?

Do you belong to a small group that is focused on Christian nurture and spiritual growth? If you do, what is your experience? If you do not, what would it take for you to lead or join a group like that?

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