

Chapter 5

What is Community?

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SABBATH

Entirely Unique Community

We are created as social beings and during our lifetimes we find ourselves in various communities. Different connections motivate us to join communities: ethnic background, hobbies, work, living location, friendships, sports teams, interests and passions, health concerns, and many others. Some of the communities to which we belong occupy us for a long time; with others, the connection wears off quickly. Some command a great deal of our time and energy; others are almost incidental. But, to varying degrees, we are all immersed in diverse communities.

There is nothing wrong with belonging to communities established on positive and wholesome principles. But there is one special community, the community of faith, to which we are all invited. Throughout history God has been laboring to bring us to the community of faith and He desires that all human beings join this community. Whatever other community we are

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The community of faith is an entirely unique community. It is established by God, rather than by human leaders, and its foundations are neither natural nor human. Instead, it exists because of God's mighty and glorious acts in creation and redemption. God inaugurated the community when he set us on this earth, and He re-forged it when He gave His Son to reconcile us to Himself and each other.

Another reason why this community is unique is that it is indissolubly bound to Jesus Christ. Jesus is its head and without Jesus it would not exist. Dietrich Bonhoeffer succinctly argued that "We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ."¹ He explains that the members of the community of God would not truly know each other or truly come to each other without the mediating work of Christ. Furthermore, as believers are in Christ, they are in Christ *together*. And they are together only because they are in Christ.

Nothing like this remarkable community ever has existed or ever can exist in human experience. That we all—rich and poor, educated and simple, weak and strong—are invited into this community is the greatest privilege and joy of our lives.

What joys and challenges do you feel when you know that you are called to belong to the entirely unique community of God?

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperOne, 1954), 21.

SUNDAY Church as Community

If a community of faith is a gathering of human beings who share in common their experience of salvation in Christ and see themselves as of God and not of the world, then the church could be considered a community of faith. The church can, to a large extent, define itself in similar terms and, therefore, *the church* and *the community of faith* can be used interchangeably.

The church is the manifestation of the community on both global and local levels. The global church community is a gathering of people who, admittedly, do not know each other and cannot all actively and purposefully care for each other to the same degree, but who, nevertheless, have a common faith in Christ and a common set of beliefs and principles by which they abide. This sense of the global church as a community is joyfully obvious to Adventists every five years at General Conference sessions. We may not know a majority of session attendees, but we feel a relationship and intangible connection, even with those we meet for the first time in our lives. We feel the pull of the community. The bonds are difficult to capture and explain, but they are very real.

Sligo Church is a numerically much smaller community than the global church, but it is still a community of disciples bound together by the blood of Christ, core beliefs, and common principles of life. Also, because we are fewer in number, we have the opportunity to implement successfully some functions of community that cannot be accomplished

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on the global level. We can know each other deeply, love each other genuinely, and care for each other faithfully.

However, in order to know, love, and care for each other effectively, Sligo Church would have to divide itself into even smaller communities. It is exceedingly difficult to truly know a thousand or more people, let alone genuinely love them and care for them. We have to worship together on Sabbath mornings; we have to make important decisions in our business meetings; we have to meet socially as a church; and we certainly have to reach out to the world corporately. But in order to nurture each other in faith and watch over each other's souls, we need to organize ourselves into smaller groups, where everyone will be able to express themselves, be known, be loved, serve and be served.

If our Sligo Church is indeed a community of faith, what should be our attitude towards church attendance and participation?

MONDAY

The Community of God is Supernatural
(Ephesians 2:11-22)

The word *supernatural* often conjures up thoughts of miracles, ghosts, and other-worldly beings. But in the context of community, the word refers simply to things that cannot be explained within the framework of a natural worldview or by our normal way of thinking.

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul points out that the

supernatural nature of the community of faith is manifested by its unity. Those who were born Gentiles were once separate from Christ, not allowed to be a part of Israel, without God, and without hope. But now the blood of Christ has brought them near to God (vs. 12-13). In verse 14, Paul writes that Christ has made the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) one and has destroyed the barrier between them, the dividing wall of hostility. The supernatural power of God brought two groups that were historically hostile together in unity. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, the Jews and Gentiles, as well as all believers today, are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of His household (v. 14).

Biblical community is supernatural because, without God, it is not possible. Only the power of God can put together a group of human beings with nothing in common, who may have even been hostile to each other in the past, and form out of them a loving and supportive community, the household of God. We naturally gravitate toward and form communities with people who are similar to us, and it takes the miracle of God to binds us together into a community where similarity is not required. Only God can make people of widely divergent ethnicities, cultural contexts, income levels, educational backgrounds, personalities, and interests, deeply care for and love one another, treat each other as brothers and sisters, and see Christ in one another's countenance. Without a doubt, the community of faith is an incredible wonder of God.

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²David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 133.

How aware are you that our Sligo Church is an incredible miracle of God? To what extent do we trust the supernatural power of God to create a community of faith from our gathering of believers? Should we work to grow such a community, or should we entirely trust God to build it?

TUESDAY

Community as an Outpost of the Kingdom of God

During the earthly life of Jesus, the kingdom of God was manifested in His life and His mission. He intended to establish the kingdom of God. The first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark reference His own ministry and claim, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; ESV). After Jesus ascended to the Father, the kingdom of God continued to dwell to a limited extent in the life of the church community. Scholars refer to this reality as the *already* kingdom of God, in contrast to the *not yet* kingdom of God that is still to be established at the Second Coming of Jesus. In other words, the kingdom of God is already inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus, and is proclaimed and lived out in the community of faith, but it is not yet completely consummated.

The community of faith has a very high calling to function as an outpost of the kingdom of God—to serve the purposes of the kingdom and point to the kingdom. It is the only earthly institution that is related to the kingdom of God.² The Bible directly connects the community of faith to the kingdom

of God. Jesus speaks of the authority that the community has to invite people into the kingdom and discern conduct appropriate for those in the kingdom (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). In 1 Corinthians 10:11, the apostle Paul speaks of the church community as experiencing the realities of the kingdom of God. He also likens the community to the kingdom of God's Son in Colossians 1:13. Therefore, it is obvious that the biblical witness identifies the church community as a representative of the kingdom of God on earth.

The Sermon on the Mount is often referred to as the constitution of the kingdom of God, and the personal and communal conduct presented in this sermon is frequently identified as "kingdom life." When Jesus preached this sermon He explained practical outworking of the principles of His kingdom and He expected His disciples and all other disciples throughout history to live out these principles. He expected his community to be an outpost of the kingdom principles, values, and attitudes, and in such a way to demonstrate the kind of fellowship that will take place at the consummation of God's eternal kingdom.³

How does Sligo Church live and function as an outpost of the kingdom of God? Do you see it as a privilege to be a part of the outpost of the kingdom of God on earth? What does this high calling mean for your personal life?

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³Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 479.

WEDNESDAY

Barriers to Community—Relationships

During our life in the church, we have undoubtedly crossed paths and interacted with individuals who were rude, deceitful, selfish and vindictive. Some individuals we have even considered impossible to deal with, let alone love. And to be very, very frank, at times we ourselves have been guilty of being one of those people.

There is no question that sin and its effects harm and diminish the community of faith. Pride manifests itself in a thousand different ways in our lives and, since none of us is immune to pride, we bring all those manifestations of pride with us into our community. Very often the lack of spiritual growth in our own lives reaps its destructive effects in relationship with the people of God. Some, who have been hurt in the community of God, have changed their place of worship, or stopped attending church altogether. Some of those who have been hurt and stayed, have become cynical, reserved, and passive. Either way, these effects diminish our community and our witness.

At the same time, superficial and perfunctory relationships also harm our community. For many of us, contacts and relationships within the community of faith are largely reduced to a weekly polite “Happy Sabbath!” or meaningless “How are you?” We come to church to pay our dues to God or relieve some sense of guilt we carry around, but our desire is not to be truly known or to know others. With such an attitude, we may not directly hurt anyone, but we snub the cause of community. These actions and

feelings can keep someone from taking their place in the community of God and may deprive it of being all that God intended.

We will make significant strides in repairing strained relationships in the community of God if we keep in mind two things: that we ourselves are sinners and that difficult people are children of God. Whatever the level of frustration we may have, we need the Spirit of God to help us carry the memory of our own sinfulness and weakness, not because we wish to keep indulging in sin and weakness, but because this memory makes us humble. Jesus said that “whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47; NIV). In order to love supernaturally, and we will need the grace of God to love difficult people, we need to experience the supernatural forgiveness of God.

Furthermore, we have to remember that we are not given the right to choose who will be in our community. This decision is made by the providence of our all-wise God. For some reason, He bound us together with some easy and loveable people, but also with some difficult and obstinate individuals. And it is very, very important for our own souls to learn to love them all.

Finally, as members of the community of God, we have to honor the purpose God has for us. The Word of God calls us to build relationships that are deep, spiritual in nature, and mutually accountable. Scripture commands us to watch over each other and carry each other’s burdens. We must not ignore this mandate for our community.

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Have you ever suffered at the hand of a member of your church? If yes, how did you respond? In what ways have your own actions, words, and attitudes hurt the Sligo community?

THURSDAY

Barriers to Community— Career, Family, Location

Some of us may say, “Yes, I get it. We are made in God’s image and we are to reflect God in all we do. God is a community and He made us for community . . . I understand . . . But, I have a demanding career and a family to look after, and I live miles from the church. I have neither time nor energy to be very involved in the Sligo community.” These are all very real and legitimate reasons why a person might struggle to find time for community.

Career. In our contemporary society we are very much driven by work. Many of us find our primary personal identity in our work, and we measure our success in life by our career accomplishments. We relish receiving a high salary, bonuses, promotion, accolades, and public recognition, and we invest enormous amounts of our time, energy, and focus into our careers. Moreover, we feel a great compulsion to stay employed and keep paying our bills and hopefully preparing for a comfortable retirement. For many of us, bringing work home, physically or mentally, has become a way of life. This all-consuming imperative of work leaves us very little time to faithfully participate in our Sligo community.

Family. Many of us feel an underlying sense of

guilt that we do not pay nearly enough attention to our loved ones, and we feel remorse because we know how salient family relationships are for our lives. Many of us try hard to take time for an occasional date with our spouse, share household chores, keep the semblance of daily family dinners, help children with homework, and drive our children to sporting events and music lessons. There is very little time, if any, to dedicate to our Sligo community.

Location. Very few of us live in close proximity to the Sligo Church, thus we drive long distances to get to the main church service on Sabbath morning. It is a real challenge to find time to make more than one trip per week for church-related activities, even if the activities concern community-building.

Our work, our families, and our distance from church are all very valid concerns. They rightfully require much of our time and attention. At the same time, we need to ask ourselves some very important questions: How can we honor the imperative of Hebrews 10:24-25 to awaken one another to love and good works and encourage one another increasingly more as the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ is approaching, unless we prioritize biblical community? Should we expect to shoulder each other’s burdens and in such a way fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), if we do not even know each other? Is it possible to exhort one another so that none of us is hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13), if we do not meet with one another? For the sake of our God and His mission, let us step back and plan to incorporate the Biblical imperative

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Which one of the obstacles to community discussed in this section do you see as your personal challenge? How can you reorganize your priorities to invest your time and energies in the Sligo community?

FRIDAY

Active Church Membership

(1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

For several years now, the Church has been going through an ostensible crisis of volunteerism and participation. It appears that many do not want to serve their church or get involved in its ministries, let alone lead out. Some may have thought on occasion, "Ah, if I don't do it, someone else will." Most likely, this regrettable development suggests simply that for many community is not a priority.

This attitude creates substantial logistical and spiritual challenges. A relatively small core of members, who are willing to participate and serve, carry most of the burden of church ministries. We see them greeting at church entrances on Sabbath mornings; we see them lead out in worship services; we see them attend the Church Board meetings; we see them unlock and lock the church; we see them serve in hospitality events. They make great sacrifices for the sake of the community and we owe them profound gratitude. But a number of them are overwhelmed, overstressed, and exhausted. They often suffer quietly, even though

they serve with excellence. They also cannot fill some essential leadership offices and functions for which they are eminently gifted and which would bring great blessings to the entire community, simply because they cannot take on even more responsibilities.

The Bible likens the community of faith to the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). A body consists of many organs and parts, and each one of them is essential. It can continue to live without certain organs and parts, but its health, function, and efficiency will be compromised. If we remain on the sidelines and refuse to serve and participate, our community will likely hobble along into the future without us, but its health, function, and efficiency will be compromised.

We are given an incredible privilege to participate in the community of God and its ministries. God has given us gifts and has prepared us for our unique place and role in the community, and we should not reject God's purposes for us personally and for our community.

How does the vision of community presented in this chapter compare to your own understanding of community?

How do we build a community that is through Jesus and in Jesus at Sligo church? How can you personally participate in this endeavor? How would you evaluate your present involvement in the Sligo community? Are you

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