



Church Health Profile

Loving Community Feature Article

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The healthy church practices genuine care for one another while embracing new people and valuing their inclusion in the fellowship.

Unity! Love! Compassion! Selfless sacrifice! The early church was the body of Jesus Christ at its very best. We read about their community in Acts.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

Filled with the newly released power of the Holy Spirit, the first members of the church exhibited the qualities that set the church of Jesus Christ apart from any other organized group. However, unity is a fragile commodity.

Selfless love can quickly give way to self-interest. Unity can be threatened whenever believers take up sides. A few chapters later, we read of the church's growing pains. "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1). Although they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, these early believers quickly learned the importance of community. No wonder that someone once wrote:

To dwell in love with saints above,
Why that will be glory.
To dwell below with saints I know –
Well, that's a different story.
(Church: Why Bother? Philip Yancey, p. 43)

The church of Jesus Christ is at its best when it is a loving community. It is becoming its worst when it is anything less. Jesus declared that love would be the characteristic that would set His disciples – His Church – apart from the world. He said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

For nearly two thousand years, the followers of Jesus Christ have endeavored to be a loving community. While the church has often endured great criticism, it is still the only organization on the face of the earth in whose arteries and veins flow the very love and

life-giving power of Almighty God. It is true that the church has not been perfect and it is has faults and failures today. Yet, we must remember that it is still the Body of Jesus Christ and when it is obedient in love, there is no light that shines brighter, nor any force that is more powerful. When the church is a loving community, no enemy can stand against it. Jesus said, “the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).

So what does it mean to be a “loving community”? Is it possible that many of us miss the target simply because we can’t see it? If you’ve ever played golf on a foggy day, you know what it’s like to aim at a target you can’t see. Serious golfers wait for the fog to clear. They understand that seeing the target is an important part of hitting it. Before we go any further, let’s take a moment to clear the fog so we can see our target and take serious aim at what it means to be a loving community.

Defining a Loving Community

The fact that we need to define a loving community is a sad commentary on the condition of our society. “Dysfunctional” is the term most often used to describe today’s families and relationships. With each passing generation, we become further removed from healthy models of loving communities. The family unit was once that model, but because it is often fractured by selfishness, abuse, negligence and divorce, the average family no longer nurtures an understanding of loving community. Many people reach adulthood having never experienced a truly loving community. As such, we unknowingly perpetuate unhealthy and damaging relationships, passing on to the next generation the very same destructive habits.

David L. Thompson, in his book Holiness for Hurting People, clearly defines the many challenges facing the families of today and how these challenges can spill over into our church relationships. Churches will sometimes have trouble developing a loving community because they are lead by pastors or other key people who have never learned how to live in a loving community. Dysfunction is transported from the personal family into the church family. Issues such as co-dependency, abuse of power, role reversal, and an inability to resolve conflict can spill over and taint the Body of Christ. Left undiagnosed and unresolved, this lack of healthy maturity often results in deep divisions and devastated congregations.

Through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, this chain of destruction can be broken and God can teach us a new and right way to love each other. This God-given love, expressed within the community of believers, is so powerful that it is irresistible to the lonely and broken people in our world. Is it any wonder that the early church grew? The loving community within the church created a hunger in the unsaved people around them and they wanted to experience it! Since they were a healthy, loving community God was able to increase their numbers by the thousands!

To understand loving community, we begin with dependence. Dependence makes it clear that I am in need. I need God. I need forgiveness. I need restoration. I need healing. I need hope. I need you. I need support. I need strength. I need accountability. I need ... I need ... I need! The recognition of my dependence on God and on other people is the first step I can take toward making my church a loving community. When I recognize that I cannot fulfill my purpose in this world without God and without other believers, I forfeit my pride and I become dependent on God and my fellow believers.

Pride is always the first breath of disunity. When I convince myself that I don't need you, you become expendable. How I treat you is no longer of importance to me. I can make it without you. Pride displays my independence.

Humility displays my utter dependence. In his book, Church: Why Bother?, Philip Yancey relates a conversation he had with a recovering alcoholic after they had attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting together:

I asked him to name the one quality missing in the local church that AA had somehow provided. He stared at his cup of coffee for a long time, watching it go cold. I expected to hear a word like love or acceptance or, knowing him, perhaps anti-institutionalism. Instead, he said softly this one word: dependency.

"None of us can make it on our own – isn't that why Jesus came?" he explained. "Yet most church people give off a self-satisfied air of piety or superiority. I don't sense them consciously leaning on God or on each other. Their lives appear to be in order. An alcoholic who goes to church feels inferior and incomplete." He sat in silence for a while, until a smile began to crease his face. "It's a funny thing," he said at last. "What I hate most about myself, my alcoholism, was the one thing God used to bring me back to him. Because of it, I know I can't survive without God. I have to depend on him to make it through each and every day. Maybe that's the redeeming value of alcoholism. Maybe God is calling us alcoholics to teach the saints what it means to be dependent on him and on his community here on earth."

While the word dependence begins our definition, another word better describes the culture that must be in place for a loving community to develop. That word is: interdependence. While it is true that I need God and my church family, I must also recognize that God and my church family *need me*.

Paul, the New Testament writer, captures this concept when talking about gifts and relationships within the church. "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). God has given me gifts, abilities, and talents that are necessary in the Body of Christ. His Body *needs* me.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12:21-25)

Simply put, we all need each other. In a loving community, the value of every person is celebrated. To develop a loving community, every individual must accept that they are dependent on all others and that all others are dependent on them; "having equal concern for each other." I need God and my church family, and God and my church

family needs me. Within the bounds of this humble, interdependent relationship, loving community is cultivated.

Living as a Loving Community

Whenever a church family cultivates a loving community, certain things begin to happen:

1. Walls come down.

There are many walls that can separate us: race, gender, tradition, wealth, education, position, age, seniority, ability, preferences, etc. Someone once said that “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Their point is well taken. While all of these walls may be important in the eyes of the secular world, they become non-existent in the loving community of the Body of Christ. In this Body, we see each other differently. Everyone is declared to have utmost value.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28)

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:11-14)

Interdependence breeds unity. We all need each other. We remove walls. We do this as an act of love and grace, because Jesus gave Himself to remove the strongest wall of all – the wall of sin that separated us from God. In response to what He did for us, we now remove walls. Interdependence means that I remove walls for two reasons: 1) others need me; and 2) I need others.

2. The truth is spoken in love.

In a loving community, communication is vital. At the first hint of conflict, communication is always the first thing to suffer. When communication breaks down, loving community begins to unravel.

The complaint reported in Acts 6 was the first sign of conflict in the new church. In addressing it, the leaders and congregation spoke the truth in love, the conflict was resolved and the church moved forward – stronger and better. Speaking the truth in love is not about flattery and talk that avoids pain. It is about being genuine and being willing to risk momentary pain to preserve the loving community.

In a loving community, truthful communication leads to growth and maturity for all who are willing to participate in the conversation. (Ephesians 4:14-16)

3. Conflict is turned to positive interaction.

As in the early church, conflict can develop quickly and easily. James said it this way, “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (James 3:5).

A loving community is careful to resolve conflicts quickly and effectively. Sparks don't need to become forest fires. Sparks are easy to extinguish – forest fires are not. When conflict is avoided – squelched in the guise of peace – sparks are allowed to smolder. If left unattended, conflict will burst into flame. Once fully ignited, conflict resolution becomes a long and difficult process. A loving community watches for sparks and extinguishes them quickly.

A loving community is not afraid of sparks. In fact, the sparks of conflict and the resolution that follows, often leads to healthier relationships and stronger ministries. That's what happened in Acts 6. In a loving community, conflict is inevitable. When conflict is embraced and resolved, the outcome is a stronger and more stable loving community.

4. Genuine care is given and received.

When the walls have come down and communication has been nurtured and conflict has been resolved, then the groundwork has been laid for a loving community to produce genuine care. The conflict of Acts 6 resulted in better care-giving within the community. The result was growth. “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

When believers give and receive genuine care they become the loving community that Jesus intended for them to be. To those in the early church, making sure that the widows received their daily allotment of bread may not have seemed like a great tool of evangelism, but it was. You see, when Christians genuinely love each other, the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes irresistible to those who are lost and lonely and hungry for love.

5. Individuals mature and experience fulfillment in exercising their God-given purpose.

The culmination of a loving community will be believers who are reaching their full potential in Jesus Christ. In a loving community, people move from only having their needs met to also being able to meet the needs of others. As believers mature and begin fulfilling their God given purpose, the ability of the church to meet needs expands and healthy growth results.

If you've never been a part of a loving community, you may be skeptical. If so, you're not alone. Too many churches have survived for too many years without being a healthy loving community. Believers who grow up in these churches are unaware that it doesn't have to be that way. And in case you haven't noticed, old habits die hard. Getting a church to change is much like turning an ocean liner – it takes a long time. Once you begin the change process, you better have a leader and a team that's committed to completing it.

Assimilation

Assimilation is the process by which new people are embraced by the church family and become an active part of it. In churches that are loving communities, assimilation is an intentional process. It is well-planned and carried out by people who are gifted by God's Spirit to do so.

If your church is not a loving community, then all of the intentional assimilation in the world will not help you retain visitors. Healthy people will rarely embrace unhealthy organizations. The best thing unhealthy churches can do to retain visitors is to become healthy. Having slick assimilation programs at unhealthy churches is a bit like putting sweet icing on a rock – it may look good, but when you bite it, the experience is very unpleasant. Sometimes we invest more effort in *looking* healthy than we do in *being* healthy. If you are serious about assimilating more people at your church then you will need to be serious about developing a loving community. There are no short cuts.