

BETTER TOGETHER

Our church is about to embark on “40 Days of Community”, a follow-up program to Saddleback's “40 Days of Purpose.” I know that our church's involvement will be a good thing and that we have much to learn from it, but this whole idea of “community” is something the church should be exemplifying now. In Christ, we are connected; we are a family; we are joined together, making us a community within a community. We ought to be experienced in community living since that defines *whose* we are and *what* we are called to do. Community living should define our lifestyle already, and we should not need a 40-day program to get it together. The main focus of the program is to reach out beyond our four walls into the community beyond our community with the love of Christ. I know that the program will benefit us, but what about after the 40 days? What will define us then? Will we be the church that simply went *through* the program, or will we be the church that is *living* out the principles daily and making a difference in the world around us?

I am not sure how much we as a church really understand our *own* connectedness and how that should play out before a lost world. Because we as a church belong to the Lord, we *are* joined together, but it seems as though we sometimes lose sight of what that means practically.

At the end of the 18th and early in the 19th centuries, many communities in our country were familiar with barn raisings. They were not just a part of the Amish and Mennonite life. The entire community came together to help one another in building barns. Even the children would often participate with small, yet important tasks. Are we as a church and as *parts* of the church *active* in “church raising” or “part strengthening?” Are we more than *just* connected in Christ? Are we actively involved in building each other up, so that together we might more effectively serve Him, enjoying the ties of community in Christ and shining brightly into a lost world?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 paints for me a graphic picture of what being *connected* and *community* living is all about. “*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work.*” **If that is true, then what about four, or twenty, or one hundred, or the church? Think of the return for *that* work! “If one falls down, his friend can help him up...” **But what if he had a community of friends who could all gather around him and lift him up or help with his burden? “If two lie down together, they will keep warm.” But, what if an entire community of believers came together to bless one another and share in meeting each other's needs? “Two can defend themselves.” But, who can stand against an *army* that's connected and supportive? “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” But, what about the strength of a cord that has all the strands of the body (community), connected together in Christ?****

We were never designed to “do church” alone. We are a body of connected parts, each dependent *on* the others and each necessary *to* the others. We need to be regularly re-evaluating and reinforcing our connectedness. If our desire is to be more effective for Christ, then we need to come together as a community of believers so that we might impact the greater community into which God has placed us. We *are* better together.

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Suppose you are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—all little pieces of the puzzle in a box---when someone comes along, opens the top, dumps the box and scatters ALL the pieces over the floor. So, what do we do? We can either give up, be put back in the box, or press on and let the puzzle be completed. The purpose of the puzzle is for each of the pieces to be fitted together to make a complete picture.

The same thing is true in the Body of Christ.

When we trust in Christ as our Savior, we are “connected in Him.” We become brothers and sisters in Christ. We are a team, a family, a Body. We are called and gifted to work together. Some, however, choose to go it alone – staying at home, perhaps worshipping with the radio, TV or computer. And, what is wrong with that? We have been created by God for fellowship – first with Him and, second, within the church.

It is like the puzzle above—Alone we are one little piece, maybe a recognizable shape, maybe not, but once we join with another, and another-we become more complete. Not only that, but we help those “other pieces” to be more complete.

There is not one of us that is complete alone. Each of us has been given a gift by HIM – not all have the same gift, and that’s okay, for each gift is special and has been given by Him to build up the Body so that we can be “a holy temple in the Lord, in whom each one of us are being built together for that dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being build together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Ephesians 2:19-22

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What does it mean to be joined together in Him? One of the definitions of the word “join” in Webster’s dictionary states, “to come together so as to be connected.” Though all of us come from a variety of backgrounds and churches with different styles of Worship, our unity is that we all worship God as our Lord. He is the One who binds us together. We have opportunities to continue to foster this connectedness through the Annual CCCC Family Conference, regional fellowships and other less formal means such as phone calls, e-mails and prayer. These ways of communicating help us to build stronger relationships with each other if we continue to focus on God as the authority who is keeping us united. Too often our human nature wants to interfere, and we get caught up in issues that threaten to drive a wedge in our relationships with each other thus severing our unity. Sometimes we get so focused on our own agendas that we fail to realize the trickle-down effect and subsequent hurt that our wants and desires may have on others. We must shed our pride and repent of our sins that caused hurt to one of our brothers or sisters and go to that person and ask for his/her forgiveness. This can pave the way for reestablishing unity that may have been lost. We must also continue to go to God in prayer and humility and ask that He make clear to us what He would have us to do and be willing to abandon our own desires if it is in violation of where He leads us if it brings harm to others. ***Ephesians 4:2-3, 15-16 states, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace... Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”*** Paul clearly states that if we are to grow, we must work together in love to keep the unity that God has called us to maintain. May we not hide our convictions, but may we not use them against each other either.

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“In Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.” Ephesians 2:22

The 60th Annual CCCC Family Conference this July coincides with the completion of 20 years of service at our church in Royal Oak, Michigan. I guess it is only natural that both Larry and I have spent many hours on and off our knees "taking stock" and evaluating the results of these years of labor.

We all know how easy it is in the busyness of our daily events to lose sight of the "big picture." So much of the urgent distracts our focus and too often we willingly follow the distraction to a place where we dishonor the Lord with inattention and/or indifference. While this is true for all, I think pastors and their families are especially vulnerable to this insidious tool of the Evil One. We are so busy doing the things that require "immediate" attention that we miss what God is doing right under our noses. We tend to focus on what we do for Him rather than what He is doing for and with us and those around us.

As we have taken stock, we have often found ourselves preoccupied with the problems, the mistakes, the things we wish we (or the Lord) had done differently. We wonder how God is or will be able to use any of our efforts as He builds and burnishes His kingdom. We fall so easily into the trap of fuzzy thinking or the vortex of self-pity where Satan rejoices to see us. I admit to having spent time in both places, much to my shame.

One of the things God used to refocus me was a highly unusual church calendar. Christmas and Easter fell within three months of each other. There was virtually no down time to rest from Christmas before we were into the season of Lent and gearing up for the celebration of Resurrection Day. Exhaustion reigned in and over all. The promise of spring and new life seemed to me far over the horizon and way out of view.

For many years, our small congregation has enjoyed using a spiritual journey type Lenten devotional. The source for this material ceased production recently so this year we decided to produce our own. We called it “Living This Side of the Cross.” At final count, ten percent of our members wrote at least one daily devotional and some considerably more. The writers represented a cross section of elderly saints, mature believers, youths, and new believers.

The remains of Christmas had not been completely put away as I started the readings in the dim gray light of early February. Each day as I read of a dear one's struggle or blessing or insight, God slowly refocused the eyes of my faith. Daily, he stretched faith's muscles. Slowly, my vision began to clear. He showed me spiritual brothers, sisters, children, and parents - the ones who sit in our pews each Sunday. He revealed to me through their own words, what He has done in their lives, how He has knit us together as we strive to grow in Christ. Not only did He show me how much I had missed, He allowed my brothers and sisters to refresh my heart and restore my energy. I was touched in ways that only those nearest me could accomplish.

I found myself in abject, tearful humility before the throne of the Almighty, confessing my unworthiness to be a part of these loved ones' lives and of His plan. While I stressed out over details, God had been changing hearts and drawing souls unto Himself. How could I be so self-absorbed that I did not see His hand at work in those who are so close to me? How could I have given in so easily to Satan's ploy to distract me?

When we are properly focused, it is fairly easy to see, acknowledge and thank God for the evidences of His hand in our lives. Scripture says that we should be praising and thanking Him all the time. Just because I don't see it (or feel it) doesn't mean that God isn't active all around me. Ephesians 2:22 states as fact what our God is doing. Who am I to question His promise?

His gift to me in this 20th year is 57 pages of evidence that He is alive and active in the minds and hearts and hands of His people. Despite our faults, failings, self-absorption, and distraction, the Holy Spirit builds us together into that dwelling in which He is pleased to live. He does it on the small scale of Royal Oak, the larger scale of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference and the truly grand scale of the Church Universal. I am truly humbled to acknowledge the abundance of His love.

Lord, open the eyes of my faith and may my lips never cease to pour forth praise and thanks to You. Use me in spite of myself, guide me Holy Spirit to help build Your dwelling place. Only let me inhabit it with Your people all of my days!

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Philippians 4: 4-7: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice: Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

I have been reminded frequently throughout this past year how prayer is the vehicle God uses to grant us peace when we are worried about our children and the decisions they make and they lives that they live. Steve and I have three adult children who are growing in the Lord and making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. As a mother, I so want to "advise" them in what their decisions should be, however, I have found that by quietly praying that God's perfect will would be manifest is much more effective than my "advise." I have seen prayers answered that have been lifted up to our Father for many years that are now coming to pass. I have also seen God opening and closing doors to guide our children into the path of God's perfect peace in their lives. God is so good and loves our children even more than we can humanly love them. Mothers, remember to let your "gentleness be evident to all", and the peace that passes all understanding will guide your heart and the hearts of your children. God truly is a prayer answering God!!

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