

The Church and the contemporary search for community

We hear much today in society about the need for more community, the failure of our communities, and the search for community, and in a very real way, the current debate about sexuality in the Uniting Church is a debate about the nature and being of Christian community. I have long been fascinated by the *Book of Acts*. This reflects my historical interest, but also my secret desire to leave the world of church administration and join a Christian community (though my preference is around the time of AD 70!)

Who belongs in the Christian community – the church? What are the boundaries? Are there any boundaries? If you are in, are there boundaries for your behaviour and practice?

In one part of the Uniting Church, the position of situational ethics is practised. This is where 'right' practice is related to a particular time and community. The community is the group which determines how one acts and what is appropriate. Sometimes this is even applied to the communities within a denomination, with the implication that all groups can make their own standards. Apart from the theological and moral issues which this approach raises, a practical difficulty for most denominations like the Uniting Church is that it is difficult for one part of the community to make a decision without it affecting other parts.

While certainly each of our communities has certain standards, what are the standards of practice that the Uniting Church as a whole should endorse? Should we even worry about this? I have often heard the comment during the last few years, that, "we should not judge", or "having this regulation or that guideline is not appropriate in a church of freedom and choice".

I am reminded of the references in *Judges* (for example, *Judges* 21:25) where, in those days there was no King, and people did what they liked. In reality however, all people judge to some extent and the Uniting Church would not survive without regulations. Are we not judging those whom we charge with sexual misconduct?

It appears to me that some people actually believe they are not judgemental. Sadly some leaders of the 'liberal' side even often portray the evangelical side as being uncaring and exclusive. They may even imply that people are not welcome in evangelical churches.

Having attended a variety of churches around Australia, I am aware that many congregations can actually be reasonably exclusive, even though they think they are the most welcoming group God has ever put together. Interestingly, I have found some theologically identified 'liberal' congregations to be quite exclusive because of their intellectual arrogance and trendy secular orientation, and profound, sometimes violent hatred of people with a different viewpoint.

Who are we, this group of people called Christians?
What is our calling?

Let us go back to our common history. What better place to start than the *Book of Acts*. In this Scriptural record we are given a full picture of the church, from beginnings of Jewish Christians taking on the task of presenting the gospel to all people, and confirming the real openness of the Gospel. The early chapters of *Acts* clearly demonstrate that the gospel is good news for all. Everything was in place for the expansion of the gospel, and the early Christians were convinced of the power of the gospel for all, and their conviction led to proclamation. Leaders were even killed and imprisoned then, and are still killed and imprisoned today, but the Good News continues today and the body of Christ is built up.

That is why the story of the church did not stop with Pentecost, or with the formation of the first community, or even with the delivery of the good news to people in the immediate area, for this is a story about God's continuing work - the unstoppable Good News. The acts of the believers, presents a gospel open to all, and the description of a community unlike any other in the world. It is a community of real acceptance, but not unreal tolerance.

The word acceptance is bandied around like a panacea for all the trouble in the church. Strangely enough the idea of acceptance of what we see is often not Christian acceptance because the full picture of grace and forgiveness is not presented. There is no group or person that the gospel does not make a call upon in terms of their life and the way they live.

In any community, we often come back to questions of behaviour and practice, and in the church today this is the centre of much discussion - what should be endorsed, either implicitly or explicitly?

In an increasingly 'ahistorical' and secular culture it is difficult to comprehend that our personal history is intrinsically linked to the people in the Book of Acts, who were called by Christ into a new community. We can be helped with a timely reminder that we did not found the real Church today, and certainly should not re-make in our own image.

I believe that the 'right' position is a church that welcomes all, but a church where people understand that not all behaviour is condoned or blessed; a church that welcomes those people struggling with painfully obvious addictive behaviours, and prays for all us as sinful people, rather than seeing people as simply needing a helping hand to become more moral.

Finally, I hope for a church that will discipline us when we fail, and as a loving community help to restore our relationship with God and our neighbour. Like the woman caught in adultery, we are not in a place to cast stones, but a true community of love and compassion is one that keeps people faithful, and does not indulge behaviour that was not implicitly or explicitly endorsed by our Lord Jesus Christ.

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