

CHAPTER VII

VARIETIES OF COMMUNITIES

Zones Of Intimacy

One cannot assume that people understand the word community any more. Not only has the experience of community eroded but also our capacity to even talk about it is impaired. I am therefore grateful for those who begin by defining their terms. For my working definition of community I wish to borrow from the authors of *For The Common Good* who provide this working definition:

A society should not be called a community unless (1) there is extensive participation by its members in the decisions by which its life is governed, (2) the society as a whole takes responsibility for the members, and (3) this responsibility includes respect for the diverse individuality of these members.¹

God is disclosed to us in the intimacy of the "I and Thou" encounter with other people on the horizontal level. As we become vulnerable to another in community and find the deepest levels of relationship through shared brokenness and forgiveness another presence is discovered and something new is born. Where two or three gather in Christ's name, there is the kingdom and there is power and growth. The nurturing of this new life, the roots of community, is how the church serves the larger society. In their study of base Christian communities Margaret and Ian Fraser see in the way Jesus treated children an example of how the new shoots of life are to be nourished.

Jesus was not starry-eyed about children. He depicted them playing in the market place, jibing at one another and sulking (Matt. 17:16-19). But he gave a new place to children, and this was reinforced by such clear and specific teaching that the church's refusal to recognize its significance must surely be ascribed to disobedience rather than to ignorance. In face of the patriarchal character of the Hebrew way of life (the word for 'educate' is *jasar* which literally means "whip into shape") and the military basis of Roman order. Jesus' teaching was penetrating and disturbing. . . . The best kind of concern expressing Old Testament teaching requires that children be instructed carefully and thoughtfully by adults in order that the race might continue in the faith (Deut. 6:3). Jesus, in contrast, sets children before us to be examples, to be our instructors in the faith. We are not to hope that they become like us when we are at our best--we are to hope that we become so like them that we have a chance of entering the Kingdom. Their place is not on the margins of church life but "in the midst."²

While scale alone is not the only issue, it is a significant one. There is strong evidence that the optimum size for a healthy household is eight. Some years ago a psychiatrist at the University of California at Davis, Dr. Mansell Pattison, became intrigued with the standard size of villages he discovered in various parts of the world.³ Villages appeared to level off at about 1500. That was the manageable size. Upon further investigation he observed that within the village structure there were various "zones of intimacy" from one's immediate family to friends and neighbors. What began as a curiosity turned into a careful and thorough investigation of the size of basic communities. Pattison concluded that eight is the optimum size of the core group. He called this the "Personal zone" which consists of those with whom one shares life most privately. The next zone, "The Intimate Zone," numbers 25. This level represents the support group of persons one can turn to for assistance and counsel. The next group is the persons one knows by name and would probably show up at one's marriage or funeral. Pattison calls this sphere the "Effective Zone." The zone beyond that, "the Nominal Zone", contains persons whose lives intersect ours only occasionally and are known at least by sight. The farthest out zone represents the persons whose lives we impact indirectly through our economic, political, and community. Pattison calls this "The Indirect Zone."

Personal Zone 8

Intimate Zone 25

Effective Zone 100

Nominal Zone 500

Indirect Zone 1500

Pattison observed that when one's primary communities of the Personal Zone and the Intimate Zone together are reduced to a total of ten to twelve people, there are more incidents of breakdown and suicide. In other words, humans need community for psychic health and there appears to be a critical size that is required. Pattison looked at other systems and was amazed how the same scales were repeated. When the Tasady peoples were discovered in remote forests of the Philippines not so many years ago, their groups numbered twenty-five. John Pfeiffer's studies also led him to set the size of the basic group at twenty-five. The next significant scale for Pattison is five hundred. Twenty-five and five hundred represent what he calls "equilibrium value."

The magic number 500, on the other hand, represents something really new. As a common average for a dialectical tribe of hunter-gathers - that is, a group of bands all speaking the same dialect - it is a purely human number in the sense that organizations of such interrelated bands have not been found among other primates. . . . This number apparently reflects certain fundamental features of human communications systems. The unity of a hunting-gathering tribe depends upon face-to-face meetings, a degree of intimacy among members of its component bands which creates the feeling of belonging to the same extended community even though they may live miles apart. The intimacy involves not only the same language and dialect but also the same familiar intonations, expressions, and gestures, and a common store of idioms, jokes, myths, and allusions. All this signaling or communicating activity is implied in the notion of sharing a common cultural background.⁴

It might be helpful to recognize three general categories before or beneath the zones of intimacy that might be added to Pattison's. There is the relationship of the self to God that constitutes the beginning of community. Then there is the relationship of the self to the self, not mere individualism, but rather the "school" in which one learns to live with one's more intimate neighbor. Jesus recognized this in coupling love of neighbor and love of self (Mat. 32:29). And then there is the relationship to others where Pattison's zones of intimacy begin. But we must not overlook the first two as though they are of less social consequence.

Intimate zones operate on lateral communication. In John Taylor's suggestive term, "the go between God," he emphasizes the profound connection between human communication and divine disclosure. Difference in size is not merely a quantitative matter but a qualitative one. The power of the primary lies in this movement laterally within the intimacy of shared lives. Unleashing that power requires the shift from secondary to primary relationships. To achieve such intimacy hierarchical forms of authority must be set aside and other patterns relinquished. In an intimate community members live the deaths of others and die each other's lives. When human systems become too large this intimacy diminishes and the glue that holds human community together dries up. Leopold Kohr in *The Breakdown of Nations* goes so far as to claim:

There seems only one cause behind all forms of social misery: bigness. Oversimplified as this may seem, we shall find the idea more easily acceptable if we consider that bigness, or oversize, is really much more than just a social problem. It appears to be the one and only problem permeating all creation. Wherever something is wrong, something is too big.⁵

In describing the small group movement Rosemary Haughton says all these groups are:

. . . reacting against the cult of bigness. They are aware, at some level, that scale is a matter of crucial importance in human life, whether in buildings, or organization; that at a certain point, bigness leads to loss of real contact, and facilitates manipulation rather than cooperation in human life. . . . The people who turn to each other, in so many different ways and contexts, in small groups, are reacting against all this: they have recognized, at least implicitly, that they are up against something basically and finally corrupt and corrupting. Something very deep and essential in them revolts, and in their need to articulate and "live" this revolt, they turn to others and discover a shared response and need.⁶

There is a remarkable film without words entitled "cosmic zoom." The film begins with a boy in a rowboat. The camera zooms away from the boy, the water, the city, the nation, the continent, the planet, the solar system and out into the mystery of cosmic space. Then the camera reverses the direction and travels into the blood cells of the boy and on into the particles of matter and finally into a micro world of cosmic space and mystery. I would like to remake that film. Instead of showing a boy I would show a small group at the matrix of the micro and macro worlds. In the midst of the two vast reaches of space is the human scaled community. It is the center where all things come together in the mystery of community. The Greeks were wrong; man is not the measure of all things. In fact, part of our problem is that we have isolated a single particle (and a male one at that) as the norm. The basic community is the norm. When the proper scale and intimacy are reached heaven and earth converge. However complex this universe may be, however distant its parts, everything converges at that scale where each person can play a significant part. The manageable center of our universe is the base community. As we live in community at the vortex of the micro and macro the universe is in our hands as a terrible and wonderful gift. Scott Burns agrees:

The household - the family - is an institution that tends our hearts, mind, and bodies. No other institution has such clear or complete charge or such enormous responsibility. At best, every program of social care and welfare is compensation for deficiencies in some households, and there is no institution, public or private, that could be expected to assume even a small portion of the responsibility that belongs to the household.⁷

The base communities are significant, therefore, not because they are on the periphery but because they are located at the center of the transactions that are crucial for survival. If they are seen as the essential matrix for life together on this planet then they deserve our highest priority. By remaining small but open to the larger as well as smaller worlds base communities will serve a vital role. How this can effect the religious community is described by in the following quote:

If the ecclesial basic community wants to preserve the community spirit, it will not have to seek to take the place of the parish; it will have to remain small in order to avoid bureaucratization and to facilitate direct contact between its members; it will have to open itself to communion with the Church and its totality, with its institutions and societal forms and at the same time sustain dialectical tension with it, so as not to allow itself to be absorbed. In that way it will not allow itself to be absorbed. In that way it will not deteriorate into either a fanatical or a retrograde group, but will endure as a sound leaven for the whole Church.⁸

Mediating Structures

A number of writers have recognized the need for social institutions that protect the individual from larger systems by nurturing the virtues required for a healthy public life. The term "mediating institutions" has been employed to suggest the appropriate role of the more intimate communities of family, church and other smaller publics.⁹ A mediating institution is a middle ground between personal faith and public life. Base communities are prime candidates for this role.

The base community provides room for individual differences, spontaneity, "muddling," uniqueness or what Gotthard Booth in *The Cancer Epidemic* refers to as the "creative potential of nature and the human spirit." The base community can provide the primary and natural setting in which persons feel freer to express themselves. It is, therefore, the ideal setting for worship, nurture and taking direct social action. When that nurture and action must be negotiated through complex levels of ecclesiastical machinery, not only is the creative spirit curtailed, but the Gospel itself is blunted. If the basic Christian community is the church in a particular place, then its own action taken at its own risk requires no other sanction. The "official" church needs not take credit or blame. If the left hand is not supposed to know what the right hand is doing, then questions of image or public relations are of

secondary importance anyway. Furthermore, Jesus' description of the judgment of the faithful in Matt. 25 it is suggested that one will not even remember when he or she had performed acts of mercy! Such record keeping belongs to secondary systems not primary ones.

The function of the primary sector may be described as "organic farming," for it has to do with establishing roots, nurturing persons in the faith, encouraging one another and in producing the fruits of love. The function of the secondary is to provide an environment for the development of these primary functions. This can mean maintaining basic services and social structures that make primary life possible, e.g. humane housing codes, environmental protection, essential community services, public health care, etc. In most countries the national scale is too large to relate directly to the primary, albeit an international organization like Amnesty International has effectively linked up tiny groups of people with prisoners of conscience throughout the world. In most cases intermediate levels are needed. A regional system between the local and national levels is one way national agencies can be redeployed. Of course, the more initiative and responsibility the base takes the less secondary machinery is needed.

Secondary structures are intermediary forms from another perspective. They are intermediate in the sense of being provisional, temporary and interim, a point made in a preceding chapter. Usually it is the other way around. We think of the frail endeavors at the grass roots as "temporary" over against the marble and steel edifices of established systems. But that is a misleading view. What is far more permanent is the root system from which the plant grows and is regenerated. It is the superstructure that is temporary and can be relinquished from time to time without destroying the organism. For example, the basic Christian communities just beginning to thrust themselves into view, are closer to the early church than the highly visible institutional forms of the church. For basic Christian communities to relate to the New Testament church it is not necessary to stretch and qualify such terms as "presbyter" or "deacon" in order to find in them the prototype of the present bishops and church executives. The primary church is not the undeveloped church but the form of the church ripest for producing new life. Christian communities in the First Century were in this sense "mature".

When the official church speaks it can speak only for the legally constituted organization it represents at that moment. Usually it speaks in a very subdued tone or one sufficiently ambiguous not to be controversial. The exceptions usually come when the problem is far enough away not to distress the constituency too much such as "reserved areas" in South Africa rather than the Indian reservations in South Dakota. The place where courage based on personal faith can be expressed more powerfully and directly is in the small cadres of committed disciples. When the official church listens, it needs to do so with great care to what is being said from the base. If and when such a voice is given the platform in institutional church settings, hushed silence would be most appropriate. However, I suspect that base groups will come less and less to such gatherings to ask for permission or direction. They will come, if at all, to share the reality they know. "Don't call us, we'll call you" reverses the direction of "called" ministry. Instead of the "It's up to them" that quickly overburdens the hierarchical system, the slogan should be, "It's down to us."

"Well and good," you, the reader, might say. "But realistically you can't abandon all the institutions and apparatus lying around. It is irresponsible to neglect the legacies we have inherited from the past. They too need maintenance and lots of people depend on them. What about retirement centers, hospitals, colleges, pension plans, publishing houses, salaried positions by the thousands?" Of course, we are not talking about mere abandonment but responsible relinquishment. Furthermore, our fore parents did a lot of relinquishing. Abraham and Sarah, like many of our ancestors, left home, goods, careers and institutions. These institutions contain marvelous resources, human and material, for building the base. But what they have needs to be dispersed and in some cases dispensed. God's people have no abiding city. Death with dignity (or, better yet, with celebration) would be a most appropriate Christian witness in our time. Decent burial directly in the earth without concrete vaults to preserve the carcass would enrich the soil. When and if we learn so to die it will be no tragic loss but a significant contribution to ongoing life.

Many Varieties

Many terms are being used to describe small groups in the church today. Each suggests a different way of viewing them: "Primary group", "extended family", "ecclesial groups", "grass roots church", "faith-family", "micro-church", "covenanted family", "daily church", "household church", "Christian communities of common people", "underground church", "house circles" etc. Some groups are residential, others not. Some see themselves as part of the local congregation, others as alternatives and some as neither. Some have been organized by a congregation or a church body, others have developed spontaneously. Some are hierarchical while others are egalitarian. Some are

"charismatic" while others would avoid that term but nonetheless consider themselves deeply spiritual. Some are formed in response to the call for a simpler life style in the light of global needs. Some are formed out of the need for disciplined living in a chaotic world. Some are founded to find personal peace while others were established to serve public peace. Some have been begun to experiment with alternative family living. All these and other motives you can find in base community groups. Even in a given group the reasons will vary. This is to be expected since the primary group is by nature developed around personal belief systems. With few exceptions, such as the cults, people join them voluntarily. All groups need to be assessed in terms both of their formation of the healthy member as well as their contribution to the larger society.

The following description of groups in Holland belonging to The Grassroots Movement of Critical Groups and Communities in the Netherlands conveys a good picture of the range of concerns.

What is going on within the groups themselves is a many-sided process. A movement which rightly claims to operate on a broad plane, which counts the whole world as its sphere of endeavor, which preaches social commitment, and which does not shrink from politics, will simultaneously need to devote the closest attention to individual suffering, to questions concerning personal relationships, to problems of being alone, to tensions and conflicts within grassroots groups there is reflection guided by the Bible, on important questions in human life. Perseverance and stamina call for the clarifying word, the hand on the shoulder, prayer, song and music. There are sometimes fierce debates and sorrow at the loss of people who could not go all the way with us. . . . Our program on a national level involves: Biblical theological study, political study and Liturgical renewal.¹⁰

Our purpose here is not to make a detailed analysis of varieties and forms. That work has already been done by David Clark. I will simply borrow his working definition. He identifies a base Christian community as:

any grass roots Christian group or association (whether residing together or not) whose members have been engaged for a considerable time in new initiatives for the creation of a Church and society able to respond meaningfully to the needs of the remaining years of this century. Such basic communities may be closely linked to parishes (as is often the meaning of the term for Roman Catholics especially in relation to Latin America), but just as often they will be committed to a form of ministry unrelated directly to parochial structures.¹¹

The most common starting point for community is the family. When Christ commanded the disciples to begin at Jerusalem it was clear that kingdom (or better "kindom") building begins at home and then goes to the ends of the world. I have already discussed the necessity of building a strong base and how that bears fruits for others, even on a global scale. But we have not said much about the most basic community of all in which everyone's life begins, namely, the family. I have deliberately skirted the term "family" up to this point because it has, unfortunately, become a problematic term and for many also a problematic structure.¹² Some appear willing to write the family off as a casualty of the Industrial Revolution or at best as a provisional form that needs to be replaced with something better. Others have had such unhappy experiences with the family that they despair of it being salvageable. Others who view the family as a prison and the marriage contract as a restricting burden call for a whole new way of living together. Many young people look on all this with wonderment and dismay and are hesitant to consider marriage or raising children in such a problematic enterprise. Some, of course, simply relish the removal of all restrictions that interfere with their hedonistic pleasures. A narcissistic society would do quite well, thank you, without the family.

Despite all this, however, the family remains the most neglected resource of modern society. It has been belittled, ignored, taken for granted, marginalized, attacked and abandoned. Yet it provides the most natural and universal "little public" for the nurture and sustaining of our common life. Rather than despair of its potential in the light of statistical studies of its demise, we need to recognize its irreplaceable value and invest our energies and creativity in its regeneration. It is the system most in need of liberation from tyrannies as well as from neglect both within and without. For those of us who have attempted to use our own primary systems as a base for public formation there has been an amazing discovery that it is the most effective instrument for social change that we have known. The family is the bridge to public life. The covenant to live together in a private household is the covenant that most needs our attention for the sake of personal and public health. Potentially there is no better place to base strategies for the regeneration of society than in the household.

But we will not survive without a base community and that is what the family is whatever other terms we might choose. It is the most natural human arrangement for the continuation of humankind and the care of the person. The family is the most immediate *oikos*, the most universal "little public" where values are formed and where members make the decision to enter into or avoid the larger society. William Everett in *God's Federal Republic* says, "Our *oikos* can be a cradle of our publicity or a tomb of isolation."¹³

Despite the precarious condition of the family in some parts of the world, if it is discarded something looking very much like it will reappear out of necessity. Just as an economic or a political system is a necessary structure, some form of family life is needed. The question is what form? The present dismay over the family arises from dissatisfaction with the present form of family life. However, the ideal form has never existed just as ideal people have never existed. Nonetheless a more humane, just and satisfying form needs to be sought. This quest for community is widespread and intense.

I think that among all the parables of Jesus, none is more universal than the story of the Prodigal Son. I suspect that every family (or family system, which seems to be the current term) has experienced at least one prodigal be it a son, daughter, grandchild, spouse or even parent. Unfortunately the outcome is not always so happy as in the story Jesus told. Of course, Jesus was describing God's love. And we all fall far short of that. If all the prodigal situations could end in the embrace of reconciliation this would be quite a different world. Knowing that reconciliation is possible at all, that there is a loving and forgiving God, is what makes living bearable even when prodigals still remain away from home.

The universality of the story of the prodigal has to do also with a basic experience in socialization. In the process of developing from an initial state of complete dependency to one of independence, each human being has some kind of "prodigal" experience. This does not always happen, of course, in a dramatic way as in Jesus' parable. But in some manner or other there has to be a time when one leaves in order to become an adult and acquire an identity of one's own. Departure from the original nurturing environment is usually painful. But we do need some distance. How many of us first came to appreciate our own homes only after being away? How many of us having fought and scrapped with siblings finally came to appreciate them only after they left? Being a prodigal is not necessarily bad or destructive. The real tragedy is the failure to mature through the process, to find reconciliation and to enter an adult relationship of interdependency with parents and others. That brings me to the story of Susan.

When Ruth and I were living in student apartments at the University of Chicago in 1955, we became close friends with Armin, a student from Germany. Armin came from a pastor's family in Northern Germany. He came to us one day with a request. His younger sister, Susan, was finishing her *Abitur* (graduation from the German secondary school) and wanted to spend a year in the USA. Would we be willing to take her on as an *Au pair*? (A live-in helper with the children and household). With two small children and Ruth working at a full time job and my full load of study and some church work on the side it sounded like a good idea.

The next Fall Susan came to join our family in our walk up flat on the South side of Chicago. She was a very attractive and energetic young woman. She was also quite strong willed. She was delighted to be away from family constraints and was not prepared for a young couple like us to be surrogate parents. She wanted her freedom. It turned out not to be a pleasant experience since we were not about to abandon all our responsibilities for Susan. We had assured her parents that we would watch after her welfare. Indeed, that was the condition upon which the arrangements were made. But once in the USA, far away from home, Susan took full advantage of her independence. Eventually she moved out of our apartment. Before the year was out she had married a Sheikh from India.

We didn't lose contact with Susan entirely. Despite her "prodigal time" she still had some common sense and some values that she did not abandon. The news of Susan's marriage to a non-Christian and a non-European was devastating to her parents. An important relationship was severed, at least for a time. Susan was married in a religious ceremony on campus. Her husband was a graduate student in International Studies. We attended the marriage ceremony concerned that Susan had some kind of family at the event and wanting to maintain some contact, however tenuous. Eventually they settled in New England where he secured an excellent position and there they established their home. By the time of the birth of their first child the relationship with the family in Germany had improved. Susan had not gone back home during these years of estrangement, but she invited her parents to come to the States for the baptism of their child. That broke the ice and the parents booked themselves on a passenger ship to the states.

When Susan went to the pier in Boston to meet the ship, she heard her name being called over the loudspeaker. She went to the office and there was introduced to the captain of the ship on which her parents had traveled to the States. "I'm terribly sorry, " said the captain, "But your father died last night of a heart attack".

Susan was crushed. Was it the excitement of joy or fear that triggered the heart attack? Perhaps there had been reconciliation by letter or phone. Perhaps the act of traveling to the USA was a kind of embrace. I don't know. I only know that the long awaited reconciliation never did take place at least physically (and that is of no small importance). We have heard since that things are going well for Susan and we are grateful for that. We hope this means that this prodigal story did end something like the one in Jesus' parable. Yet nothing will ever replace that longed for embrace.

The erosion of the family in the Western world is in large part due to the upheaval of settled village and town life caused by the Industrial Revolution. The migration of vast numbers of people into urban settings where housing and social conditions were designed for material production rather than human development, had a disastrous impact on the family. Torn from the support systems of relatives and neighbors and from a human scaled society, families found themselves in strange environments and in yet unformed social aggregates. Although the extended family in the new urban communities and the remnants of the village in the immigrant ghetto demonstrated a tremendous staying power, the family ultimately became a victim of the Industrial Age.

The separation of work place from household further contributed to the ravages on family life as well as on society itself.¹⁴ In earlier societies the workshop was in the place of residence. It was there that the apprenticing took place. That involved more than the learning of skills. Just as important as acquiring a trade was the passing on of values and traditions within the family. This process of formation was enhanced by the presence of grandparents and other adult members of the extended family sharing story and memory. The working place gradually became estranged from family life. Each member went his or her separate way sharing less and less of the world in which they spent most of their waking hours. The skills of the factory were those of an increasingly rationalized system and had little to do with domestic life. Girls were still trained in domestic skills at home, but boys rarely received such training. It is no wonder that males are so inept and therefore so afraid of domestic responsibilities.

Furthermore, the wider society was deprived of primary life values. Soon there was a male world of occupation (the "real" world) and a female world of family (a nearly invisible world). With the removal of the working place, the family activities for the sharing of each other's development were crowded into severely limited space and time. Modern society worked hard to build up its secondary institutions with little regard to the price being paid at the base. It is no wonder that the family has not done well in modern society. Eventually the extended family was reduced to the nuclear family, one-parent households and millions of lonely singles. The family became too small. Mothers had to carry the burdens of domestic life alone and add work outside the home for sheer economic survival. The family became an island to itself or it was abandoned.

A healthy society is a community of communities. The interdependence of systems in mutual fulfilling arrangements that balance the functions of each is what community means at the institutional level. In the biblical view this mutuality is called covenant. Covenant is the way in which God relates to humans through a relationship based on mutual agreement, trust and love. The paradigm for that covenant is the Trinity. While the being of God by nature and definition remains a mystery, the way in which God is revealed in divine/human ("I-Thou"), human/human, human/nature, and nature/nature relationships does provide some attributes to which we can relate. Humans can live in community because God is community. That is another way, I think, of saying that we can love because we have been loved first (I John 4:19). God begins community building with covenanting, wooing, gently persuading, inviting and loving. The church is called the "bride of Christ" for good reason. The fact that we even have to remind ourselves that the church is an intimate, primary activity exposes the extent of its routinization and professionalization. The primary is not an "underdeveloped" secondary institution, but is the model for all levels of human community based on covenanting. Where two or three agree (Matt. 18:19), that is where covenanting begins. Covenanting community is at the heart of the faith relationship to God, at the heart of friendships, of marriage and of society itself.

Marriage has historically been seen as a legal contractual agreement giving ownership to the male. Because the relationship was imposed by the extended families on the partners, it has been seen as restrictive of human development. Although such marriages have survived better than those in Western "developed" societies it is not likely this pattern will meet the needs of people today. But there is an alternative and that is the "covenanting

household". By covenanted household I mean a human-scaled community that can provide a liberated zone for establishing healthy relationships with others and with the wider society.

It is clear in the world of Biblical faith, the family is the primary unit which shapes and defines reality. The individual person belongs to and lives out of the family. It is the family that provides deep secure roots into the past, bold visions for the future, a sense of purpose and a set of priorities for the present. Of course, the family in that context is not the nuclear family, for that is unknown and unthinkable in the ancient world. Rather "family" consists in the network of inter-relationships of the extended family that should be thought of as clan or tribe. Family in this sense claims primary loyalty from its members and resists two alternative understandings of human personhood. On the one hand, the family resists the encroachment of the city or the state, any objectively, rationally organized power which wants to erode tradition or peculiarity. . . . On the other hand, the family is a major resistance against an inordinate individualism which seek to "emancipate" persons to make private decisions and choose private destinies.¹⁵

Basic Support System

If the above is true, why has the family so few advocates today? Is it because secondary systems have made such extravagant claims and demands? Or because of bad press? Or because we have taken it for granted? Or because it is so much the women's world that it has been devalued? Whatever the reasons, it is high time to make a cogent case for the covenanted family. The reasons for doing this are compelling both to church and society. The family is the most universal form of base community. At the foundation of both must be stable relationships based on mutual consent, respect and shared responsibility. To rebuild the family, however, is not to build a fortress against the world in which to escape, but to create a place of hospitality helping persons to mature and sending them into the wider society with commitment and purpose. They have to be relinquishing communities. Nurture communities also have to "let be".¹⁶

The Industrial Age has forced the family to withdraw into itself for defensive reasons. This was especially true of the middle and upper class families. This only increased the separation and left the family more isolated than ever from the public sector. Primary and secondary became more and more disconnected. The nuclear family is a consequence of this process. According to sociologists like Talcott Parsons, this is no tragedy since the nuclear family serves the needs of an industrialized society well.¹⁷ But others are not so sure. Phillippe Aries sees the family withdrawing from society because of its small size. Richard Sennett supports his view.

As a result of the growth of the privacy in the family, and the rationale for better training of the young in a more isolated, controlled setting, Aries argues, the intensive family of the industrial era cast the members of the home who did not work into a retreat from the world at large; the head of the family was expected to represent and protect the home in the world, the wife and the children to live apart from the world and the temptations to be found in it. Thus the division of labor in the family would compound the sense of isolation that the family created for itself in order to shield those helpless beings within it, the children . . . such children grew up less able to become responsible actors in the world later.¹⁸

The Kibbutz movement presents quite a different model for it seeks deliberately to balance concerns for the individuals and the nuclear families with the needs of the nation state.¹⁹ The Israeli state provides, of course, a more human-scaled state in terms of geographic size and population. The Kibbutz, which can be as large as 1,000, is more like a village. It is also rural although many engage in other enterprises. In any case the orientation is more primary. Comparative studies of metropolitan areas have suggested that those cities with easy access to small town and rural areas have a better quality of life since they draw strength from a more primary oriented society. I was raised in such a metropolitan area and nearly every Sunday we went "home" for extended family gatherings to the family farm fifty miles away.

While the nuclear family may be too small for healthy community development, the extended family, historians tell us, was not very large either. Peter Loslett has estimated that during the Middle Ages and the Reformation the extended family was a modest sized unit averaging 4.75 persons plus a servant.²⁰ The servant was no stranger but usually a neighbor. The key, however, was not merely the numerical size of the family unit, but the social setting of kinship support systems. There is no magic in numbers (though there is a certain mystery in the "zones of intimacy" numbers of 8, 25, 100, 500 and 1500) but it is clear that we are talking about a small group. "Small enough," argues Bishop Taylor, "to enable all its members to find one another in mutual awareness, yet large enough for them to be

an embodiment of the life of the Kingdom, which is a life of restored humanness in action."²¹ In the early church the household provided the basic unit. Today the term sometimes used is the "house" church.

The emerging need is for a community style that is small and supportive, i.e. the house church, and large and celebrative (e.g. the cathedral). The parish congregation has attempted to steer a middle course and too often has failed to provide intimacy and support for people as well as to sustain celebration on a weekly basis. The house church can provide weekly "family" support with a cathedral style of monthly festival day gatherings.²²

The above quotation suggests that the support systems need to be both within and beyond the base group. The parish church is one such support system. It can do some things well, including, by the way, certain kinds of celebration. But the parish church cannot do everything. More modesty about its capacities can keep its size modest too. A win/win solution between the traditional parish and the base group could be realized in discovering how they might support each other. As the base Christian communities are made up of more and more people who understand this mutuality and who maintain links to the established structures and respect for tradition, a healthy covenant between primary and secondary could result. Charles Olsen, quoted above, makes an interesting observation in this regard.

The house church movement contains some counter cultural characteristics which are opposite the typical residential congregation which tends to reflect the dominant cultural values. As the counter cultural movement shifts from young people toward those of middle age, more and more middle aged Americans making the transition will need a church community which reflects their new values. The house church could very well become the church of the counter culture. The established church must not divorce itself from or lose touch with this vital element. The gospel itself is counter cultural.²³

A young pastor in East Berlin who works with house groups (*Hauskreise*) shared experiences that are enlightening at this point. First and foremost was the lesson forced on the church in the former German Democratic Republic by having to relinquish its privileged position in society. Congregations became small but self-sufficient. The fact that building space was so limited has helped the church look positively at using private homes. In the parish this East Berlin pastor served the people lived in huge apartment complexes. He was in touch with fifteen groups that numbered from eight to sixteen people each. There were many single parent situations. The groups met monthly. Some meet alone with staff from the parish. The emphasis was on indigenous leadership. I met an official of one of the Provincial Churches in the GDR who went so far as to keep clergy away from these groups for the first year or two until the groups had developed sufficient strength to deal with the institutional church.

One pastor in Dresden reported that such groups did not start with the Bible or prayer but with discussion on general topics. After some years, however, Bible study was often requested as the group became more comfortable with each other and shared deeper questions of personal faith. Participants developed a strong loyalty to the house group but not necessarily to the congregation. The pastor recognized that his parish was made up of separate cells. He invited these cells to gather in a larger assembly once a year or so. He did not show any nervousness about this lack of cohesion in the larger parish. The groups were not certain themselves if they were a group of friends or a community that could be called the church. Many were skeptical of the parish church. "But they are asking the right questions," said the pastor. There were persons of different religious backgrounds in the house circles. The pastor explained, "These groups do not have all the marks of the church, but they have some, like a sense of community." Then he continued, "But I regard them as the church." He was even concerned that a new building then being constructed for the parish might have an adverse effect on the groups. He is committed to a decentralized parish. Given the cultural tradition, he was skeptical if the groups would have started on their own. However, in other parts of the GDR we found groups that appeared to emerge spontaneously.

The household community enlarged beyond the nuclear family and supported by a larger institution like the congregation in East Berlin, can be the nucleus for base communities if not the base community itself. The family is the most universally dispersed base community and therefore the logical place to start. To try to create a substitute is as unnecessary as it is futile.²⁴ Despite everything, the household has proved to be amazingly durable. While threatened, it nonetheless has survived better than many other institutions.²⁵

Congregation As Community Of Communities

I believe that the church should become the leading advocate of the extended family by demonstrating in its own relinquishment and dispersion ways in which a predominantly secondary system can move from the "fortissimo" church to the "pianissimo" church. I have given theological reasons for that and will deal with sociological ones in the next chapter. Responsible relinquishment involves the wise use of the resources that the church now has to assist in this "exodus in place" of the Third Settlement.

A very ancient model might serve very well for this exodus. Jewish life was focused on home, synagogue and temple. Each had a different function. The basic place of worship, nurture and service was the household. Even to this day Jewish people have a higher degree of integration of their faith and their family life than most religious traditions. The synagogue was a support system, largely educational in function. The temple was the place for occasional festival worship. The traditional parish church has attempted to be all three in one. While that may seem like a good Trinitarian approach, a better understanding of the Trinity suggests that all three ought not be collapsed into one.

We need many forms of the church. The base community provides the daily integration of faith and work, worship and response. It would not have to be residential. The base group may be the household of an existing nuclear family or the linking of several households. It might be an existing support group. In some cases the household units might arise out of leadership from the local congregation, though the initiative should remain with the base. The congregation is strategically situated in encouraging, locating and linking people. But it is less effective when it attempts to start initiatives from the top down.

I believe the essential function of the local congregation, like the synagogue, should be educational. The educational program for the congregation would have more relevance for the people if it was not designed to get members to do the work of the "weekly church" but to equip God's people to be the "daily church" in their primary settings. In this sense each congregation becomes a seminary preparing the front line, daily life ministers. This preparation includes the study of Scriptures, the theological tradition of the denomination and the theological foundations for ministry in society. Such training is necessary for responsible relinquishment. Equipping God's people without abandoning the present systems thoughtlessly is good stewardship. Indeed such programs are already a lively part of many churches. The synagogue or congregation has much to do in this connection. Even more extensive use of parish facilities and staffs might result from the concentration on education for liberation rather than on the traditional keep-them-busy-in-the-church-building. The basic growth and ministry of the church would happen at the primary level. The staff of the local congregation would not have to be all things to all people but could focus on several clearly defined functions. Equipping the members for their primary ministries in household and work place vastly multiplies ministry in the community.

Festival celebration, too infrequent in societies with a sharp separation of church and state, could happen anywhere. No great temples are needed. At least no more cathedrals need to be built. Existing buildings - theaters, concert halls, school auditoriums, shopping center malls, old barns - can function well as gathering places on the festive occasions without burdening the people with the maintenance costs or continuing the "higher-than-thou" Edifice Complex of the past. Individuals would find themselves, as many already do, members of several communities at the same time. Church membership could also be multiple. One would belong to several forms of the church at the same time: a primary community, a parish church in which a particular tradition is appropriated, a study group in the local neighborhood, a group of co-workers at the job site, an issue oriented group, and, on certain festivals, a community wide fellowship celebrating an ecumenical festival. Most of these groups would bear few of the marks of the church. They would be more like Rosemary Haughton's "pre-church." The church thus described is no single system, although it would clarify where the base is and where the initiatives and responsibilities lie. Though all the diverse forms collectively are not manageable by one institution, the scale allows for grass roots control. The costs are modest. No great building or recruitment program is required. Most of the pieces are already in place. Many congregations are already at the threshold of such a change in function. The proposal of a community of communities or a congregation of congregations allows for multiple forms is more revolutionary than radical, i.e. it can actually happen. It is doable and therefore contagious. The conversion needed for this is not a mighty upheaval in structures and roles. The change is an "exodus in place," of looking at old things in a new way: an organic shift from secondary, vertical, top-down to primary, lateral, bottom-up. Let me quote an Anglican bishop who said back in 1972:

Small units of Christian presence are emphatically not a half way house through which the uncommitted will eventually be drawn back into our parish churches. Nor are they an interim structure, which ought to grow into new parish churches in due course. In some instances this may be a right development, but all too often

it happens for the wrong reasons. It happens because too many people in the church insist upon regarding any other form than the conventional parish congregation as sub normal and peripheral. They will not believe that such groups may have the fullness of Christ and should be allowed to possess all the resources and all the responsibilities of a local church. . . . It is the "little congregations" which must become normative if the church is to respond to the Spirit's movements in the life of the world.

To treat these small units of Christian presence as being truly the local church in all its fullness and responsibility means that we should expect their activities to include as completely as possible four different aspects of Christian life and witness, namely reflection, service, worship and evangelism.²⁶

America found its way out of the depression by regenerating the labor force through such programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Today we need another CCC: Congregation as Community of Communities.

In the 19th Century a remarkable community was started in Northern Germany by Pastor Bodelschwink. He took seven epileptic young men into his care and thus inaugurated the community of the sick known as Bethel. Today it is a thriving community of over ten thousand members operating its own industries, schools, sheltered workshops and institutes of various kinds all devoted to the healing of diseases and deformities. In the 1960's the director was a friend from the Student Christian Movement, Alex Funke, who invited me for a visit. It was an impressive experience seeing how the sick and the healthy lived and worked together. During the Sunday morning worship in the Bethel parish church there were a number of situations needing medical intervention for which nurses were on hand but that was so much a part of the life of this community that it was all taken in stride. The community was healthy because it included the sick.

Some years later I discovered that a similar effort had been launched in Clear Lake, Iowa, after a local pastor from Clear Lake visited the Bethel community in Germany. It sounded most interesting so I arranged to visit the community in Clear Lake called Handicapped Village. From the moment I arrived it was clear that things were different. As I come up the path to the main building a man came speeding out to greet me in a wheel chair. He told me he was the mayor of the village. Then he said, "I'm retarded. What's your handicap?"

I can't remember what I said. Perhaps I made some inane comment that my handicaps were hidden beneath the appearance of health. But I shall never forget his question. He then took me on a tour of the facilities all the time telling me about what they had done to the Governor of the State when he visited the village. During the last election campaign the incumbent Governor had included a short ten of fifteen-minute stop at Handicap Village. It was to be a good "media event". When the residents heard of this they organized their own plan for they had some issues to take up with the Governor regarding state regulations for institutions for the physically and mentally impaired.

When the Governor arrived with his entourage he was met by a committee of residents who showed him their village. They pointed out to him that they were currently violating over twenty state laws. These included doing such things as preparing their own meals, living in cottages with men and women together, having locks on the inside of their private rooms, electing their own leaders and washing their own clothes. They pointed out which laws they would hope the Governor would try to change. If he would promise to do that he would get the votes of the community. As it turned out the Governor was both taken back and considerably impressed by the people he met and what they were doing and could do for themselves. He also didn't miss the point that the village did not use any public funds. It was well over an hour or so before he left. He won their votes and the election and held good to his promise to seek legislative changes.

We have to revise our criteria as to what makes a healthy society. Models are already at hand. They include Bethel in Germany and Handicapped Village in Iowa.

Are the base Christian communities and other forms of households and places like Handicap Village "para structures"? This term was bantered about a good deal in the 1960's as people were searching for alternative systems. In East Europe even before the radical changes in 1989 the term "parallel polis" was used to refer to efforts to create new participatory systems through movements like Solidarity (which, incidentally had a very strong religious base). Whatever they might be called, there is in the emergence of primary forms of community at the base of society a movement of great public consequence and one in which the church can play a major role. What that role might be will be explored in the next chapter.

¹Herman Daly and Hohn Cobb Jr., *For The Common Good*, p. 172.

²Margaret and Ian Frazer, *Op. Cit.*

³Mansell Pattison, "Pastoral Care and Primary Prevention", mimeographed article. Pattison draws on the work of Anthony Wallace, anthropologist, on the upper limits of viable community, and on the work of Jeremy Boissevain, Dutch anthropologist, on the optimum numbers of human interaction.

⁴John Pfeifer, *The Emergence of Man*, New York: Harper and Row, 1978, p. 313.

⁵Leopold Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations*, pp. xviii-xix.

⁶Houghton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

⁷Burns, *Op. Cit.*, p. 13

⁸*Ibid*,

⁹Cf. for example Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*, Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1977.

¹⁰"A Dutch Version of the People's Movement", *People's Participation and People's Movements* (II) (Geneva: World Council of Churches CCPD Documents, No. 20, Oct., 1981), pp. 8-9

¹¹From a draft copy of a course description on "Basic communities and networks - processes of Christian renewal in Contemporary Britain", David Clark, Westhill College, Woodbrooke College, Selly Oak, April 1-4, 1982.

¹²Not a new problem. The New Testament suggests one's own family may be the hardest group to start with. Matt. 10:35-37, 13:57.

¹³William Everett, *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁴For the impact of family in South Africa cf. Walter Gill, *Crossroads - A Community of People* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, CCPD Documents, no. 20, Oct., 1981)

¹⁵Walter Brueggemann, "The Covenanted Family: A Zone for Humanness," *Journal of Current Social Issues*, winter, 1977, p. 18.

¹⁶Ronald Marstin states in *Beyond our Tribal Gods*, New York: Orbis Books, 1979, p. 91:

The faith that usually celebrates the groups in which we feel secure will sometimes be called on to celebrate the struggle of the self against the nurturing group, the self bent on finding itself.

¹⁷Cf. Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, New York: Free Press, 1955.

¹⁸Sennett, *Op. cit.*, p. 65. Cf. also Phillippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

¹⁹Menachem Rosner, *A report on the Kibbutz*, Center for Social Research on the Kibbutz, Givat Haviva, Israel.

²⁰Peter Loslett, *Household and Family in Past Time*, Cambridge University Press, 1972. Cited in *Underside*, p. 554.

²¹Bishop Taylor,

²²Charles Olsen, "Which way the House Church," *Community*, autumn, 1972, p. 13.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁴G. P. Murdock in, *Social Structure*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p.11, maintains:

[No society] has succeeded in finding an adequate substitute for the nuclear family, to which it might transfer these functions. (sexual, economic, reproductive and educational). . . . It is highly doubtful whether any society ever will succeed in such an attempt, utopian proposals for the abolition of the family to the contrary notwithstanding.

²⁵Scott Burns, *The Household Economy*, p. 3, argues:

The household is healthy, stable and growing. It is, in fact, probably our strongest and most important economic institution. But, more important, it is an institution and economy whose growth and strength hold the promise of a democratic, egalitarian society in a stable world.

²⁶John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, pp. 148-149.