

## Living in community

Read: [Psalm 100](#), [Colossians 3:12-17](#)

I want to talk about the blessing of Christian community this morning, but am going to start from a slightly surprising position by speaking first about **loneliness**. Social isolation and loneliness are emerging as major health concerns in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ... and are related to other mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

The prevalence of loneliness occurs across the age spectrum. The former Minister for Aged Care, Ken Wyatt, revealed the shocking statistics that around 40% of people living in aged care receive no visitors, ever.

And it's not just older people who feel lonely. Various surveys suggest that up to 30% of Millennials – people aged between 20 and 40 – often or always feel lonely and cannot name a single friend. This is despite social media that provides so many platforms for staying connected.

Why is all this loneliness such a problem and what opportunity do Christian communities have to offer help?

It seems that we humans were **made** for community and **need** to be part of community to be healthy. The biblical creation story about Eve in [Genesis 2](#) is built on the assumption that 'it is not good for the man to be alone' and so God creates Eve to be a partner and a helper for Adam – a lifetime friend if you like. So except in special circumstances, we humans have been created for community, just as God exists in community as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus understood this well and many of the healing stories in the Gospels are actually stories about marginalised people being restored to their community. People excluded because of their health, or gender, or profession, encounter Jesus and are restored to their rightful place of belonging in the community.

So as Christians we understand this pull towards community. People want to feel included, embraced, cared for and appreciated for who they are. And this is something really important that we can offer.

What sorts of things help to build community? Some factors common across all communities everywhere include a sense of mutual respect, shared interests, the opportunity to be listened to and heard, and our availability. For **Christian community**, we might add that faith in Jesus and in God are also pretty fundamental ... we might say a shared Christian worldview.

But when we turn to the writings of the NT, the letters written to churches ... which come from a context of new and emerging communities ... we find a number of **other** factors listed that are considered high priority if not essential for building strong communities.

So in our reading today from Colossians, which, by the way, has special significance for Liz and I because it was the reading we chose for our wedding ... the writer lists the following behaviours and attitudes that are needed:

- Knowing that you are loved by God
- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility
- Forgiveness
- Love
- Thankfulness

Other passages list further behaviours such as honesty, care for the weak and poor, including the gifts and contribution of each person, and a willingness to serve. These behaviours are not unique to Christians, of course, but were modelled and taught by Jesus and so became foundational for the emerging Christian communities.

Without wanting to pump up anyone's tyres, I have observed these community building behaviours in the Parish Players community over the years ... it's what

has made and continues to make CPP a special and distinctive theatre group to be part of. While CPP have also strived to bring excellence in theatre craft to their performances, there has always been an equally strong emphasis on community and making people feel welcome.

Lest we feel tempted to put CPP on a pedestal, though, it may be easier to hold together a community that is fairly focused and that has clearly defined shared goals and tasks. So if I have a passion for sport for instance – or board games – or helping asylum seekers – but not theatre – then I would probably look for an alternative community.

The church community is quite diverse in its passions and interests and therefore struggles more to find our common purpose. But if we listen carefully to Jesus – perhaps a message for another day – our passion and priorities will focus on living in and building God's kingdom in our midst. There are multiple ways to do this ... whether caring for others, helping the poor, seeking justice, sharing the good news of Jesus ... but wouldn't it be good if our **neighbours** thought similar thoughts to the neighbours of the early Christians – how they love each other! How they have a compassionate, kind, humble, forgiving, thankful, joyful, loving community! That's what I want to be part of. That's where I can not only belong but also contribute and thrive.

So to the members of CPP Community Theatre who are here this morning – thank you for showing us an example of a strong and healthy Christian community – as well as giving us much joy in your performances over many years. Our prayer is that God would continue to bless you and guide you in the years ahead.

And to everyone here this morning – may we all remember that we were created for community and that we all have an important part to play in making a healthy community.