

When God Acts, It Is To Build Compassionate Inclusive Community

Sermon by Bryce Taylor ^{MSW RSW}
February 25th, 2007 First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

COMMUNITY BUILDING PRAXIS



The Kingdom as explained by Jesus was; trust God to look out for you by providing people who will care for you, and listen to God when he calls on you to provide for them. In this way you can depend on God. God is somebody you can trust. In this way we can live in God's Kingdom.

James M. Robinson The Gospel of Jesus pg viii

The Will For Community

This morning you are going to hear a story of fellow travelers in this great City of Toronto. It increasingly has come to my understanding that there is a group of people in every faith, in every denomination and in every society that can and do find more things in common with their fellow travelers, than things to cause separation. In my opinion these are the good women and men of the earth, these are the people with whom I want to share my brief span of time I have on this earth, these are my fellow travelers. It has come to my understanding that community building is more a matter of will, than common beliefs or common practices or common anything. For example, in many ways the faith community of my heritage is not unique from you, we are more similar than different. We use many of the same words, I have no argument with any of your principles to live by; allow me to give you some of the principles that come out of my heritage;

- 1) We promote expressions of community. By this we mean that when God acts, it is to build community. Everything we do derives from this quest for more community; we call it the cause of Zion.
- 2) We promote prophetic dialogue. By this we mean that we attempt to inform society as it changes and grows into the future.
- 3) We promote new understandings and are open to new revelation. By this we mean that we are open to grow and learn from ourselves; other societies, communities and faith groups, as God is continually expressing new insights.
- 4) We promote the worth of persons. Our belief in compassionate, inclusive community means we focus on those who are left out, those who are left behind with a goal of helping all increase their life-ability.
- 5) We promote economic generosity. Our belief in community does not allow us to accept our prosperity at the expense of another's poverty.

My heritage has come to the understanding that women can hold priesthood office, that we can provide communion to anyone attending our services, that all ethnic groups are equal and presently we are wrestling through the issue of homosexuality.

It is my belief from my heritage that the world needs more community, that we must "will" greater examples of community into being. This morning I would like to indicate why this is important and how the Community of Christ in the GTA is attempting to transform itself from a group of congregational churches to an exemplar community or group of communities.

The Will for Mind

The will for more and better community is very important for you personally. Just as physical science has determined that your body is made up of star dust, so social science has determined that your mind is made up of community. As long as there has been the study of sociology (which is not all that long) there has emerged a new understanding, a new profound realization that our mind is not our own.

We began to really lose our mind with the advent of literacy. First on cave walls, then on hides, then on papyrus and paper, then with printing presses and now electronically we have developed a new level of mind, the literate mind. A mind that can be shaped by study, by research; a mind that has tremendous recall, a mind that resides mostly in libraries and now on the world wide web. We only think we own our mind, it is really owned by our culture; a large part of our mind is out there somewhere. That is why Chinese babies speak Chinese, because their brain emerges through the Chinese culture and then through reflection and education it becomes a mind. Your

mind is derived from your community. That is why developing more and better community is fundamentally important for you personally. To have a great mind, you have to be emerged in a great community. If you are into personal growth and self-motivation, then you have to be into building your surrounding community. A great mind requires a great community.

Our Mythologies

This is in stark contrast to the common belief in the supremacy of the individual; the strong, almost mysterious individual who rides into town, at best imprisons the bad guys, at worse kills them all at the OK corral and then rides off into the sunset to do it all over again somewhere else. We live in an economic society that celebrates the self-made man, the person who moved to Toronto and single handedly rose all by himself / herself to fame and fortune. I am here to tell you this morning its all mythology. We live within the greatest mythology that has ever been perpetrated on mankind, in the history of mankind. You think the Greeks had myths, but we don't; you think the Romans had myths, but we don't. You think Joseph Goebbels was good in creating the Aryan myth. He pales in comparison to the media mythology that we witness every day; that tells us what's pretty, what's not; what's the smart thing to eat or smoke; what the retirement dream should look like... The reality is that 50% of our students will never enter College or University, will never achieve an income level that will come even close to living the myth, will never understand what happen to their life-ability; why because they have this belief that its their fault, they're just not smart. They have in their mind a wrong message; and when does it start; grade two; and who foists it on them; professional teachers and brain dead parents. The reality is that only 20% of the population has problems with literacy and many of these can be elevated into an academic stream if they have the proper community surrounding them. Our 50% failure rate is a community problem, not an intelligence problem; it is a lack of a caring coaching inspiring community.

I ministered to a family of a supposedly self-made man, one of the wealthiest men in Canada, only last month at his death. His body arrived at Pearson International Airport on a Lear jet owned by one of his companies. As I gathered the family together I told them that here was a life lived large, tell the big stories, don't hold back, its a wonderful story. His brother in his eulogy basically told the story of how they got started. He stated, "my father sold his contracting business in Sarnia and he was paid two cheques and he let us see them; they were each \$500,000 and we thought we'd never see that much money ever again in our lives." His brother didn't start out by indicating that they did it on their own. No he started out and he continued to expand on the theme of how the heritage they received from their father and the thousands of employees that formed their business team resulted in the success of two companies that now reside on the Toronto Stock exchange. He celebrated the community that they built and that built them!

I once asked the highest ranking Vice President in the Bank of Montreal; what do you subscribe your success to? His answer was interesting, he stated; "I just made sure my boss got promoted." In other words he made sure he was in the community that his boss depended on in order to get the big job done. His boss, the President of the Bank of Montreal, was not a self-made man, he was a made man, he was a product of his community, both the close professional community and the larger community of his heritage.

Some communities are better than other communities.

How would you like to be part of this community?

- a) 45% of the most economically successful business persons on the Forbes 400 come from this group
- b) 33% of all multi-millionaires come from this group
- c) members of this group on average have an income double the national average
- d) 20% of leading professors at leading universities are from this group
- e) 25% of all American Nobel Prize winners are from this group

This group makes up 2% of the American population.

On a sunny afternoon, a Jewish grandmother was walking down the street, with her two grandchildren; one in a stroller the other with their hand on the stroller. A passerby stopped and commented, what lovely children; how old are they? " Well the lawyer in the stroller is 16 months old and the doctor beside it is 4 years old.

It is time that we overcame our mythology and started to focus on the understanding that our communities are what creates our minds and our minds should be focused on building more community. That is the understanding and the imperative that is the foundation for what our community is doing in the GTA.

Part B

From "Church" to "Community"

The 6 Pastors and other leading officials of the Community of Christ in the GTA decided about 3 years ago to meet on a monthly basis in order to increase their presence to match this vision, rather than diminish their vision to match their presence. There have been several decisive phases that this group has experienced and I will outline in hopes that they might prove helpful for your own journey.

Decision One - State the Vision

The Pastorate worked for sometime to develop a rationale and statement of their identity; the big picture. They developed the big picture by having one or two individuals write presentations which they then critiqued and dialogued through to a final consensus. A big picture PowerPoint slide show was put together that looked at our historical heritage, going back to Moses, then Jesus and then Joseph Smith to trace the common theme of one God continually working to build a better community in the here and now, on this earth. It was well received. It seemed to reaffirm to everyone that we do have a common vision, a community building vision that had relevance to our present society.

It also bluntly, if not brutally laid out the situation that our presence in the GTA was in no way matching our vision. Either we would have to diminish our vision or increase our presence. It set the tone that the pastorate was talking about praxis, not theology; program operations not program theory.

However, some theory is needed to give direction to programs so the presentation included four focus areas for community building that would receive market acceptance in our present society. At the time it was felt others would come forward with other focus areas, but to date no-one has come up with a program or an activity that doesn't fit under one of these 4 community building focus areas.

Grace Focus One of God's great missions is to demonstrate his love for each of us. More than being worshiped by us, God wants to give to us. The goal of this group is to attract people into exciting worship and spiritual meditative experiences where they can feel and experience the spirit of love that comes from God. Properly done, gathered communities (large / small) through prayers, scripture study, worship and social interaction with this focus will reach out and gather those who are seeking spiritual renewal and enrichment in their lives.

Life-ability Focus God-given missions abound, everyone has one. The goal of this group is to attract people into an exciting high achievement lifestyle capable of fulfilling their inspired God-given mission. Members in this group will be professionally and purposefully coached towards developing a positive attitude, clarified goal quests, high EQ's, and accomplished competent skill levels that will bring purpose and success to their life. Life-abilities are diminished by discouragements and perceived obstacles. Properly done referrals and testimonials will attract new participants to search out this life-changing, life-enriching, life-affirming program.

Dialogue Focus One of God's great missions is to dialogue the peoples of the world towards world accord. Inspired dialogues impel people to work towards common understandings; celebrating diversities while discovering universal agreements. Dialogue communities can change long held prejudices and uniformed stereotypes transforming individuals into disciples of world accord. The goal of this group is to attract people into an exciting dialogue forum focused on the relevant issues in society. Properly done, society will be interested in knowing what the "Dialogue Community" is saying about each topic.

Community Development Focus One of God's great missions is encouraging little expressions of Zion by strengthening and building expressions of community around the world. The power of positive relationships gathered to a common mission can sometimes transform societies, but at all times they transform individuals. Whether its finding a soul mate or a circle of supportive friends or a social cause we are not whole until we have become part of and identify with something greater than ourselves. Properly done, the cause of Zion will create a host of mission programs capable of attracting new energized participants.

Decision Two - Leadership

The pastorate decided that they would have to "own" their leadership. They decided that they would act more as a Board of Directors and less as facilitators of a democratic grassroots movement. The premise being that the membership cannot be expected to find their way out of a decline in attendance on their own; or they would have already rose up in despair and done something about it. It was accepted that they needed leadership. The pastorate also very early decided that they would have to form a community themselves, everyone would have to be accepted and everyone would have to trust that their were no hidden agendas and all white elephants would be out on the table for all to consider. Within the pastorate leadership there are approximately 16 persons attending each meeting. It was decided by the core leaders, the ones that had the passion, the business skills and the writing skills, that they would meet each month as a steering committee setting the agenda for the pastorate meeting and previewing all materials that would be discussed. Both of these groups operated by consensus and anyone was welcome to attend any of their meetings and some new people did show up along the way.

Decision Three - Interaction With Non-attenders

The pastorate concurred that one important voice in the planning process would have to be from those who were raised in our community but who were not attending. In most cases these are the children and grandchildren of the present attenders. Through hiring a facilitator and an administrator we ended up with a concerted effort to find those people and invite them to participate with us in our planning process.

Decision Four - Interaction With Membership

The pastorate decided that they needed to touch base with the attending members which they have done through two surveys and a major two day weekend workshop led by a professional non-member facilitator and logistically supported by a paid administrator/co-ordinator. Our workshop was made up of 140 people of which 30 were non-attenders and they turned out to be some of the most vocal small group leaders during the day. The workshop was the first time that

the 6 congregations had met in many years as a common community. The greatest sense that came out of the workshop was that they really were a community, they wanted to do more activities together. However, there were no new entrepreneurial programs to emerge from the day; rather what seemed to emerge were program suggestions that would require congregations working together. This confirmed to the pastorate that perhaps amalgamation of several congregations would be acceptable. This is a major psychological step for our community of communities. This is also a major economical hurdle solved; since some of our facilities sit on fairly valuable land.

Decision Five - Real Estate Implications

The Bishop of Canada and our world leadership were present at the workshop which is important in our structure since all properties have their title held by the Bishop, but each congregation has democratic control over property decisions. (One congregation sold their property five years ago and they still hold the money even though now they meet in homes.) The Bishop, sensing that amalgamation is now for the first time being considered, has brought in real estate consultants to conduct a due diligence study of the values of each property and the appropriate manner to realize the highest and best value for each property. They are now in the midst of that study which will be made available to the pastorate leadership team once it is complete.

Decision Six - A Concrete Proposal

This has been close to a 4 year process and some of the members are voicing that this is taking far too long. Consequently, this month the steering committee made a forceful presentation to the pastorate indicating that it was time to begin to put together the business plan of which congregations should be sold, what funds will be realized and what would be the criteria outlining a new amalgamated centre. The pastorate determined at this meeting that the social housing projects that are sponsored by the church would be part of the overall amalgamation study and that their equity would also be included in the study.

The criteria presented were:

- Proposal Objectives:
 - Our vision based on our heritage and our scriptures is to establish community building programs
 - Successful programs need a development plan that includes facilities, support personnel and market analysis matched with capital dollars and potential revenues;
 - § our objective is to create self-funded programs
 - § our objective is to create self-funded facilities
 - § our objective is to generate sufficient revenue to fund GTA community building services and ministries
 - § our objective is to amalgamate our financial and property assets into centres of presence and influence
 - § our objective is to attract non-attenders and new attenders into inter-age, inter-cultural, inter-faith, inclusive, compassionate communities
 - § our objective is to raise the bar of commitment to our vision rather than lower our expectations
- Proposal:
 - Develop centres in multiple locations

- § Central
- § West
- § East
- § North
- Centres to focus on the community building activities of
 - § Grace
 - § Dialogue
 - § Community Relationships
 - § Life Ability
- Centres to be financially self supporting
- Centres to support Community Building through
 - § Retirement and senior's housing
 - § Disadvantaged housing
 - § Recreation for various age groupings
 - § Education in small and large groupings
 - § Worship at Home Church and Centre level
 - § Socializing Events/Activities
- Centres to provide additional annual revenue to support Community activities and staffing:
 - § Supported Ministry for:
 - Youth
 - Seniors
 - Worship
 - § Counsellors
 - § Recreation
 - § Events
- Centres to support and promote existing successful programmes:
 - § Joybringers
 - § Encounter World Religions
 - § Youth Retreats
 - § Etc.
- Proposed Action:
 - Secure support of GTA Pastorate
 - Collect facts and figures and timelines
 - Present proposal to Congregations and Stakeholders in April
 - Recommend immediate action for Central and West
 - Recommend immediate amalgamation of West into a new/rented facility
 - § Etobicoke
 - § Mississauga
 - § Willowdale
 - § Woodbridge
 - Secure Congregation and Stakeholder approval to continue the development of our Covenant Plan based on these guidelines

Christians pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth. All faiths need to find the "will" within their own traditions to build compassionate inclusive community. The universe stands waiting for its silent void to be filled with the sounds and movements of community. Allow me to end with the vision statement of the social housing group that I have developed and manage.

THE SIONITO VISION STATEMENT

There will come a time I know, when people will take delight in one another, when each will be a star to the other and when each will listen to his fellow as to music. The free people will walk upon the earth, people great in their freedom. They will walk with open hearts, and the heart of each will be pure of envy and greed, and therefore all people will be without malice, and there will be nothing to divorce the heart from reason. Then life will be one great service to each other!... Then we shall live in truth and freedom and in beauty, and those will be accounted the best, who will the more widely embrace the world with their hearts, and whose love of it will be the profoundest; those will be the best who will be the freest; for in them is the greatest beauty. Then will life be great, and the people will be great who live that life. Gorky