

Breathing together: Community as a way of life

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

In July 1995 Chicago was wrapped in a deadly heat wave. For days the mercury hovered in the three-digit zone, with heat indices reaching 120 degrees. In that period 739 Chicagoans died of heat-related causes.

Emergency teams reported finding inadequate or nonexistent ventilation in the residences of the dead. Persons living with cardiac or pulmonary weaknesses were the most susceptible. Of course, the elderly were the most susceptible.

What major media accounts failed to report was another deadly killer: the absence of community. The majority of people who died in the heat wave died alone. They had no one checking in on their attic apartments or their windowless lives. No family, friend or neighbor showed up to discover the severity of their plight. Sixty-eight of these individuals died so anonymously that Cook County officials buried them in a mass grave.

The absence of community does not require a heat wave or a cold spell, much less hundreds of deaths, to make its presence known. It surrounds us in a daily way—in our neighborhoods, our work lives and the anguish of our own souls. We may not always be aware of this void. But the scarcity of a deep sense of community can wreak havoc below the surface of outwardly busy lives, just as it occasionally makes the ultimate claim on an elderly individual living alone. From the ethos of economic life to the chatter of talk radio, our society is busy promoting the appetites and fantasies of the individual more than it is encouraging an investment in the larger aspirations of a community.

“What life have you if you have not life together?” Words of T. S. Eliot from his 1934 play *The Rock* point to the power of receiving life and nurturing life within the context of relating to other human beings. “There is no life that is not in community. And no community not lived in praise to God,” wrote Eliot. When people become aware of the limitations of individualistic thinking and the drawbacks of

disengagement from their neighbors, they hunger for alternatives. They yearn for something beyond themselves.

Those with Christian leanings commonly turn to the church, and more specifically, the local congregation. Week by week, individuals gather together voluntarily in congregations, often with high expectations for experiencing what they cannot locate in their solitary lives. The church's business, after all, has everything to do with relationship, putting people in touch with each other and with God. So who wouldn't expect to find a profound sense of community there?

Surprisingly, a richly textured communal spirit is absent in many congregations. There may be experiences aplenty of social togetherness. And friendliness may be an abundant part of all these experiences. But this is not the same as participating in and being deeply entwined with a spiritually grounded community. The two should not be confused. Inhabiting the same ecclesiastical space for an hour on Sunday morning is not the same as belonging to a community where your presence truly matters to others and their presence truly matters to you.

The difference is often detectable in the very way that a church member may express her congregational affiliation: "I go to that church on Brady Street" is very different from "I belong to a great community of people, and we call ourselves St. Paul Lutheran Church."

A communal spirit blooms where people are deeply in touch with one another, thriving because of the faithful interaction with one another. Outwardly, members of a congregation may have little in common. Inwardly, they can be touched by the possibility that they have something to learn from each other. Broad friendship, mutuality of purpose and an abiding care for one another are all by-products of a spiritually grounded community that is working together. The way in which members of a congregation reproduce the love of God through genuine hospitality and a love for one another will indicate whether they are indeed the body of Christ or simply a religious club.

Every congregation has its supply of believers who would love nothing more than to cultivate their own private spirituality by taking home that beloved hymn refrain or sermon quip to benefit their personal life. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this private eagerness for spiritual nurture. But as soon as personal edification becomes the primary focus for "attending" church, individualism begins to infect the

health of the congregation and the possibility of a grander sense of true community.

Holiness is born out of communities, not solitary lives. Nothing in a pastor's portfolio compares with the responsibility of molding a communal identity. Helping people invest their lives and confidence in one another for the sake of a common dream and a shared mission is a tall order. But the gospel itself provides continuous cues for demonstrating how people who are very different can be drawn together to appreciate one another.

Given all of the popular understandings of what a church is supposed to provide in an age of options, a pastor who delights in creating a shared sense of meaning is a pastor worth following. When he or she grasps the difference between a richly textured communal spirit and mere social togetherness that is the result of sharing the same street address, the possibilities for that congregation's service to the world rise exponentially.

John Courtney Murray once described the early church as a "conspiracy." By that he meant that ancient believers "breathed together" (*con*: "with," and *spire*: "breath"). It wasn't sinister behavior, of course, that held these Christians together. It was their shared sense of grace, their breathing together as the people of God. The contemporary church has exactly this same potential and same requirement. Effective pastoral leaders will have God's people breathing together, modeling a common way of life that is good for the world. They will walk people into what Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas have referred to as "a community capable of sustaining Christian virtue." Such a community of togetherness, they reason, will "enable us to be better people than we could have been if left to our own devices."

A people who breathe together can afford to be diverse. Uniformity does not constitute biblical community. If anything, it threatens it. Henri Nouwen coined the all-important definition of community as "that place where the person you least want to live with always lives." A resurrection-minded community will not emerge so long as individuals are busy surrounding themselves with only those people with whom they wish to live. Great congregations form where people with a dizzying variety of backgrounds and experiences take an interest in the mystery and the mess of each other's lives. The pastoral challenge is to give shape to this particularly diverse body.

One of the apostle Paul's determinative moves was to take the diversity of the church and, through hard work and grace, form a spirited community. This was how he believed the wisdom of God would get through to the world: "That through the church," he noted, "the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known" (Eph. 3:10). It is the rareness of such a body that captures the attention of the world. The manner with which this body or organism begins to move together has more than eye-catching appeal. It also happens to be the church's most effective way for transforming the world.

William H. Whyte, a leader in the study of modern urban street life, spent decades studying the patterns of diverse people on the move. His fascinating analyses of crowd behavior on New York City streets, using time-lapse photography and extensive notes and graphs, are published in his 1988 book *City: Rediscovering the Center*. Whyte discovered that pedestrians walking on busy sidewalks have a natural way of avoiding collisions with one another. Without even realizing it, they form a mass or a crowd that is both smooth and efficient. "They give and they take, at once aggressive and accommodating." The sidewalk scene "comes alive with movement and color—people walking quickly, walking slowly, skipping up steps, weaving in and out in crossing patterns, accelerating and retarding to match the moves of others. There is a beauty," Whyte said of this sight, "that is beguiling to watch."

The beauty that Whyte saw in these coordinated crowd movements is not totally unlike the beauty of a congregation that understands itself as a community moving forward together. There are obvious differences, of course. Most notably, a congregation is not a mass of people lumped together by default. People make a conscious decision to join a church. Unlike their urban pedestrian counterparts, who glob themselves together quite arbitrarily to cross a street, church members do realize that they are creating some form of togetherness. They understand at least the theory of a congregation being a cohesive community—the "body of Christ" in New Testament terms—even if they have little sense of what they must let go of to contribute to the shape of this community.

This is where pastoral leadership figures in. A pastor has the daily privilege and responsibility of giving form to an unformed mass, and selflessness to people capable of selfishness. No one tells a New York City pedestrian how to pick up the pace or stutter a step to avoid smashing the heel of the next pedestrian. Every walker on Fifth Avenue has to decide for himself or herself when and how to walk on the basis of his or her best guess of what everyone else will do. In a congregation

that is led thoughtfully, members are not left simply to guess at what everyone else will do. They do not merely decide for themselves how to press forward. They are led. They are guided to discover a sense of their place in the whole because they have been shown how to believe in the significance of the whole. They become captivated by a vision and get wrapped up in engaging their faith alongside the strength of others' faith.

Finding one's place in the fullness of this kind of spiritual community is a matter of what Whyte labeled for another realm "give and take . . . movement and color . . . walking quickly [and] walking slowly." Congregational life is a colorful and complex walk of togetherness, led by a pastoral hand that appreciates the worth inherent in a well-formed community.

Establishing this togetherness is not a small or quick task. It is a continuous and sometimes strenuous one. But pastors are uniquely positioned to help individuals relinquish their grip on personal preference. They get to shape a community around the inspiration of Jesus, intentionally walking people into each other's lives, teaching them how to admire and appreciate fellow members who may often think and live quite differently. The motivation for this pastoral practice is clear: it is the belief that the love generated by a spiritually coherent community is greater than the sum total of the love emanating from its individual members' lives.