

## RECLAIMING A BIBLICAL VISION FOR COMMUNITY

### A THREE-FOLD VIEW OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

**Do we value community because it is merely a traditional part of Mennonite pro-family culture?** Nelson Martin graduated from the Teacher Apprenticing Program in 2016 with a deeper commitment and clearer vision for community than he had before. In this article, he addresses key strengths of community and how the family of God reflects Jesus' prayer for His kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth.

People today feel drawn to the idea of community. The camaraderie of coffee shops and community gardens appeals to an increasingly lonely and fragmented society. But is this ideal actually helping people navigate life decisions, face crises, and find purpose for life? Is our society becoming more caring and accountable, or is this ideal mostly rhetoric that reacts against a cold, isolated life that still avoids the responsibilities and power of true community? Because Christian communities have always valued support and accountability, this broader cultural trend toward community awareness and support could be encouraging to us. Yet despite this increased emphasis on community, our society remains largely isolated and individualistic. I suggest that although our culture is becoming more aware of the need for connection, we do not naturally seek the kind of transforming closeness that Jesus intended for his followers.

What has changed in our society and how has it affected the church? In his book, *When the Church Was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman says, "For Jesus, Paul, and early church leaders throughout the Roman Empire, the

preeminent model that defined the Christian church was the strong-group Mediterranean family." When Jesus spoke of the church operating as the family of God, He was speaking to people who considered community interests and needs more important than those of the individual. Western individualism is partly a result of family and community becoming less essential for survival and companionship than they were in other eras. Personal affluence and technology have enabled people to survive alone while maintaining a sense of connection with their acquaintances. This shift also follows a change in values that places less importance on community and more on the individual. Hellerman offers an example of this shift when he observes that we have become more known by what we do and not just where we are from. This shift of language has not always been a negative thing, but it can influence even our Christian culture toward a tendency to make decisions and follow God as individuals, not as groups. In light of these cultural pressures,

maintaining our vision for transformational Christian communities is vital to the health of Anabaptism.

**Community is more than being a traditional culture. It is how humans are designed to function successfully.**

#### Accountability and Support in Community

Strong communities give protection and direction to individuals and families. Everyone likes to receive positive feedback, especially from peers. Technology has allowed us to filter out much of the input we don't like and distance ourselves from the kind of feedback we feel is unhelpful. Social media has made it possible to relate to people at a controllable distance where we can simply unfriend them and remove negative responses. This allows us to present the most attractive side of ourselves and thrive on the affirmation we get from peers, but miss feedback from people who would give us the kind of critique we need to hear. In contrast to this, vulnerable accountability in community forces us to be shaped by opinions and people we otherwise tend to filter out of our lives. Hellerman affirms this. "In the strong-group church family model, input from others is a way of life, not a resource to occasionally draw on as one of several items on a checklist that purports to tell us how to find God's will for our lives."

Accepting accountability does cost us some measure of personal freedom, but also brings a stability and care not otherwise possible. We can receive the

## COMMUNITY AT FAITH BUILDERS

Faith Builders does not intend to replace the home communities of students, but it does provide an environment and incorporate practices that promote growth in community. During my two years as a student at Faith Builders, I experienced community through several facets of life on campus.

The mentoring program became one of the most formational parts of my Faith Builders experience. Interacting with five other men from my class and two staff members every week provided a place of stability and vulnerability that gave accountability and support. The mentoring assignments I completed and shared gave me a chance to better

understand my past and present and helped me set my goals.



My mentoring group gave me clarity through both positive and negative feedback. Interaction with the staff at Faith Builders outside of mentoring was also a highlight. A low ratio of students to staff helped me learn to know them well and respect them not only as competent academic authorities but also as trusted mentors and valued friends.

Chapel services twice a week anchored my quest for God's presence. When our class experienced births and deaths among their immediate families, staff and students shared the joys and losses in prayer and praise.

Most of my fellow students lived on campus in dorms. This gave us the opportunity to share our lives and learn how to communicate and function well in close living spaces. Late-night snack times in the hallway often became discussions that transitioned from humorous to philosophical and back again.

The main thing that made my experience at Faith Builders sustainable and healthy was the seamless integration of our academic, social, and spiritual lives into one experience that was centered on becoming better lovers of God as a community.

*Nelson Martin*



## ADMINISTRATORS CONFERENCE

JANUARY 25-27, 2018

This retreat helps administrators build vision for their schools and grow in effective leadership. This year's general sessions by Richie Lauer's are designed to help administrators lead their schools with clarity in purpose, communication, and methods.



Steven Brubaker will lead a work session for administrators, and Dorcas Smucker will speak to the women.

Small group discussions will provide a forum for administrators and their wives to interact with and learn from each other.

### REGISTRATION OPEN

More information and registration is at [fbep.org/acr](http://fbep.org/acr).

most support from the people to whom we are the most accountable. Hellerman makes the surprising claim that our loss of strong-group communities has come at a cost to our emotional health. Advice and emotional support from elders and extended families, especially for young parents raising children, promotes emotional stability. Instead, we make many of our most important life transitions with very little outside input, which puts a lot of pressure on individuals, especially the young and inexperienced. Hellerman says, "Faced with decisions that people were never meant to make in isolation, we self-destruct emotionally and relationally, we never grow up, and we turn to therapy or medication to prop us up against a world that is just too much to handle on our own." The Anabaptist faith tradition values the involvement of peers, parents, and spiritual mentors in making personal decisions. This is more than being a traditional culture; it is how humans are designed to function successfully.

### Salvation into Community

For the Christian, community is more than just a source of direction and support. Community is also the context for salvation. Although we must have a personal faith in Jesus, we join the

## WINTER TERM

JANUARY 1 - FEBRUARY 2, 2018

Winter Term offers courses and flexible schedules to suit pastors and young people wanting refreshment, guidance, and instruction for ministry.



### APPLICATION AVAILABLE

More information and an application is at [www.fbep.org/wt](http://www.fbep.org/wt). A paper application is also available on request.

### CLASSES OFFERED IN 2018

|   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| Cross-Cultural Communication .....        | Collier Berkshire |
| Homemaking: An Art for All Women .....    | Cynthia Brubaker  |
| Anabaptism as a Worldview .....           | Steven Brubaker   |
| Reading the Bible .....                   | Steven Brubaker   |
| Two Centuries of Mennonite Thought.....   | Edsel Burdge      |
| The Life of Christ .....                  | John Coblenz      |
| Understanding Abuse .....                 | John Coblenz      |
| Introduction to Apologetics.....          | Ernest Eby        |
| Life & Leadership for Men .....           | Melvin Lehman     |
| Issues in Church Leadership .....         | Melvin Lehman     |
| The Kingdom of God.....                   | Melvin Lehman     |
| Kingdom-Centered Business .....           | Gary Miller       |
| Beginning Choral Conducting .....         | Brandon Mullet    |
| Class Voice .....                         | Brandon Mullet    |
| Listening to and Enjoying Good Music..... | Brandon Mullet    |
| Music Fundamentals.....                   | Brandon Mullet    |
| Music in the Life of the Church .....     | Brandon Mullet    |
| Growing Into a Godly Woman .....          | Marie Mullet      |
| Marriage & Mothering .....                | Marie Mullet      |
| Church History: Early & Medieval .....    | Stephen Russell   |
| Historical Theology .....                 | Stephen Russell   |
| Menno Simons Seminar .....                | Stephen Russell   |
| Developing as a Servant .....             | Glendon Strickler |
| I Corinthians.....                        | Dave Yoder        |

family of Christ-followers in conversion. In Helleman's words, "We are not saved only to enjoy a personal relationship with God. We are saved to community. We are saved to God's group." Helleman believes that the current evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus has devalued the place of the community in our salvation. The traditional Anabaptist understanding is that we do come to God personally and with our brother. According to the principle taught in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, even our forgiveness by the Father is contingent on our forgiveness for our brother. Our relationship with God is not divorced from our relationships in the community.

God's family is a community of incarnational Christ-followers: that is, those who live the gospel of Jesus Christ in flesh, not just subscribe to a set of beliefs. Just as everything Jesus did on earth was to show us the Father in flesh, so we show God best in how we interact with each other. The Anabaptist ideal of a collective pursuit of God demonstrates part of what it means to be saved into the family of God and grow into Christ together.

### Evangelism through Community

Community is not just the safe, supportive context into which we are saved as followers of Jesus, but is also the most powerful model we can offer for the redemption of the nations of the world. John Driver writes in his book *Community and Commitment* that evangelism should not focus just on saving souls here and there and expecting a true harvest to result.

"The central task of evangelism is forming disciple communities. Evangelism is not simply saving individuals from hell for heaven, nor inviting them to repentance and then leaving them to struggle alone to be faithful to their confession that Jesus is Lord. Evangelism is calling men and women to repentance and inviting them to become part of the community of God's people which participates even now and here on earth in the kingdom of God which will finally come in all its fullness."

While some individuals do choose to follow Christ alone and without the support of their existing communities, we should not assume that as a model for our evangelism efforts. Our continued spiritual pilgrimage is very difficult when journeying alone, and presenting the gospel only as a solitary offering is missing much of God's mission. In Driver's words, "The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ inviting persons to enter into a new life of love and obedience in the context of community of the kingdom which anticipates the ultimate reign of God over the cosmos."

We need to embrace the power of strong-group cultures for the mission of God to be accomplished. Most unreached peoples still function as strong-group communities, unlike the Western individualized culture. We will reach entire people groups most effectively through existing community structures and authorities since widespread movements toward God tend to grow most naturally through these channels. When we ignore the community and focus only on reaching the individual, we limit the effectiveness of the gospel: the good news of joining God's family.

Employing community models in our evangelism is critical because of the existing cultural values of unreached peoples, but also because the family of God is the context into which we call new believers.

We must model the redeemed relationship dynamics of the Kingdom through communities of disciplined believers. People often need to see a functioning group of redeemed people in order to be convinced of the authenticity of our faith. In John 13:35, Jesus says, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (NASB). Anabaptists have long recognized the power of families and small communities of believers to live out in flesh the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a strength of our culture that we must embrace as we invite people into the family of God.

### Summary

In a world that continues to search for security, identity, and direction, we have the opportunity to model transformational Christian community as an attractive and viable solution. As Christians, we believe God speaks in and through the community, and that His will is done "on earth as in heaven" when we live this truth. This is in our spiritual DNA as Anabaptists and is a strength to embrace, not an archaic tradition from which to distance ourselves. In order to thrive, we must reclaim a biblical vision for accountable, redeemed, and inviting communities.

Nelson Martin



### OPEN HOUSE AT FB

NOVEMBER 17, 2017, 10:00 AM-6:00 PM

We invite parents, church leaders, and business owners to our fall open house to attend classes, chat with instructors, and tour the school.

Do you have questions about Faith Builders? Would you like to know more about what we do? Do you want to see what a student from your church is experiencing?

#### REGISTER TO ATTEND

Find more information and register at:

[www.fbep.org/open-house](http://www.fbep.org/open-house)  
(814) 789-4518.

### GRAPHIC DESIGNER NEEDED

We need a graphic designer to work with curriculum writers and project managers creating materials for Living History Weavings and other projects in development.

Experience using the Adobe Creative Suite (Photoshop, InDesign, and Illustrator) is desired. Some training could be provided if necessary.

#### CONTACT

Would you like to know more? Email Matthew Mast at [matthewwm@fbep.org](mailto:matthewwm@fbep.org).

## Contact us

-  **By Phone** (814) 789-4518
-  **By Fax** (814) 789-3396
-  **By E-mail** fbep@fbep.org
-  **By Mail** 28527 Guys Mills Rd  
Guys Mills, PA 16327

Visit us on the web at [www.fbep.org](http://www.fbep.org)

## FAITH BUILDERS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

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### UPCOMING EVENTS & TERMS

#### TEACHERS CONFERENCE | OCTOBER 13-15

More information and registration is at [www.fbep.org/tc](http://www.fbep.org/tc).

#### HEART & VOICE | NOVEMBER 10-12

Heart & Voice, a men's choir, will be hosted in Lancaster, PA. The Sunday morning service will be at Bethel Fellowship, the afternoon program TBD.

#### FBTI CHRISTMAS CONCERT | DECEMBER 11, 4:00 PM

#### WINTER TERM | JANUARY 1 - FEBRUARY 2, 2018

Details inside. Apply at [www.fbep.org/wt](http://www.fbep.org/wt).

#### ADMINISTRATORS CONFERENCE | JANUARY 25-27, 2018

Details inside. Register at [www.fbep.org/acr](http://www.fbep.org/acr).

### FAITH BUILDERS NEWSLETTER

The Faith Builders newsletter is published quarterly and serves to inform, inspire, and equip its readers. Subscription is free upon request.

### NEWS FROM FAITH BUILDERS

#### FAREWELL

- » The graduates of 2017 were a group of passionate men and women with diverse interests and goals. We bless them as they serve in the kingdom!
- » We are grateful for a good Summer Term. Record enrollment and an abundance of couples and families made this summer especially memorable.

#### WELCOME

- » Twenty new students begin 2-year studies in August. We have eight new students in Christian Ministries, two in General Studies, and ten in Teacher Apprenticing-- ten women and ten men!
- » Seven volunteers joined us this summer to serve in maintenance, kitchen, and housekeeping responsibilities. Thank you for your service!