

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

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Not Community, Communitas!

by Rev. Michael Frost

In the 1970s and 1980s the term “community” was in vogue with theologians, church leaders, psychologists, sociologists, and self-help authors right across the Western world. We were told how much

we need to be in community. It was mentioned that the human being is a herd animal, and we cannot live for any length of time in isolation. Life is not meant to be done alone. We need fellow travelers, supporters for the journey of life. Nearly every church was using the term “community” in its advertising and promotional material. Some even used it in the name of the church itself.

I have to admit that I went in for this stuff in a big way. In the 1980s I read Scott Peck’s, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, and was deeply moved by his definition of “true”

community. He wrote about an experience of human togetherness the likes of which I’d never known, but for which I yearned deeply. Up to that point, my experience of church community had been that of a generally warm, outwardly friendly society with pretty rigid rules about who was “in” and who was “out.” I became strongly committed to trying to build a community centered on Jesus, but inclusive and welcoming. A small band of Christians joined me in that experiment. We regularly referred to our community as being hard at the center and soft at the edges. In other words, our commitment to Christ and his teaching was hard and nonnegotiable, but at the edges of our community we provided multiple portals or entry points. It was pretty heady stuff, and we saw some real movement toward our goal. We developed community-building skills that have served us even until this day.

But along the way I was regularly disquieted by visitations from slightly older people who came to our community to take a quick look at how we were doing and if it was working. I discovered that most of these older people were survivors of similar community-building experiments from the 1970s. They had become jaded and cynical by their own experiences of the so-called radical discipleship movement of that era. They told me that they, too, had worked on fashioning inclusive community; that they, too, had experienced periods of success as my community was currently experiencing. But they eyed me with suspicion and told me that it wouldn’t last. Their marvelous experiments had come undone, leaving many idealistic young people wounded or exhausted.

We were told...we need fellow travelers,
supporters for the journey of life.

Lutheran Renewal

(Independent of North Heights Lutheran Church)

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So I went back to study the Acts of the Apostles, and I realized that the blissful early days of the Jerusalem church were also short lived. In fact, I realized that the inclusivity of sharing possessions, eating together, and gathering under the apostles' teaching, as delicious as it seemed, was actually a contravention of Jesus' command for them to take the gospel to the very ends of the earth. As I read on, I realized that the early Jerusalem church was in fact a community in transition. Once a traveling missionary community of disciples, centered on Jesus, it had become a static group, camped in Jerusalem. But this was not its intended future. After the persecution that resulted from Stephen's bold and offensive ministry (Acts 6-7), the church was scattered, and through that dispersion it rediscovered its original mandate: to be a missionary people, a community on the move.

I began to fear that we had lost something important in all our work in building community. I began to wonder whether Christians don't do well to build community as an end in itself. We build community incidentally, when our imaginations and energies are captured by a higher, even nobler cause. Though it took me a while, I came to realize that Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission. My ongoing reading led me to discover that what I was originally yearning for was not the therapeutic community that Scott Peck wrote about, but rather the missionary community that the apostle Paul writes about.

I have come to realize that aiming for community is a bit like aiming for happiness. It's not a goal in itself. We find happiness as an incidental by-product of pursuing love, justice, hospitality, and generosity. When you aim for happiness, you are bound to miss it. Likewise with community. It's not our goal. It emerges as a by-product of pursuing something else. Those who love community destroy it, but those who love people build community.

Then my dear friend and fellow conspirator, Alan Hirsch, with whom I wrote, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, introduced me to the much more radical concept of "communitas." Anthropologist Victor Turner first used the term *communitas* in his 1969 book, *The Ritual Process*. Turner explored the nature of male initiation rites among the Ndembu, a tribe in Zambia. He and other anthropologists identified three universal stages to such rites: separation, liminality, and reintegration.

Young men of a certain age were removed from mainstream society while they undertook the ordeal of induction into adult life. This period of separation, during which the initiates were considered no longer children but not yet adults, was called liminality. A liminal state is a stage of transition, a period that is neither one thing nor the other. Cast out of the village and made to live in the jungle, fending for themselves, the initiates were visited regularly by the community's holy men to be taught the lore and learning of adulthood.



After a prolonged period of liminality, the young men were then reintegrated into mainstream or normal society with a new status. They were men in full standing, no longer boys living in the world of women. But most interesting, was that being in this liminal or "limbo" stage, the initiates discovered a depth of community so great that it transcended what we normally mean by that term. This is *communitas*.

Although this anthropology may seem somewhat obscure, the concept of *communitas* isn't as unusual as it first appears. We all know that when people are thrown into a challenge, an ordeal, they develop a much deeper sense of communion. Think of any group of people in a liminal state, and in all likelihood they will have experienced a deeper sense of community than those in mainstream society.

Have you ever been on a short-term mission trip overseas and felt such a special, intimate, profound sense of connection with your fellow travelers? When building houses in Mexico or working in orphanages in Haiti, we connect with other Christians at a level entirely different from the one experienced each week in our local church. This isn't just because of the exotic location or the spicy food. It's because we are in a liminal state. We are not living at home, nor are we really living in Mexico. We are in transition, a resident in neither place, really. This sense of liminality, fueled by the challenge of completing certain tasks, fosters *communitas*. Even if we find ourselves on a team with people we don't particularly enjoy, the experience of liminality eventually sweeps away our petty differences, bonding us strongly, because we are forced to rely on each other simply for survival.

This is obviously the sense of companionship that Jesus' first disciples felt. With Jesus at the center, they experienced a liminality and *communitas* so exquisite that it eventually spoke so profoundly into normal, mainstream society that it altered the history of the world forever. Although we sometimes mistakenly imagine the company of Jesus to be a happy band of vagabonds traveling carefree around Palestine, we need to remember that the twelve apostles, in particular, had left everything to follow Jesus. They were like the African initiates. They had separated themselves from mainstream society at great personal cost. They are a perfect example of a liminal society.

...the experience of liminality eventually sweeps away our petty differences, bonding us strongly, because we are forced to rely on each other simply for survival.



My quest in the 1980s and 1990s to build true community was only slightly misguided. The hunger for community is a legitimate one, but to pursue it for its own sake is the mistake. When we seek to build community without the experience of liminality, all we end up with is the kind of pseudo-community that pervades many churches. It's more like a support group than a *communitas*.

Community

Inward focus
Focus on encouraging each other
Safe place
Something to be built

Communitas

Social togetherness outside 'society'
Focus on the task at hand
Pushes 'society' forward
Experienced through liminality

Communitas is so different from what we have usually identified as "community", particularly the way the church has used this term. So-called Christian community often is portrayed as an inwardly focused gathering of people committed to one another, to encouraging one another and building one another up. It is often referred to as a "safe place"; a place where members can be open and vulnerable together and receive support, understanding, and mutual care. I have no objection to these things at all. In fact, I hunger for them. But I think that the church has made them an end in themselves. We are regularly told to "build" community, to meet new people, to welcome visitors, as if this is our purpose as a church. Community is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means

to an end. Initiates, experiencing *communitas*, might find all the elements of mutual support and care mentioned above, but they find them as part of a group of people undergoing a shared ordeal. In other words, you can't have the marvelous experience of *communitas* without being in a liminal state. Many churches want the experience of rich, deep relationships, but they aren't prepared to embrace the challenge of coming out of mainstream society. When in a liminal stage, coping with the difficulties and ordeal of being outside the structure of normal society, people find themselves thrown together in a richer, deeper, more powerful sense of togetherness. Not community, *communitas*!

Building community for its own sake is like attending a cancer support group without having cancer. It's like asking soldiers you haven't fought with to imagine that you are their captain. And it's like your church demanding your allegiance and your weekly attendance without giving you a cause to work toward. It's no different to the church holding endless Bible study groups or hearing countless sermons for the purpose of learning information that will be rarely utilized. Have you ever noticed how many men attend worship only occasionally and begrudgingly, but when there's



a church cleanup day, they'll turn up joyfully and work hard all day? Such workdays create a mini-*communitas*. So do short-term mission trips and youth mission trips. So does church planting. But weekly church services do not. It's like sitting at the apostles' feet and drinking in the teaching in Jerusalem in the first century. It serves a useful purpose but the ultimate purpose of the Jerusalem church was to go and make disciples of all nations. There's no question that the apostles' teaching was essential, but not as an end in itself. Their teaching was meant to mobilize ordinary

believers to go into the world, baptizing new disciples and teaching them all that Christ commanded them. As, we noted earlier, it wasn't until persecution drove the first Christians out of Jerusalem that they discovered their purpose and that purpose threw them together into a liminal state as a missionary movement.

Michael will be speaking, along with Graham Cooke, at our February 9-10, 2007 Equipping Conference, **"A Prophetic Life with God, A Prophetic Lifestyle in the World."**

Please see the enclosed brochure.

Attending a respectable middle-class church in a respectable middle-class neighborhood isn't a liminal experience. Joining a peace movement in a nation obsessed with military might is. Traveling to Indonesia to help with the international relief effort after a tsunami is. Joining a church-planting team is. Why do our churches often miss this experience of *communitas*? For no other reason than that they often avoid liminality, opting for a safer, more secure environment.

I'm not for a minute suggesting that Christian *communitas* shouldn't address the need that all of us have for safety. Indeed it should. However, it should fashion safe spaces not as alternative to missional engagement in our world, but as parallel experiences to that engagement. Whenever I have led or been part of a mission team, we have ensured that there are protocols for those who are tired, emotionally depleted, or spiritually dry to retreat and be replenished. But this hasn't stopped the mission from continuing. It happens in parallel with the ongoing purpose of the team.

This article was adapted from *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* by Michael Frost, copyright 2006, by Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

On the Road with PAUL (Anderson)

Pastor Mark Marxhausen will be traveling to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in November 2006. Mark has developed a close relationship with the Lutheran renewal group there, having visited on seven previous occasions. The flight is very expensive, and may be more than \$3,000. If you would like to help with the expenses associated with this trip, please send your gift to Lutheran Renewal with a note expressing your desire to help support the mission to PNG.

Thank you!

Scandinavia. Arlen and Elsa Salte from Breakforth! Canada, Nate Johnstone and Andrew Anderson (MI grads and church planters) and I traveled to Scandinavia and Latvia in late September after I had gone alone to Brazil earlier that month. We led a conference in Bergen, met with pastors in Sweden, made plans in Latvia for a Lutheran Renewal Leaders' Conference next October, met with Christians in the Latvian Parliament, then participated in the Nokia Mission and spoke at a pastors' conference.

Brazil. This month the fifty churches that have left the Lutheran Church of Brazil will form a new network. I have been with them twice, once when they were still in the Lutheran Church and in September at a conference after they had left. They are happy to be released from the restraints of an oppressive system, and they have asked me to return in the spring for a pastors' conference. They also plan to have Mike Bradley come down and help them plant a leadership training school, perhaps a Master's Institute.

Finland. Markku Koivisto, the leader of the Nokia Mission which Lutheran Renewal has connected with, has been given five months to recant on ten issues for which he is being tried for heresy. He is not a heretic; he is a gifted leader of a powerful movement that is spreading in Finland. They planted a Master's Institute Finland two years ago. Church leaders would like Markku to leave, but he has been encouraged to stay and fight it out. There is no doubt that there are many Nicodemus types who are silently rooting for him. I will be meeting with his staff next spring to speak to them about the ARC.



L to R: Nate Johnstone, Andrew Anderson, Paul Anderson, Hans Weibrocht, leader of Swedish Lutheran renewal network, and Elsa and Arlen Salte, worship leaders and founders of the Breakforth! conferences.

Sweden. Drew Shepp, one of the leaders of our young adult ministry, and I participated in the Swedish form of the Holy Spirit Conference last July, attended by 2,000 participants. I will be returning in the spring to spend more time with the leaders and to have a rally in Gothenburg.

Norway. We recently held a Breakforth! Norway conference in Bergen. The church where we met is under the leadership of Reidar Paulson, who also leads the Doulos network of about eight churches. I will be spending a weekend next spring with this network, which is connected to the ARC. I will also be checking out the conference center of a friend, Dr. Asbjorn Simonnes, concerning a joint venture.

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BAPTISM

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By Morris Vaagenes

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Dr. Roy Harrisville, Professor Emeritus at Luther Seminary, has this to say about Pastor Morris' book: "The author engages the ordinary reader, who may be uninitiated in the complexities of theological debate, in the Christian teaching on Baptism. He focuses on the Bible alone, without attention to particular doctrinal viewpoints."

Please see the back page to order your copy of this book.

Hearing God

By Kent Groethe



God is speaking to us constantly in order to guide us, lead us into more effective service to others, and to show His great love for

us. Pastor Kent Groethe looks at eighteen ways in which God speaks to us today. He explores reasons why we often miss His communications and gives suggestions as to how we can better hear Him. *Please contact Pastor Kent to order your copy of this book. His e-mail address: biblealiveministries@yahoo.com.*

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Multiplying Your Financial Gifts

In our February 2006 newsletter we let you know of the "GivingPlus" program through which Thrivent Financial matches your donations to Lutheran Renewal at a 1:2 ratio. Thrivent will contribute \$1 for every \$2 you donate to Lutheran Renewal, for a maximum of \$300 per year from Thrivent. So, if you give LR \$600, Thrivent will contribute an extra \$300 to our ministry. Your \$600 has increased to a \$900 gift. What an added blessing to Lutheran Renewal! We so appreciate the year-end gifts that many of you donate to us at this time of year, and we wanted to remind you of this special program before the year ends.

This program is open to anyone who is currently a Thrivent member, and to make it easier for you, you'll find the "Member Gift Form" on [page 6](#) of this newsletter. If you choose to give to Lutheran Renewal, and if you're a member of Thrivent, please fill in the enclosed "Member Gift Form," and send it along with your next donation.

If you're not a member of Thrivent, you may still take advantage of this program. Contact Lutheran Renewal by phone or e-mail and we'll send you an Associate Membership Application. You may also download this form from our website. There is a \$10 fee to become an associate member. The associate membership must be renewed each year.

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Dr. Morris Vaagenes answers questions such as, "What is the meaning of baptism?" "Why is baptism important?" "What are the areas of agreement and disagreement?" "Is baptism a passport to heaven?" There are questions for discussion at the end of each chapter which make this book an excellent resource for an adult study class or to prepare baptism sponsors. (\$16)

Answering Your Questions About Speaking in Tongues

Larry Christenson has re-released this helpful book, now with a new preface, that has already sold over 250,000 copies. He addresses questions like: "Is the gift of tongues for today?" "What does speaking in tongues mean?" "Is speaking in tongues for me?" and many more. (\$8)

Breaking Strongholds in My Life

A booklet by Paul Anderson that identifies key strongholds of bondage in our lives and how we can break free through the power of the Spirit and not merely by our own effort. (\$2)

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Do you want to discover your dream? Learn how to pursue it? Need to recover broken dreams? In *Dare to Dream*, Paul Anderson will help you to discover what God has placed inside of you! (\$10)

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The Gift of Tongues (Booklet)

A biblical study of this spiritual gift by Larry Christenson. He also traces its connection with receiving the Holy Spirit, answers questions, covers theological concerns, and discusses practical aspects. (\$2.25)

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Pastor Orval Moren has written a powerful resource for anyone who would like a "3-minute lesson" for children. You'll also find suggestions, visual aids and Scriptural references in this indispensable tool. (\$12 \$7)

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The Renewed Mind

This book by Larry Christenson touches on five major areas of spiritual experience: Dependence on God; Facing challenges with the authority of Christ; Patience; Discipline; Prayer. (\$9)

Ride the River

Using a parable of Lewis and Clark's exploration of the American West, Larry Christenson helps you discover how God the Father puts your life journey under the co-leadership of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. (\$11)

A Soldier Looks at Spiritual Warfare

Author Dick Denny uses military analogies to confront readers with the reality of spiritual warfare. "Superb" said one longtime adult educator. (\$15)

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A practical 17-page booklet by Larry Christenson. Topics include: Infant Baptism, Immersion, Re-baptism and Baptism with the Holy Spirit. (\$2.25)

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