

Authentic Community



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Introduction

Australians love their independence. Many Australians would like to see Australia become a Republic cutting our ties with the UK.

Many people think that happiness is the result of independence. *“If I’m financially independent, then I’ll be happy.”* Yet, our society is full of unhappy people!

Independence is not the answer! The truth is, happiness does not come from being independent or isolated, keeping people at an arm’s length.

God never intended for us to walk through life alone. He created us to experience authentic community – life is better connected.

Romans 12:5b (NLT) “Since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other and each of us needs all the others.”

There’s an old Zambian proverb, *‘When you run alone, you run fast. But when you run together, you run far.’*

Life is not a 100-metre sprint; rather it is more like a marathon. We need a support team to encourage us to get across the finish line.

Hebrews 10:25a (TEV) “Let us not give up the habit, of meeting together, instead let us encourage one another.”

We all need many people in our lives so we can build healthy and lasting relationships. Doing so, we experience acceptance and support.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul conveys in,

Ephesians 4:16 (NLT) “As each part does its work, it helps the other parts grow. So Christ’s whole body, is healthy and growing and full of love.”

God desires us to grow together, and to support one another.

Galatians 6:10 (MSG) “Every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.”

Authentic community occurs when we uphold the value and worth of each person, by creating an environment of love, acceptance and forgiveness.

The Vision Statement of our Church promotes this expectation; our desire to be a **Christ centred community of believers who obey the Great Commission.**

As we encounter the saving power of Christ through His grace, and continually allow His Word and the Holy Spirit to influence our lives we will become more Christlike in our behaviour and mindset.

Whilst we need an encounter with Christ to bring forth a life change, we also need others around us to help us stay on that course. This is why we have two core values that assist and guide us in how we are to live as a Christ centred community of believers. They are:

1. Authentic Community

Doing life together through supportive and accountable relationships.

2. Embracing Diversity

Bridging racial, cultural, socio-economic and generational gaps through an attitude of acceptance.

Values influence our attitudes and shape our behaviour. Values define what is important.

As a pastor, I try to live by a personal value of **being inclusive rather than being exclusive.** I must admit that I do not get this right all the time and I will fail into the future, but my intention is to embrace and to include people irrespective of the colour of their skin, or the language they speak or what they do or don't have.

This is the reason why I have compiled this booklet, so you can be encouraged to experience the richness of being inclusive rather than being exclusive!

James 2:8-9 (NLT) “Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁹ But if you favor some people over others, you are committing a sin. You are guilty of breaking the law.”

Let me encourage you to read each of the lessons to follow, as they are essential in Adelaide Christian Centre becoming all God intended...for now and the future.

Lesson One

Authentic Community

A sense of belonging best happens through supportive and accountable relationships.

It takes an **intentional decision** to develop supportive, enjoyable and accountable relationships – they do not just happen!

John 13:34-35 (NLT) “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. ³⁵Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples.”

Romans 12:10 (NLT) “Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.”

Galatians 6:10 (NCV) “When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of believers.”

Philippians 2:3-4 (TLB) “Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. ⁴ Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.”

The Greek word for fellowship in the New Testament is ‘*koinonia*,’ which means: community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy.

‘*Koinonia*’ involved the **action** of **giving and receiving** as seen in the use of the word by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church in Philippi.

Philippians 1:3-5 (NIV) “I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your **partnership** [*koinonia*] in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Philippians 2:1-2 (NKJV) “Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any **fellowship** [*koinonia*] of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, ² fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”

Philippians 3:10 (NIV) “I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of His resurrection and **participation** [*koinonia*] in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.”

Philippians 4:15 (NKJV) “You Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church **shared** [koinoneo: verb] with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.”

The concept of ‘koinonia’ was made possible because of Jesus’ death.

Ephesians 2:11-19 (NIV) “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands) ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in His flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of His household.”

On the cross Jesus **destroyed the barrier** of sin that separated us, bringing us into ‘God’s household.’ Because of Calvary we are now in ‘koinonia’ (fellowship and union) with Him and with one another.

The Apostles taught that true ‘Christian’ fellowship was demonstrated by helping those in need.

When the early church began, it functioned as a community of Christ followers doing life together. Being a follower of Jesus involves an active and intentional relationship with God and with other Christ-followers.

The local church is not something we **go to** (a building or an event) but something we are a **part of** (a community). The local church is where we can find a **close-knit** family to do life together.

Acts 2:42-47 (NIV) “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the

believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

The church in Jerusalem functioned as a group of people whom actively fellowshiped. They cared. They served. They gave. They sacrificed. They were involved in an ongoing concern for the wellbeing of every member in the family of God.

True *‘koinonia’* cannot be reduced to an idea, or an emotion. Authentic *‘koinonia’* is expressed by **action** - what we **do**, and not what we **feel**.

As the early followers of Jesus practised authentic *‘koinonia,’* the Church grew rapidly. “...and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” - *Acts 2:47b (NIV)*

The use of *‘koinonia’* in the Greek-speaking world.

- **Business Partnerships**

This was the most common practice of *‘koinonia’* in the New Testament era. It was when two or more people joined in a commercial venture, and worked closely together for their mutual profit.

In the Church, we should be bonded with each other through **loyalty** and **labouring together** as partners in the work of Christ, **committed** to the extension of God’s Kingdom.

In this, we find one of life's greatest joys - living for a cause bigger than oneself - the **cause of Christ** *who came to seek and save the lost*, for the **redemption of mankind!**

Where true *‘koinonia’* exists, Christ followers will joyfully labour together to honour Christ, and in fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

- **Covenant Relationships**

‘Koinonia’ also described the partnering in a marriage, or in other similar relationships where a deep bonding and a mutual concern are evident.

Historians, such as Tertullian, pointed out in the days of the early Church, Christian love was a thing to be mocked and not admired. The Christian idea of self-sacrificing fellowship through **unconditional love** attracted society's scorn rather than their praise. Society deemed Christian love as a sign of weakness.

The world at that time understood the concept of fellowship as between people of similar status and background. But in the Church, relationships grew between people of different backgrounds and status - Jews and Gentiles and the rich and poor.

In and through Christ we are bound together into a committed and loving relationship with Him and with one another. If the church does not function as a **bonded family**, it is then reduced to merely a **religious group**, of little value.

It takes an intentional decision to develop supportive, enjoyable and close relationships. Being committed by putting down our roots into a church family is where we can experience authentic community.

Again, authentic community is upholding the **value** and **worth** of all people and maintaining an environment of **love, acceptance** and **forgiveness**.

1 Peter 4:8 (NIV) Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

Ephesians 4:2-3 (TLB) Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. ³ Try always to be led along together by the Holy Spirit and so be at peace with one another.

Small groups of people who connect are ideal in experiencing the power of authentic community, by growing through **mutual encouragement** and **accountability**.

We need people in our lives and they need us. God never designed us to live life in isolation, because **life is better connected**.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV) And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, (authentic community is love in action through good deeds) ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...

We need to be connected with one another in community to be able to withstand the pressures that life throws at us.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV) A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.

We don't have to go looking for trouble, because trouble has a knack of finding us! Genuine loving relationships provide the care and support we all need to stay on course.

- **Divine Communion**

When Paul taught and laid the foundation why a local church should celebrate communion, he used the word, 'koinonia.'

*1 Corinthians 10:16 (NIV) Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a **participation** [koinonia] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a **participation** [koinonia] in the body of Christ?*

What does this mean? Paul provides the answer in:

1 Corinthians 10:19-20a (NIV) Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God...

Paul refers to a pagan belief that a god entered the body of a sacrificed animal, and the same god would enter into the body and soul of the worshipper.

Paul declares that these worshippers really did come into union with a spiritual power!

1 Corinthians 10:20b-21 (NIV) and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

If a pagan worshipper could be bound to a demon through the sacrificial ceremony, even more so, we come into a spiritual union with Christ through the celebratory act of partaking in communion.

The table of the Lord cannot be just an **ordinance**, but is rather a **sacrament!** The bread and the wine do not just **remind** us of Christ, but taken by faith, they bring us into a **union** with Him.

Lesson Two

Supportive Relationships

Close community doesn't just happen. It is to be cultivated and nurtured intentionally as a ***spiritual discipline***.

The first believers in the church in Jerusalem spent time with each other over meals in their homes (see again *Acts 2:42-47*).

Intentional community is a ***core responsibility*** and ***discipline*** of being an active member in a church family.

Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV) Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Let us hold unswervingly.

Life's circumstances have a tendency to veer us off course. We can swerve too far to the left or right because of sin, wrong attitudes, unwise decisions, addiction, sickness, grief, a loss of a job, divorce etc.

These all have the potential to cause us to swerve off course and drift away from God in part or all together.

Even the most experienced Christian can stray off course. **Life has no favourites.** A key to not swerving or wavering is ***standing firm*** in God.

Hebrews 10:23 (NLT) Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep His promise.

Knowing that when we trust in God, and applying His principles from His Word, we will receive the guidance we need.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NIV) Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;⁶ in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Spurring one another on.

Hebrews 10:24a (NIV) Let us consider how we may spur one another on...

A cowboy would use the spurs on the back of his boots to motivate and steer a reluctant horse. Some may say this is cruel, but the spurs were used as a motivational technique that helped keep the horse focussed.

We are to **encourage** and **motivate** one another by prodding each other forward, by encouraging **steady progress** in our relationship with God.

This is what supportive relationships should include, riding together and spurring one another on to stay on course.

We are to spur one another on ... but onto what?

Hebrews 10:24b (NIV) ...spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Authentic community is visibly seen and identified by acts of love and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24 (NLT) Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.

Authentic community is deciding to put down roots.

Being committed into a church family is where we can and should experience authentic community.

We have a much better chance when life throws us a curve ball to stay on track and not swerve off course when we are in a life-giving circle of friends that care for us.

This is why it is important to make an intentional decision to put down our spiritual roots deep into a local church family. **God never designed us to live life in isolation but in community.**

This is why a **sense of belonging** best happens through supportive and accountable relationships.

Hebrews 10:25 (GNB) Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another....

One way God desires us to grow is through **mutual encouragement** and **accountability**.

In the Yosemite National Park in California, there are massive trees called Sequoia Redwoods. These trees are 2.5 metres up to 6 metres in

diameter, and some as tall as 115 metres high. Mature Sequoia roots are on average 1.5 metres deep but can spread up to 75 metres wide. The root system is massive but very shallow in relation to the size of the tree above ground level.

Redwood forests are known as some of the most stable forests around. **When these trees are planted in clumps, the roots become tangled, interlocked and connected** underneath the ground, which holds each tree tight and secure in times of adverse conditions.

If we are not deeply rooted and connected into a spiritual family, we may become vulnerable and potentially drift away when trouble comes to us.

Genuine loving relationships provide the care, support and context we need to stay on course so life transformation can take place.

To practically put down our roots into a local church family is achieved by committing to three basic commitments:

- **Membership:** committed to Jesus and to the Local Church.

Ephesians 2:19 (NIV) 'Consequently', you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.

- **Maturity:** committed to grow spiritually into fully devoted followers of Jesus.

1 Timothy 4:7 (NIV) Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourselves to be Godly.

- **Ministry:** committed to using our gifts and abilities to serve God and His people.

1 Peter 4:10 (NIV) Each one should use whatever gift he (or she) has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Why are these commitments needed?

Because we become what we are committed to!

Lesson Three

Developing Lasting Friendships!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV) “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work; ¹⁰ if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up.”

Loneliness causes much heartache and despair in our society. No one wants to be lonely! **Everybody needs a friend.**

God put Adam in the Garden by himself and said, “*It’s not good for man to be alone.*” So He created Eve. We all need close friends because God created us for relationships. The Bible says, “*Two are better than one...*”

Real friendships are not accidental - they are **intentional!** We must take the initiative to reach out to others.

Proverbs 18:24 (nkjv) “A man who has friends must himself be friendly.”

The book of Proverbs identifies six characteristics of a true friend and if we can apply these into our lives we too will develop lasting friendships.

1. Friends are Committed.

Proverbs 18:24 (TLB) “There are ‘friends’ who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

(GNB) “...but some friends are more loyal than brothers.”

We should concentrate on quality and not quantity when it comes to friendships. We can waste a lot of energy with superficial relationships.

Friendships last when they’re built on **mutual commitment** and that takes effort! How many people know that we are committed to them?

2. Friends are Considerate.

Proverbs 17:9 (TLB) “Love forgets mistakes, nagging about them parts the best of friends.”

Good friends will accept us warts and all and forgive our mistakes and won't kick us when we are down.

If we want to know who our friends are, just make a mistake and see who is still around to support you. **Real friends are aware of our weaknesses and help in spite of them.**

To show consideration towards others means to show an **attitude of acceptance**. To develop long lasting friendships, there must be commitment and consideration given to one another.

3. Friends keep Confidentiality.

To be confidential means to be trustworthy.

Proverbs 11:13 (NIV) “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.”

Proverbs 16:28b (NIV) “...Gossip separates close friends.”

The quickest way to kill a friendship is to betray confidence. When a friend shares something confidentially with us, we need to honour them and refrain from broadcasting their secret.

However, if the information is of an illegal nature or where it may result in someone self-harming, then reporting this to the appropriate people or authorities is necessary.

4. Friends are Candid.

Proverbs 27:5-6a (NIV) “Better is open rebuke, than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted...”

Hebrews 10:24 (ESV) “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

A true friend will level with us. Even when it is tough to hear and hard to accept. We all have blind spots and we need someone who cares about us to say, *“You're blowing it!”* A genuine friend is someone who can level with us and say, *“You're making a big mistake!”*

Proverbs 24:26 (GNB) “An honest answer is the sign of a true friendship.”

Always compliment your friends in public and only correct them in private through a loving attitude. If you want to lose a friend quickly, just start correcting and judging them publicly.

We cannot bring correction to our friends until we have earned the right to correct them. That right comes when we have **mutual transparency**. Trust is **not** automatically given!

Proverbs 27:9 (NLT) “The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense.”

Proverbs 11:14 (NKJV) “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.”

We need a circle of friends to keep us accountable from making bad and unwise decisions.

5. Friends are Constructive.

Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

Genuine friends encourage, motivate and guide each other onto grow.

Proverbs 12:26 (NIV) “A righteous man chooses his companions carefully.”

Some people are just plain negative and full of criticism. **Don't let the dissenters be the deciders!**

I Corinthians 15:33 (NIV) “Don't be misled, bad company corrupt good character.”

We become like the people we spend most of our time with!

6. Friends are Consistent.

A true friend is in our corner and can be trusted. They are dependable.

Proverbs 17:17a (MSG) “Friends love through all kinds of weather...”

David and Jonathan had every reason to be jealous of each other. Jonathan was the son of King Saul and he was next in line to become king. David, the guy God picked to be the next king was Jonathon's best friend. Jonathon had every reason to be jealous of David, but he wasn't. They were good friends who were **considerate** and **committed** to each other.

David had Jonathan. Jesus had the disciples. Paul had Barnabus. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We need friends because: “*two are (always) stronger than one*”

- Who are you committed to?
- Are you considerate?
- Are you confidential?
- Are you willing to be candid and constructive with your friends?
- Are you willing for your friends to be candid and constructive with you?
- Are you consistent and dependable?

We are cared for best and we care best when we are connected into a small group of friends. A small group environment is a great setting to create and develop new friendships.

We need genuine friends in our lives to avoid loneliness, but ultimately, **without a meaningful relationship with Christ, loneliness will never completely disappear.**

Lesson Four

Stereotyping Leads to Prejudice

In Bible times it was common for Jewish men to pray every morning, “*Lord, I thank You that I am not a gentile, a slave or a woman*”.

Stereotyping is a lazy way of lumping together everyone from a particular class or people group with certain ways of doing things. Although something may generally be true of a group of people, it is not specifically true of each person in that group.

Such stereotypes as “*all Irish people are dopy,*” “*all Italians are in the mafia,*” or “*all teenagers are rebellious*” only reveal a blind acceptance of an uninformed mind who generalises as being the rule.

By nature we judge according to outward appearances.

1 Samuel 16:7 (NIV) “For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Prejudice is a perception problem.

Prejudice divides, isolates, and ostracizes people. Prejudice is the mark of an ignorant mind that perceives itself to be enlightened.

Prejudice thinks it understands people and their actions before acquiring any actual first-hand knowledge, or before consulting with all the facts.

Prejudice is mostly rooted in ignorance.

Galatians 3:28 (NIV) “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Acts 10:34-35 (NIV) Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right.”

From God’s perspective, no one is more privileged or superior to anyone else.

When we allow our **differences** to separate us, which can prevent us from reaching certain people groups with the gospel, then we are opposing God not assisting Him!

It is our natural inclination to feel uncomfortable around people who are **different** to us, and to gravitate toward those who are similar to us.

Australian multiculturalism is a term, which recognises and celebrates Australia's cultural diversity. It accepts and respects the right of all Australians to express and share their individual cultural heritage within the basic structures and values of Australian democracy.

However, it is clear that when multiculturalism is promoted within the context of a congregation, this can be the nucleolus for barriers to be formed between different cultural groups.

Potentially, different ethnicity's can be tempted to stay within their own people group and not cross the cultural divide under the facade of multiculturalism.

A Local Church should be of one 'Kingdom' culture!

The challenge for every local church is to be inclusive of every ethnicity that is represented in its community.

Emphasizing one ethnic group makes the church irrelevant to other people groups. Such a church only builds walls, instead of building bridges.

The Church and society need to cry out loud against prejudice, discrimination, segregation and racism.

- **Prejudice** judges a man's character by his outward appearance.
- **Discrimination** deprives a person of the right to have.
- **Segregation** deprives a person of the right to belong.
- **Stereotyping** deprives a person of the right to be.
- **Racism** deprives a person of the right to birth.

It is ironic that the worst differences between races are exaggerated when brown and pinkish people are labelled "*black and white*." Those very terms begin to shape our thinking between two extremes. **They emphasize the differences in people, rather than the similarities.**

There is a lesson we learn from Peter's vision in *Acts 10:1-35*.

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." (vs: 34-35)

Race makes no difference to God. God shows no favouritism to any race that assumes it is superior to another.

There is one ***distinctive characteristic*** of Jesus' ministry. It is His incredible ability to bring good news to poor souls by breaking through the barriers of social status.

Jesus understood (*and so must we*) that there is something much worse than being without eye or limb. Being ***separate*** from God is a greater tragedy!

Jesus was blind to leprosy, so to speak; He didn't see a leper, He saw a man! **We as a church must represent this same mindset of Jesus!**

Psalms 147:3 (NIV) "He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds."

Isaiah 61:1 (NIV) "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."

People knew Jesus saw beyond their label and was moved with compassion to call life from death, hope from despair and friendship from isolation.

We must show the ***way*** of Jesus, by being an ***authentic*** Christ follower in the pursuit of bringing those far away from God back to Him!

Jesus built a community of faith, which was to be inclusive and not exclusive – a community motivated by love and acceptance.

2 Peter 3:9b (NCV) "(God) does not want anyone to be lost, but he wants all people to change their hearts and lives."

Galatians 6:2 (MSG) "Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law."

James 1:27 (MSG) "Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight."

1 Corinthians 9:22 (TLB) "Whatever a person is like, I try to find common ground with him so that he will let me tell him about Christ and let Christ save him."

Individually and corporately as a Church, we must reach beyond our world and care for the whole world.

John 17:18 (MSG) “In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world.”

Mark 16:15 (NCV) Jesus said to His followers, “Go everywhere in the world, and tell the Good News to everyone.”

Psalms 67:2 (TLB) “Send us around the world with the news of Your saving power and Your eternal plan for all mankind.”

Lesson Five

The Early Church Model of Community

It is interesting to note that we know very little about the programs or ministries of the church in the first century.

We know from the book of Acts that the early church grew rapidly from 120 in the upper room, to 3000 people who were baptized on the very first day of the church at Pentecost.

Then a further 5000 (*predominately men*) plus women and children were added. In just a matter of months it grew to around 10,000 people. Now that is church growth!

Acts 21:20 (NIV) "When they heard this they praised God and said to Paul, You see brother how many thousands (GK 'urias') of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law."

The word used in the Greek "*urias*" literally means "*tens of thousands*" Jews had believed in Jesus Christ.

Acts 21 is about 20 years after the day of Pentecost. Therefore, in 20-25 years the Jerusalem church had grown from about 120 people up to 100,000 people.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states there were somewhere between 100,000-120,000 congregational members. A number of historians say that at that time Jerusalem was probably a city of a 200-250 thousand people.

So here we have a church that grew up to 100,000+ in a city of about 250,000 - nearly half the city had become believers.

This explains why the Sanhedrin accused Peter and John by saying, "*You filled all Jerusalem with your teaching,*" *Acts 5:28 (NIV)*. It was literally a fact that everywhere you went in Jerusalem there were Christians.

This rapid growth of the early church raises at least two questions:

1. Where did all these people meet together?
2. How were they all cared for?

The early Church grew larger and smaller at the same time.

Acts 5:42 (NIV) “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Notice that there are two types of meetings.

1. They met in the ‘*Temple courts*’ - a large gathering.
2. From ‘*house to house*’ - small community groups in homes.

Bible historians tell us that Solomon’s courts were enormous. They didn’t sit down for worship in those days - they stood. But Solomon’s courts couldn’t handle the thousands. So did they have multi-services to cater for their 100,000+ congregation?

Studies have shown that the average person knows 67 people in a church, whether that church has 100 or 1,000 or 10,000.

We don’t have to know everyone in the church to feel a sense of belonging in community but we do need to know some. This is why we need reinforce our small group ministry with a new sense of purpose.

In the first 300 years of the early church, most of their church gathered together in community in homes. They met in homes at Corinth and in homes at Colossi and in homes at Rome.

These small community groups were core for the church to gather together.

Acts 2:46 (NIV) “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”

Acts 16:40 (NIV) “After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.”

Acts 20:20 (NIV) “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”

Romans 16:5 (NIV) “Greet also the church that meets at their house...”

1 Corinthians 16:19 (NIV) “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.”

Colossians 4:15 (NIV) “Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

As a church, we desire to be large enough to make a difference but small enough to really care. But how can we do this? By:

Building a Small Groups Paradigm.

In a church our size the only way to ensure that authentic relationships and genuine community takes place is through continually getting smaller through healthy small community or connect groups.

Our goal is that the majority of congregational care at ACC will be achieved through our small group ministry. Therefore, embracing a new paradigm of small groups is vital in creating and maintaining authentic community.

We gain a sense of belonging when we are a part of a small group. We feel like *“Here’s a group that knows me, when I’m not there, I’m missed, and when I’m sick they’ll genuinely care for me.”*

Small groups must be a primary ministry in our church and not just an add-on. We need both large and small gatherings of believers.

Lesson Six

Rows are Good, but Circles are Better

We were created for community and God desires for each one of us to experience the benefits of authentic relationships in a true Biblical Community.

Pastor and author Andy Stanley coined the phrase, “*Community best happens in circles and not in rows.*” And “*There are things that can happen face to face that will never happen shoulder to shoulder.*”

Face-to-face community (*circles*) are more effective than shoulder-to-shoulder (*rows*), when it comes to being connected in authentic community. Rows are good and serve a purpose but circles are better.

We need rows. Rows help us connect with God because when we're sitting in rows e.g. in church, we can just focus on God, focus on worship, focus on the preaching or teaching of God's Word. We can do rows without anyone else being connected.

Life is better connected. The Christian life was always meant by God to be done together. In our church we are good at rows, and we are trying to get better at circles (*small groups*)!

Circles help us stay connected to God and to others.

This is why we need to be in a circle – *a small group of supporting people around us.* **We need people in our lives that are there for us.** We receive encouragement and support in a circled community.

Jesus' ministry shows the power of circles and the power of community. He preached to large groups of people in rows but in the **circle** is where Jesus built authentic community.

It was this circle of men that changed the world at that time. They were not perfect. We see denial, anger, unbelief and we see the disciples questioning Jesus, but Jesus still invited them into His circle.

When we are in a circle - a small community group - we have permission to just be ourselves, to show up and ask the questions that are on our hearts without the fear of being judged!

Circles provide the context for relationships.

The Christian life is not solitary. God calls us to live out our lives with Him in the context of relationships.

One of the primary purposes of a Small Group structure is to provide a context where we can establish real and lasting relationships. Life change best happens through supporting and accountable relationships.

The One-Another's of the New Testament

- Be at peace with one another (*Mark 9:50*)
- Love one another (*John 13:34*)
- Be devoted to one another and honour one another (*Romans 12:10*)
- Live in harmony with one another (*Romans 12:16*)
- Stop passing judgment on one another (*Romans 14:13*)
- Accept one another (*Romans 15:7*)
- Instruct one another (*Romans 15:14*)
- Greet one another (*Romans 16:16*)
- Serve one another (*Galatians 5:13*)
- Carry each other's burden (*Galatians 6:2*)
- Be patient, bearing with one another in love (*Ephesians 4:2*)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (*Ephesians 4:32*)
- Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (*Ephesians 5:19*)
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (*Ephesians 5:21*)
- In humility consider others better than yourselves (*Philippians 2:3*)
- Teach one another and admonish one another (*Colossians 3:16*)
- Encourage one another (*1 Thessalonians 4:18*)
- Build each other up (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*)
- Spur one another on toward love and good deeds (*Hebrews 10:24*)
- Do not slander one another (*James 4:11*)
- Do not grumble against one another (*James 5:9*)
- Confess your sins to one another (*James 5:16*)
- Pray for one another (*James 5:16*)
- Clothe yourself with humility toward one another (*1 Peter 5:5*)

A small group circle is an environment where Christians can gather together to care for one another through friendship, encouragement and practical expressions of love and kindness.

People need to feel they belong!

Close caring relationships are best built in a small group community where there is an attitude of caring for one another.

Involvement in a small group of Christ-followers makes an excellent contribution to our personal need for authentic community and a sense of belonging.

However, community doesn't just *happen* - it has to be *intentional*.

Lesson Seven

Overcoming Offence

Each of us has been responsible for offending others, as well as having been offended ourselves.

Often, offences are little more than minor misunderstandings. At other times, they are severe and long lasting. Sometimes offences are unintentional and at other times they are deliberate and malicious.

Regardless of the nature of the offence, the Bible teaches us to respond to this problem in a righteous and proper manner.

Defining offence.

When we are offended we can experience hurt feelings, resentment, anger, contempt and personal outrage. Offences are usually the result of being unfairly treated, or feeling that our rights have been violated.

The word **offence** is found in the Scriptures. It originally meant '**a trap or a snare.**' It simply means a **stumbling block** or anything, which can become a hindrance or obstacle.

Offences are inevitable. Jesus stated in *Luke 17:1a (NKJV)* He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come," We are all guilty offending others. "*For in many things we offend all,*" **James 3:2 (KJV)**

Common causes of offence.

- **The Tongue**

The most common source of offence is the tongue. The tongue can be used creatively or destructively and, sadly, the tongue can inflict injury.

James 3:2 (KJV) "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man."

Proverbs 18:21 (KJV) "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

James 3:8-9 (NIV) "But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness."

Since none of us have reached perfection, we all tend to offend others with our mouths.

- **An Unforgiving Attitude**

When we fail to exercise a forgiving attitude, offences often result. To hold a grudge, or to nurse a grievance, or keep a record of wrongs is a common cause of offence. For this reason, Jesus admonished us to forgive: “... *if you have anything against anyone, forgive him...*” **Mark 11:25.**

In fact, Jesus told Peter that we are responsible to forgive our brother up to as many as 490 offences (*Matthew 18:22*) basically, to live with a **permanent attitude** of forgiveness.

One of the greatest safeguards against offence is the willingness to **forgive** and to **forget** quickly. This is at the very heart of Christian grace.

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV) “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

- **Being Overly Sensitive**

Some people are just too quick to be offended, even for the slightest reason. The Bible refers to some who are easily offended.

Some offences are blatant and deliberate and people are offended for obvious reasons. But all too often, some people are prone toward being **overly sensitive**. They view every breach as grounds for offence.

It is good to be sensitive, but not to the point of being overly suspicious, critical, or temperamental. Undue sensitivity is imbalance, which needs to be corrected. A failure to do so is a common cause of offence.

- **Insensitivity to Others**

Some people are insensitive to the feelings of others. They tend to be rude, pushy and indifferent to the sensitivities of others. They often lack tact and courtesy.

However, God’s love “*does not behave rudely*” **1 Corinthians 13:5.**

- **A Failure to Yield our Rights**

If we have not yielded our rights to God, we may be offended if they are violated or ignored. When we go through life expecting everything to go our way, we become candidates for offence.

The opposite attitude and behaviour is meekness. Where our rights are yielded and we become more concerned with another's welfare.

Paul captured this thought when he stated, *“Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others.” 1 Corinthians 10:24 (NLT)*

The results of offences.

Offences can have many undesirable consequences and detrimental side effects:

- They generate **resentments** and deepen a root of **bitterness**.
- They contribute to an atmosphere of **hostility** and **tension**.
- They reinforce an attitude of **distrust** and **suspicion**.
- They develop an **unforgiving attitude**, which is quick to see the faults in others and equally as quick to condemn.
- They generate **backbiting** and **gossip**, which further contribute to the cycle of offence by involving others in the offence.
- They build a **critical, judgemental attitude** towards those who have wronged us.
- They tend to **harden** our **hearts** against others and God.

How should we respond when offended?

Overcoming offences can be a **difficult challenge**. One of the problems associated with offence is our reluctance and failure to face up to them and to handle them in a Godly manner.

Proverbs 18:19 (TLB) “It is harder to win back the friendship of an offended brother than to capture a fortified city. His anger shuts you out like iron bars.”

The best way to heal offences is to follow God's directions and willingly submit to His counsel. **God's Word provides clear guidelines for dealing with and healing offences.**

Matthew 18:15 (NIV) “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.”

• Step One

*“Moreover **IF** your brother sins against you...”*

The first step in handling offences is to **determine whether or not an offence has actually occurred**. As we have seen, some people are too sensitive. They tend to be too easily offended for the slightest reason. Often, minor offences are completely innocent and unintentional.

In these instances, it is best to examine our own attitudes, which may need to be challenged and to allow the love of Christ to prevail, realising *“love will cover a multitude of sins.” 1 Peter 4:8b (NKJV)*

- **Step Two**

“...GO and tell him his fault between you and him ALONE.”

If a real offence has occurred, commit yourself to approach the person alone. One of the greatest errors in handling offences is the tendency to involve others. This only complicates and magnifies the offence.

We must approach the other person privately and deal with the offence in a considerate and Christlike manner. This is a safeguard against widening the offence.

- **Step Three**

“If he hears you, you have GAINED your brother.”

Our primary objective should be to win our brother. We must earnestly desire reconciliation.

We must not go in a harsh, unforgiving, or judgmental spirit, but in a sincere spirit of meekness and love. We must go with an attitude, which is **quick to forgive** and **ready to restore**.

Therefore, we must carefully **examine our hearts and motives before we attempt to handle an offence**.

- **Step Four**

Matthew 5:23-24 (NKJV) “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

It may be that we have not been offended, but that we have offended others, or each party has been responsible for offending each other.

If this is the case, we then carry the **responsibility**, according to the Scriptures, to take the **initiative** and to go to those we have offended and **seek reconciliation** and **forgiveness**.

This requires a confession of our faults and wrongdoing, which has caused offence to another. **A failure to do this will only result in the offence continuing.**

- **Step Five**

The real goal is endeavouring to walk in a way, which does not cause offences in the first place. Our goal should be as Paul who stated in:

1 Corinthians 10:32 (NKJV) "Give no offence, either to the Jews or the Greeks or to the church of God."

We should strive to avoid any action, attitude or word, which would needlessly cause an offence to another.

To do this, we must decide in our hearts to guard against all possible offences before they occur!

If we follow God's prescription for this problem, we can successfully heal offences whenever they occur.

If you are aware of any existing offence, you should commit yourself to go to the person involved and seek forgiveness. **This will require a repentant attitude on your part and a sincere desire to seek reconciliation and healing.**

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