



The tribe of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do

Issachar Ministries UK seeks to be a people who understand the times, listen to the Lord and know what should be done

Resourcing for Prayer Network

Practical Help (3) A Changing Community?

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This analysis of community and its development we hope will be helpful to you in your groups

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When we think of communities our immediate assumption is that they are groups of people who know each other intimately and are in regular contact with each other. We can value and appreciate this physical relationship and contact they have with each other but is this all there is to community? As Christians we see community as the basic core structure of our faith - worshipping and praying together, sharing food and supporting each other in a similar way to the Early Church described in the book of Acts and other places in the New Testament.

Virtual Community?

With the growth of technology and the extensive use of the internet especially by the younger generation 'Virtual Communities' are evolving. On their Facebooks and other social media young people boast about the number of 'Friends' they have - although many are people they have never met. They number their 'Friends' in hundreds or even thousands. Their links with these friends can be very tenuous and sometimes can even be destructive. Virtual communities can be abusive but they can also be supportive and for some they may be a means of meeting a partner for life.

From Individual to Community

During the early days of Christianity (and especially when persecution started) the Monastic movement arose in which individuals separated themselves in order to live holy lives in isolation from a contaminating world. But even they found the need for some links with each other and soon developed communities which were self-sufficient. In the first and second century they were a strong force to be reckoned with in some parts of the world. Orders like those of St Benedict and the Carmelites as well as the Franciscans and many others were established in the Middle Ages. These became supports for the whole community around them and gave rise to our more modern understanding of the word 'community'.

Everyone needs community and a relationship with others in one way or another. Although many are now finding this on-line, there are also other ways in which the Christian community is developing - one of which is in the growth of small house groups.

Definition of a community

Understanding and defining community can become very complex and there are various ways in which the term is currently used. The four most common are:

- a group of people of any size, gender and age living in a specific locality, and with a common cultural and historical heritage or other particular characteristic.
- a particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants: *eg a rural community.*
- a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests but existing within a larger society: *eg the church, the business community; an academic community of teachers or students.*
- a body of nations or states unified by common interests and treaties.

You may be able to think of more and will see that each can be applied to Church and Christianity. But thinking is also constantly being renewed as fresh insights come to light - German theologians last century defined communities as '*Gemeinschaft*' and '*Gesellschaft*' with differences in association and relationships which have also become common sociological terms.

Neighbourhood or Gathered Church?

Additionally our practical understanding of 'church' has changed over the years and it is still changing. Until the time of the Reformation, all churches (and other institutions) worked on the 'parish or neighbourhood' system, then the Nonconformists brought in the 'gathered' church system where like-minded believers came together. This concept spread worldwide especially where there is no established national church. And now with the growth of ecumenism the gathering together of those with a common interest is the most usual form of community for small groups which are not specifically linked with an identifiable church.

How does this help Small Groups?

Understanding a potted history of community and how it operates could give a helpful background to the numerous small groups coming into being. The effect of culture on the small groups is also important and will govern operations but next time we will look at the ties that bind us together as a group to give us that distinctive and effective edge and also how we relate to others to give us the support that is needed.

Please share any comments that would be helpful to others.

*This paper come to you as part of the Issachar Ministries Resourcing for Prayer e-mail in March 2015
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