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Communities, Organizations, and People



by Stuart Fowler

A shallow and limited understanding of community is a fundamental problem in modern Western society. Vincent Donovan, a missionary in Tanzania for seventeen years, speaking of his experience before going to Africa (1979:141-143), says, "I had never encountered or experienced a truly fully-fledged human community The strange, changing, mobile, temporary, disappearing communities of America can leave one without any experience of what community is."

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Community and Person

Our understanding of community is inseparable from our perception of the human person. The comparison of African and Western views of the human person developed by Menkiti (1979) helpfully focuses attention on this issue (see Figure 1). He argues that in the dominant Western view individuality defines the person. A consequence of this is that society is defined by the collective will of individual persons. By contrast, traditional Africans think that the social group defines the person; what is central to the human person is not individuality but membership in a community.

The dominant Western view of the person makes communal life dependent on and a product of the will of individual persons; communities come into being through this collective will of individuals and may cease to be through this same collective will. An individual may attach herself to a community or detach herself from a community without affecting her personhood. Personhood is defined by personal individuality.

In contrast, in the dominant African view, personal life depends on and is a product of the community; individuals become persons through membership in a community and cease to be persons if detached from the community. Personhood is defined by communal life.

In short, for those nurtured in Western individualism, communal life is created by the collective endeavor of individuals as an enhancement of human life. In African communalism, communal life is the very foundation and center of human life from which the human person emerges.

African communalism challenges Western individualism to recognize the depth of communal roots in the created order of human life. It rejects the individualistic reduction of communality to the status of a social artifact, a reduction that prevents any in-depth experience of communal life.

On the other hand, in its all-embracing communalism, the African tradition, by suppressing human individuality, produces its own distortion. In African communalism the meaning of human individuality is radically subordinated to communal life.

Ironically, by obscuring human individuality African communalism prevents a healthy development of communal life itself. By demanding that human life be enclosed within a single all-encompassing community, it shuts the door on the development of the rich communal diversity through which alone the communal potential of human life is fulfilled. Defined by membership in one community, the human person, at best, can be only a marginal participant in any other community. We will return to this later.

In a similar way, Western individualism, by obscuring human communality, not only blocks an effective experience of communality but suppresses the effective expression of human individuality. Lacking an experience of authentic community, the Western world finds pale substitutes for communal life in organized group activities. These communal substitutes, in the interests of organizational efficiency and control, press the human person into organizational moulds of conformity that inhibit individuality.

In schools and colleges, substituting organized activity for community puts students in a series of neatly labeled boxes that take no account of individuality. Individuality is that which makes each person unique and, by its very nature, defies categorization. Yet our passion for efficient organization, for defining and classifying, and our obsession with standardized testing and supposedly objective measurement, leads us to persist in organizing learning around generalized categories of learners. If a person's individuality makes him uncomfortable with the box in which we place him, we attribute this discomfort to that person's failure in social adjustment or personality development.

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communal conformity.*

All this is a direct result of the substitution of organized group activities for communal life that is forced on us by the prevailing individualism. Only an authentic communal life, grounded in human personhood, can provide a social environment that can nourish the individuality of the human person.

At this point, a word of caution about the current interest in learning styles is appropriate. Insofar as it alerts us to the many ways of learning, the learning styles movement is a healthy development. However, if it leads us to assume that we do justice to the learning styles of our students by assigning them to a new set of boxes, each with a "learning style" label attached, the result will be to reinforce an individuality-denying conformity. It may well be useful to identify types of learning styles, but this cannot do justice to individuality in learning. Individuality in learning means that each student has a pattern of learning unique to that student, a pattern that cannot be reduced to a generalized type.

Neither the individualism of modern Western society nor the communalism of African tradition provides an adequate basis to develop either individuality or communal life because each is based on a faulty view of the human person. Individualism locates the identity of the person within the individual person, qualified as a "rational individual" or a "social individual" or an "historical individual" or a "believing individual" or a "decision-making individual." As Menkiti (1979:157) puts it, ". . . most Western views of

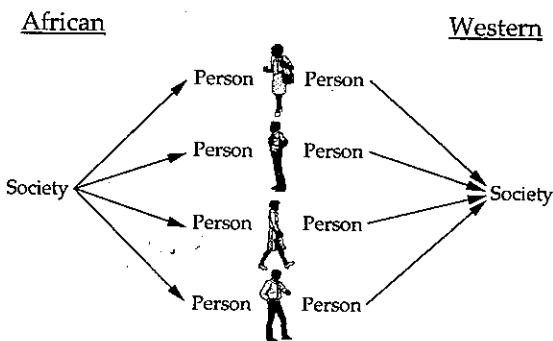


Fig. 1
Based on Menkiti [1979]

man abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entities aspiring to the description 'man' must have." Communalism locates human identity within the human community. To quote Menkiti again (1979:157), on the traditional African view, ". . . man is defined by reference to the environing community. As John S. Mbiti notes, the African view of the person can be summed up in this statement: 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. . . ."

The truth is that human identity comes neither from within the individual person nor from within the human community. It comes from the creative word of God, which both gives us our identity and maintains that identity by grace in spite of all our efforts to erase it (1 Cor 12:12-27). All human actions, thoughts, and words are in the nature of response to this definitive Word. Any attempt to define the human person in categories of human thought confuses the human response with the defining divine Word (Gen 1:26-30; 2:7; 1 Peter 1:23).

It is even misleading to say that the heart, as the religious core of the human person, defines the person. There is nothing within ourselves that defines us. We are defined in the infinitely rich multi-faceted complex of human personhood by the Lord our God, who in his grace forms us and in his grace redeems us.

Within this multi-faceted complex, individuality and communality appear as complementary facets of the human person. Scripture asserts equally individuality and communality. The human person stands before God both in a unique individuality (John 21:20,21) and also in an indissoluble communality (1 Cor 12:12-27). We are defined neither by our individuality nor by our communality.

To state this thesis without using confessional language, the human person defies definition. We can describe and analyze the multi-faceted complex of personhood, but as soon as we attempt to define the person in terms of one or another feature of this rich complex, whether as individual or as community, or in any other way, we introduce a reductive distortion into our understanding.²

The Complementarity of Individuality and Communality

The categories "individual" and "community" in human experiences, therefore, are best

understood in terms of complementary qualities of the human person. Rather than saying that a human person is an individual, it is preferable to say that the human person has individuality. When we speak of individuality we are speaking of one of numerous qualities of that person, not defining the person. Similarly, we can speak of the person as having the quality of communality. Communal life is not created by human individuals; it is the expression of the communality that belongs to all human persons.

These two qualities, individuality and communality, complement each other. Neither can develop normally without the other. A healthy communal life will nurture the individuality of its members and a healthy individuality looks for fulfillment in communal life.

The analogy of the body that Paul uses illustrates well this complementarity. On the one hand, a member of the body can serve the communal life well only as it functions in accordance with its own individuality. The hand that tries to function as an ear or the mouth that tries to function as an eye will only disrupt the functioning of the body as a communal whole. The body can function as a healthy community only as each member functions in accordance with its own individuality. To reduce the members to mere communal ciphers is to destroy the healthy functioning of the body. On the other hand, the individuality of the hand, or the ear, or the mouth, or the eye can be fulfilled only in the context of the communal life of the body. A hand can be an effective hand or an eye an effective eye only as it functions within the communality of the body.

To take but one example of this interplay of individuality and communality in modern life, we may think of a jazz band. The freedom for individual expression on the part of the performer is a feature of the jazz musical tradition. Each performer is able to put the indelible imprint of his individuality on each performance. Yet this expression of individuality is possible only as the performer functions in communal interaction with the band as a musical community.

The advocate of individualism will sometimes point to the majestic strength of a lone tree as an illustration of virtues that can be achieved only when we stand alone. Yet the image is deceptive. The tree does not stand alone. Its life is inextricably inter-

twined not only with the earth in which its roots are embedded but with a multitude of other organisms in the same ecosystem. Not only in the case of humans, but in the whole creation, God has made a world in which individuality and communality are inextricably interwoven.

Authentic communal life, then, does not force people into a communal conformity. It does not produce communal clones. On the contrary, it provides the one environment in which individuality can flourish.

It is worth noting at this point that the mix of individuality and communality appear to differ from person to person. For some, communality is dominant. For them, strong, supportive communal structures are important for personal development. Lack of this support leaves them crippled, unable to develop their potential as gifted human persons.

For others, individuality is dominant. For these, the opportunity to be innovative, experimental, pioneering, to move out on their own, is crucial for personal development. Lack of these opportunities leaves them repressed, frustrated, bored and, often, ultimately rebellious. They become rebellious because the God-given integrity of their personhood is being denied.

In this connection, it is all too easy in school and college to deal with the rebellious student as the guilty party requiring stern, if loving, discipline. This may be the case, of course. However, it may also be that the basic fault lies with those of us who exercise authority over the student. The Scriptural injunction “. . . fathers, do not provoke your children to anger . . .” (Eph 6:3 NRSV) surely applies to all who exercise authority.

When students rebel we need, as teachers, to examine our own practice, as well as that of our students. In particular, we need to ask whether our concern with order and control has led us to suppress the students' God-given individuality. Rebellion is undoubtedly a symptom of human fallenness, but we always need to ask seriously: Whose fallenness? It is dangerous self-righteousness on the part of those in authority to assume that all rebellion is a symptom of the fallenness of those over whom they have authority.

The prevailing individualism of modern society tends to blind us to the potential of expressions of communality that challenge our individualistic

organizational arrangements. One of these expressions of communality that is important for the school is the peer group. Because of the lack of a nurturing communal environment in modern society, the teenage peer group tends to become a defensive mechanism that protects the identity of its members at the cost of an individuality-suppressing peer conforming.

Yet, in itself, it is a normal expression of human communality. A school, or college, that functions as an authentic community would provide a nurturing environment in which the peer group could function as an authentic component of communal life, bringing rich benefits not only to the members of

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the peer group but to the whole educational community.

Communal Differentiation

It is characteristic of communalism that it thinks of community as encompassing the whole life of its members. Different functions are distinguished and a greater or lesser measure of freedom is given to the individual member, but these are distinctions and freedoms within one life-encompassing community.

It could hardly be otherwise if we operate on communalist assumptions. What is more surprising is that individualist notions of community tend in the same direction. So Bellah *et al.* (1985:72) regard it as a necessary characteristic of a community that it “attempts to be an inclusive whole.” Any structured social relationship that lacks this inclusive quality they call a “lifestyle enclave.”

Underlying this strong drive for communal inclusivity is the human desire to experience wholeness in social relations. In itself it is a healthy desire. However, this desire takes an idolatrous direction when we look to the structure of human relations for its fulfillment. It is the Creator alone who gives wholeness to human life. To assume that the structure of social relations will provide this

wholeness is to attribute to the creature what belongs to the Creator.

Once again, to restate this without the confessional language: human life achieves an authentic wholeness only as it is directed outward, away from itself. The human person finds self-fulfillment only as life is directed towards a source of meaning beyond the self, whether as individual or as communal self. It is only in this directedness away from the individual and communal self that the diversity of human life is brought together as an inclusive whole. This inclusive wholeness is expressed in human society in a rich diversity of communal types, with no one type dominating.

In this connection it is useful to distinguish between *constitutive* and *expressive*³ community. Constitutive community, which constitutes the foundations of our communality, belongs to the deepest spiritual roots of the human person. There are just two such communities, the creational community in Adam and the redemptive community in Christ (Acts 17:26; Rom 5:12-8; 12:4,5; 1 Cor 12:12-3; 15:21-2).

Christians belong to both these communities. By creation we are one with all fellow humans in Adam. By redemption we are one with all the redeemed in Christ. In our nurturing of the communal life we have in Christ we should never forget the communal bond we have with all in Adam.

Authentic Christian communal life, therefore, will always be open-ended. It will be open to the world around, responsive to that world and equipping its members to go out into that world as participants in the life of the Adamic community. We are not called to establish closed Christian communities in the world, but to penetrate as salt into the world. Our Christian communities deserve the label "Christian" only so far as they facilitate penetrating this world in keeping with Jesus' words to his Father concerning his disciples in all ages: "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

It is valid to maintain Christian schools and colleges as manifestations of our community in Christ. They are not valid if they function within a closed Christian educational network. To be authentic they must be open to other educational communities in the world around us. We do not maintain our Christian integrity by isolating ourselves from the world around. Rather, such isolation denies our calling and falsifies our witness.

While the spiritual community in Adam and in Christ is fundamental, it is not enough for the realization of community in human experience. This realization of communal life requires the expression of community in concrete historical situations.

"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' yet do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" (James 2:15-6). The roots of communal life are embedded in the spirituality of the human person; its fruits appear in the diverse concrete relations of human society. This concrete expression of communal life is what I call "expressive" community.

In this concrete expression communal life is a differentiated life producing a diversity of communal types. Each communal type is characterized by a shared life with a distinctive focus that constitutes the communal bond.

So, for example, we have the family community in which kinship constitutes the communal bond; we have the church community in which cultic life constitutes the communal bond; we have a commercial community constituted by a bond of economic exchange; a social community constituted by a bond of shared enjoyment; and we have the school community constituted by a bond of structured learning.

To be an effective community, communal life in each of these differentiated communities needs to be focused on the shared life that constitutes the communal bond.

In the school community, from grade school to college, there will be moments of social life, when communal life focuses on shared enjoyment, and moments of cultic life, when communal life is focused on communal devotion. There will also be an economic dimension to school life and a sense of kinship among the members of the school community.

However, all these moments will be secondary and subordinate to the structured learning that is the heart of the school. It is the shared life of structured learning that constitutes the school community.

Because of this differentiation of communal life in its concrete expression, it is a mistake to expect the school, or the church, to fulfil all the communal needs of human life. These needs are met only by a complementary diversity of communities, with each one functioning in accordance with its distinctive character.

The common use of the term "community" for an undifferentiated aggregate of individuals leads, at best, to an impoverished experience of communal life by its failure to recognize the rich diversity of communal life. In education this is reflected in the fact that the most common use of the term "community" in educational discussion juxtaposes "school" and "community." The primary question then becomes how the school functions in relation to "the community," rather than the functioning of the school as a community. The communal character of the school itself is obscured in the process. At best, communal life in the school is only an offshoot of the life of this larger community.

The identity of this entity described as "the community" often remains vague. A recent work, *The Community as Classroom*, attempts to define "the community" as "a complex network of people, places, and times" (Gillis, 1992:155). Reading between the lines of the text, we may infer that it is the political linkage between individuals and groups in geographical proximity that constitutes this complex network called *the* community. However, this is never made clear.

Valuable as works such as this may be in other respects, the use of the term "the community" in this way is a serious hindrance to the development of communal life. Community is reduced to an inclusive, politically qualified network of social relations, and its rich diversity is lost to view. Communal life is reduced to participation in this politically qualified community.⁴

If we are to recover the experience of communal life in its rich diversity, we would be wise to cease talking about the social environment in which the school functions in this way as "the community." There is, of course, a political community that binds individuals and groups together within geographical boundaries, but this is *a* community, one of a number of communities that function within these boundaries, and not *the* community. We will avoid confusion if we use the term "social environment," rather than "the community," for the communally diverse social context within which the school functions.

Once we recognize the qualified nature of the school, or college, as a differentiated community, it becomes clear that the development of a healthy communal life requires, among the members of the school community, a mutual dependence and shar-

ing that is focused on *the educational practice* of the school. The shared life that constitutes the school as a community is a shared educational life, a shared life characterized by structured learning. To share in other ways, valuable as it may be in itself, does not nurture the communal life of the school. This nurture requires educational sharing.

John Vanderhoek, in private discussion, pointed out that cordiality is often mistaken for community. Teachers suppose that the existence of cordial and personally supportive relationships between them as individuals is evidence of a strong communal life, when there is little, if any, sharing in the area of educational practice. Similarly, in the

In Christian schools a shared devotional life is often mistaken as evidence of a healthy communal life.

Christian school or college, the existence of a shared devotional life is often mistakenly taken as evidence of a healthy communal life. It is thought that communal life is being nurtured by sharing in prayer and Bible reading, even though this sharing is never, or only rarely, focused sharply on the educational issues that are the heart and soul of communal life in the school.

For a similar reason, although it offers some useful, and in some ways penetrating, insights, Waldo Beach's essay (1971) misses the point because it endeavors to restore the communal character of college life by nurturing *ethical* community. There are, of course, important ethical dimensions to college life, but communal life in college or school is educationally qualified. It can be nurtured only by a nurturing of the shared *educational* life that constitutes it as a community.

Organization and Community

Individualism leads to equating community with organization. If the basic human given is the individual, then all social entities must be the product of the organizing activity of individuals. It is in keeping with this view of the person that Nisbet (1970:xvi) asserts, "Community is the product of people working together on problems."

To the same effect, Reynolds and Norman

(1988:34) speak of "social practices that will create and sustain community." In spite of their criticisms of individualism, Bellah *et al.* (1985:333,335) adopt a similar view of community when they argue that a community is constituted by the shared activities of a group of individuals.

A similar individualistic view of community is reflected in the comment of Scott Peck (1987:88) that "community-making requires time as well as effort and sacrifice." In the context of modern, secularist society, with its radical individualism, the nurturing of communal life is likely to take time and effort, as well as the sacrifice of cherished individualistic values. However, in other social contexts that have not been infected with secularist individualism, to act communally is as natural as breathing. Besides, we do not make communities; community is the result of communal bonds that belong to our very personhood.

Although these various authors desire to do justice to the communality of human life, their stated views about community reflect an underlying individualism. That is not surprising given the pervasive individualistic values in modern secularist society. This underlying individualism causes the human person to be seen first of all as an individual who comes together with other individuals to create a community. Community, then, becomes something that a group of individuals creates by appropriately organizing human activities.

To recognize that community is as basic to the human person as individuality requires a radical change in the relation between community and organization. It requires us to recognize an organization as something we build—a social artifact—to facilitate the achievement of human goals and purposes. A good organization is one that serves well the persons involved. Community, on the other hand, is something we are; it belongs to our personhood. To clarify this further, we may say that an organization is a rule-governed framework of human invention for ordering human affairs. A community is a human organism constituted by the shared life of a number of persons.

Organization is not unimportant to communal life. The functioning of communal life requires an organization appropriate to that life. However, organization does not create communal life; it cannot bring into being a community that does not already exist. It can provide only a framework for

ordering the affairs of an already existing community. Shared practices do not constitute a community; they are the expression of communal life.

Humans do not make themselves human by such activities as thinking, speaking, laughing. These activities, with many others, express the life that is in them. So also it is with communality.

Communal life should not be expected to fit an organizational model. Rather organization should fit communal life. An organization may either facilitate or hamper communal life. A good organization will be one that is suited to the nature of the community and that facilitates the functioning of communal life.

A critical review of organizational structure, therefore, is one of the most urgent tasks for us to undertake if our schools and colleges are to function as effective communities. The existing organizational structure in most of our Christian schools and colleges is a replica of the organizational structure of secularist educational organizations. However diligent we are in ensuring the Christian character of the curriculum, our schools and colleges will not achieve the distinctively Christian character we want while we go on copying organizational models that have been forged at the anvil of individualist secularism.

It will not be enough merely to adjust to the existing organizational structure. We will need to be open to a fundamental restructuring.

A common mistake, in this connection, is to suppose that we introduce the desired communality into our organizations by increasing opportunities for input to the decision-making process. So we establish more committees, expand the makeup of committees to make them more representative, and convene more meetings to discuss school or college affairs. In the classroom, we shift the emphasis from individual to group learning, or go even further to embrace the organizational structures of cooperative learning. Maybe we become even more radical and introduce team-teaching practices in order to promote communal life.

Some, or all, of these moves may be useful in the organization of a learning community. But they can neither create nor nurture communal life. At best, they provide a facilitating framework for communal life. To see them as the means of generating communal life may well hinder communal life by shifting attention from the shared life, that is the

communal life, to the organizational arrangements that constitute only the framework within which this communal life functions, for better or for worse. One disastrous consequence of this shift of attention from shared life to organizational arrangement is that communality becomes falsely identified with participation in organizational structures. The busyness of organizational activities gives the illusion of communal life even while the communal roots are being starved.

A critical review of organizational structures must begin, not with an organizational review, but with a careful and thorough exploration of the nature of the shared life that constitutes the community. It is only when we have a clear view of the communal life that we can begin to develop organizational structures that will facilitate the functioning of that life.

The school or college community is characterized by a shared life of structured learning. In the case of the Christian school this shared educational life is given a specific shape and character by a shared faith. However, it is important to remember that it is not the shared faith as such that constitutes a Christian school community. It is the shared life of structured learning, shaped in a distinctive way by shared faith.

Yet, important as this observation is, it still remains an abstraction inadequate for developing communal life in a particular school or college at a particular place and time. For this purpose we need to give concrete substance to the meaning of the shared life of structured learning in this particular situation.

Exploring this concrete meaning of communal life in the school or college requires that we carefully explore the shared beliefs about *the desired pattern of educational practice*. To be effective this exploring needs to be penetrating and rigorous. We need to guard against easy options that appear to agree but cover fundamental differences. It can seldom be achieved by two or three seminars or a few days of retreat. It will not be enough to produce documents stating broadly defined goals or a statement of purpose or principles to which all agree. We must probe carefully, and perhaps painfully, to uncover what we each believe to be the appropriate pattern of educational practice for achieving stated programs and goals and implementing agreed upon principles. This must include exploring the willingness to act on the stated beliefs.

Agreement on every detail of practice is not necessary. Indeed, to expect this would deny the

individuality without which community cannot flourish. However, there can be no communal life if it is not possible to agree to move forward in common action reflecting common beliefs about the desired pattern of practice. It should be noted that, in exploring beliefs about practice, we are not looking for a basis for creating a community but for evidence that a community exists. Without a core of shared beliefs about educational practice, there is no educational community. In this situation, no amount of organizational reform will generate communal life. All there can be is an organizational structure within which individuals and groups of individuals practise education.

A common mistake is to suppose we introduce communality into our organizations by increasing opportunities for input to the decision-making process.

Where communal life does exist, exploring beliefs about practice will stimulate that life. By clarifying the nature of the shared life that binds us together, we are able to put the situation in perspective, refocusing our energies on the nurture of this shared life while placing all else on the periphery of our communal life.

This process may also show that, while a community does exist, some within the school or college organization do not belong to this community. These can then be encouraged to look for other avenues to fulfil their calling, avenues where they can find an appropriate communal environment.

Once we have identified the existence and nature of an educational community, we can attend to whatever reorganization may be needed to facilitate communal life. This reorganization should refocus organizational arrangements on nurture of the communal life, pruning those arrangements that are peripheral to this and dispensing altogether with any arrangements that do not serve the interests of the communal life.

The Nurture of Communal Life in the Classroom

Both the nature of communal life as a sharing of people with people, and the requirement for the nur-

ture of individuality, means that communal life can be nurtured in the classroom only as teacher and student develop a close personal relationship. The teacher must know each student as an individual fellow member of the educational community, and the student must know the teacher in a similar way. Without this personalized knowledge between teacher and student, communal life cannot flourish in the classroom.

This raises a practical obstacle to the nurture of communal life, especially in colleges and to some extent in high schools. This is the problem of large classes in which it is next to impossible for teacher and student to develop the kind of personal interaction that communal learning requires.

Possibly an ideal would be to make all classes small enough to enable this personal interaction to take place. However, this may not be practical and perhaps not always wholly desirable. There is nothing necessarily wrong with a lecture given to a large group of students as a teaching strategy. There are times when it may be the best strategy. However, effective learning cannot occur, and communal life cannot be nurtured, if this is the only or the dominant teaching strategy. For the purpose of the present discussion, substantial room must be made for other strategies that provide for closer personal interaction of teacher and student.

We need, therefore, to think of practical strategies to help students interact with teachers and vice versa. I have no complete answer to this issue, but three possibilities come to mind as a starting point. I am sure that a little creative thought among teachers could generate further ideas.

1. *Team-teaching and the large class size.* By team-teaching I do not mean simply dividing the teaching load for a class between two or more teachers. I have in mind a collegial collaboration in which a course of study is planned, developed, implemented, critiqued, and redeveloped by a group of teachers functioning as an interdependent community in the spirit of I Corinthians 12. In itself, such team-teaching can be a valuable expression of communal life. At the same time, wisely planned team-teaching can expand the opportunities for teachers and students in a large class situation to interact.

2. *Learning by Doing.* By this somewhat ambiguous term I mean structured learning projects outside the classroom in which students take con-

trol of their own learning. Depending on the area of learning, such a project might take the form of library research, involvement in the commercial life of the neighborhood, an agricultural endeavor, a construction or design project, or any of a multitude of ways in which learning may occur through involvement with concrete problems.

Such projects are by no means unknown in contemporary educational practice, of course. However, they are usually supplementary to the learning that occurs in the classroom. I am suggesting that they *replace* some of the learning that at present occurs in the classroom. The classroom environment is useful for some kinds of learning but is a totally unsatisfactory environment for other learning. Apart from other educational benefits, replacing a proportion of the classroom time with such projects would free teachers for closer personal interaction with students.

3. *Peer Tutoring.* Teaching is itself a valuable means of learning. By involving students in tutoring other students, we not only free the teacher to develop closer personal contacts with students but we also enhance the learning experience of the students. At the same time we would nurture communal life among the students themselves.

I stress again that I do not suggest that these strategies should wholly displace other strategies more oriented to teacher input. I suggest only that by broadening the range of our strategies we will not only enrich the learning experience but also increase personal interaction between teacher and student without which communal life will languish.

Office, Authority, and Power

In our modern world it is common to think of "office" as a position of authority that only some people have within an organizational structure. So we commonly distinguish between the "members" and "office-bearers" of an organization, with organizational authority being exercised by the office-bearers as representatives of the members.

This usually goes with an hierarchical view of organizational authority. In the school or college, for example, the principal or president is seen as having the greatest authority, with appropriate accountability of course, students as having the least—if they are seen as having any at all—and others coming somewhere in between.

Reacting to this hierarchical view of authority, some argue for an egalitarian view of office and authority. On this view everyone has the same authority with no clear distinctions of office. Teachers are only co-learners and principals or presidents are only facilitators whose function is to carry out the collective will. This egalitarian view of leadership is sometimes mistakenly regarded as a model of servant leadership.

Neither of these views is adequate for the nurture of a healthy communal life. If we are to develop healthy school communities we must take a more careful look at the nature of office and authority. An office may be regarded as a specific calling to serve with appropriate authority and power. In the final count it is God who calls all human beings to serve. The call to fill, subdue, and have dominion over the earth, together with the call to love our neighbor in the context of wholehearted love for God (Gen 1:26-8; Mark 12:28-31), is a call issued to all humans, not just to a select group. In issuing this call, God gives the authority and power to fulfil this call.

While all are called to an office, all are not called to the same office. The failure to recognize this led to the rebellion of Korah and his associates, a rebellion that brought decisive divine judgment. Everyone is, indeed, called equally to holy service, but all are not called to serve in the same way (Num 16:1-35). Healthy communal life depends as much on recognizing distinctions of office as it does on recognizing that all are called to an office. Some common distinctions of office in a school are teacher, student, administrator, secretary, janitor, board member, librarian, parent. Communal life depends on each serving faithfully in the office to which she or he is called, while at the same time respecting the office of each other member of the community. Nothing destroys communal life so readily as coveting the office of another.

Recognizing the particular office to which I am called is a matter of informed personal judgment confirmed by communal judgment in reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Basic considerations in this judgment are discerning gifts and discerning strategic opportunity to serve. No one can be called to serve in an office who lacks the gifts appropriate to that office.

Both the hierarchical and the egalitarian views perceive authority incorrectly. They see the authority of communal life as a single authority, so that

the question becomes one of deciding how this authority is to be distributed among the members of the community. On this view, the key question is, "How much authority do I have?" The nurture of communal life requires us to shift from asking *how much* authority to the question, "What *kind* of authority belongs to this office?"

When God calls to an office he gives an authority appropriate to that office. A healthy communal life requires recognizing different kinds of authority within the community corresponding to the different offices. It is important to recognize that authority is not given by the community. All authority is God-given.⁵ The role of the community is to *recognize*

A legitimate exercise of teaching authority will never dominate the student but will make room for the student to take initiatives and to make decisions in learning.

the authority that, by God's gift, belongs to each office.

To exercise authority of an office effectively requires a power appropriate to this authority. In this connection, authority is understood as the *right* to act and power as the *ability* to act. Both are required for effective service. Authority without power is meaningless, and power used without authority is meaningless. It is meaningless, for example, to say that a teacher has authority to control a classroom if the teacher lacks the power to do so. Similarly, a student who uses power over other students to usurp the role of the teacher is abusing that power.

The possession of the appropriate gifts is a basic component of the power of an office. However, it is not enough in itself. There is a need also for *communal empowering*. There are four components to this communal empowering:

1. Communal recognition of the authority that belongs to the office; that is, the right of the person holding the office to act, take initiatives, and make decisions in accordance with the nature of the office.

2. The provision of space to exercise this authority; that is to say, an area of communal life that is

the recognized domain of the person holding this office, within which this person is expected to take initiatives and make decisions.

3. Appropriate provision for developing the full potential of the gifts of the office-bearer.

4. The provision of adequate resources and other forms of support needed for the effective exercise of the authority of the office.

It should be noted that there is a mutuality to this communal empowering, reflecting the mutuality characteristic of all communal life. It is not a matter of those at the top empowering those under them. Such top-down thinking is incompatible with communal life. It is a matter of all being empowered by the community to fulfil the calling of the office of each and of all participating in the activity of empowering. So, for example, students are not only empowered in their student office, but students also are involved in the empowering of teachers and other members of the community.

The character of the school, as a community qualified by structured learning, places the offices of teacher and student at the center of communal life. Without them there is no school. However, the other offices that support and sustain the structured learning are no less important in the communal life of the school. Each office must be given equal honor and respect if communal life is to flourish. Communal life cannot flourish if teachers and administrators are treated as an elite corps with others cast in a subordinate role as servants to this elite corps. All equally are servants and all equally are to be honored (see Figure 2).

OFFICES IN THE SCHOOL

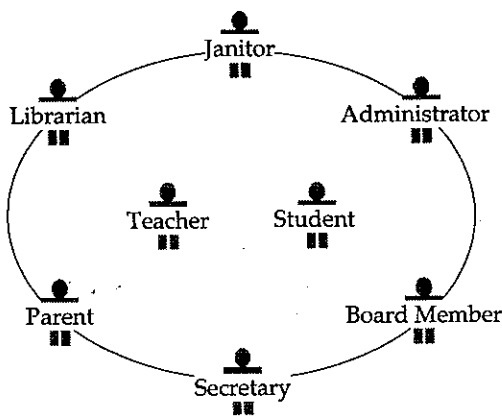


Fig. 2

Once we recognize that authority attaches to an office, and is qualified by that office, it becomes meaningless to talk about how much authority a person has. The question becomes, "What kind of authority belongs to this office?" Authority is no longer thought of in hierarchic terms with offices ranked in order from those with the greatest to those with the least authority. Each office carries with it all the authority needed to fulfil the service of that office.

An organizational structure adequately supportive of communal life, then, will recognize the authority that belongs to each office, giving to those who hold this office the responsibility and freedom to act, take initiatives, and make decisions in fulfillment of his office.

This leads to a shift in the view of leadership. Leadership is no longer confined to some members of a community with all others cast in the role of followers. Those holding any office will take the lead in matters that fall under the authority of that office. Janitors will take the lead in janitorial matters, secretaries in secretarial matters, administrators in administrative matters, board members in board matters, teachers in teaching, and students in learning. And each will respect and follow the lead of the other in the appropriate areas.

But, it may be objected, surely someone must have the final authority? While this raises an important issue, the formulation of the question is unsatisfactory. There does, indeed, need to be an office with the authority of communal oversight to guard the coherence of communal life in its multifaceted functioning. However, this office is not to be seen as an office of higher authority with a right to override decisions made by those of lower authority. On the contrary, a righteous exercise of the authority of this office of communal oversight will jealously guard the integrity of each office within the community. It will ensure that each has the freedom and responsibility to act, take initiatives, and make decisions within the bounds of the office.

The qualification "within the bounds of the office" is important. However, this qualification applies equally to all, including the office of communal over-seeing.

The recognition of student authority is a common area in which communal life breaks down in today's schools and colleges. The student, as much as anyone else, is called by God to the office of stu-

dent and is given by God the appropriate authority to fulfil the service of this office. This authority is an authority over learning and involves the right to take initiatives and make decisions in relation to this learning. A school or college functioning as a healthy community will recognize this student authority by not only allowing but expecting students to take initiatives and make decisions in relation to their learning.

It is not an adequate acknowledgment of the office of student to obtain student input in the decision-making process or to place student representatives on sundry committees or to give students responsibility for student life in extra-curricular activities. The office of student is recognized adequately only as the authority of the student is recognized in the learning process.

The legitimate exercise of student authority, of course, is always in interaction with the authority of the teacher. However, a legitimate exercise of teaching authority will never dominate the student but will make room for the student to take initiatives and to make decisions in learning.

This will include room to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes. The student who learns only to give negative value to mistakes has had an inadequate learning experience. The expansion of human knowledge involves a process of experimentation in which we learn by trial and error. This process is basic to the advance of scientific knowledge, but is no less important elsewhere. No learning experience is adequate if it fails to expose students to this process as a positive learning experience. But students cannot have such an experience unless they are expected to take the risk of deciding and taking initiatives.

Making Decisions

Finally, and consequent on all that we have discussed so far, the nurture of communal life requires careful attention to making decisions. Three kinds of decisions need to be made in communal life.

Firstly, there are decisions internal to a particular office that are most appropriately made by an individual person holding that office, whether teacher, janitor, administrator, student, secretary or any other. A healthy communal life will ensure that individuals have adequate room for making such deci-

sions. A requirement that all decisions be collegial decisions rests on a distorting misconception of communal life. It inhibits rather than nurtures that life. A healthy community gives to individual persons freedom to make decisions and take initiatives.

Such individual decisions, of course, should be consistent with and supportive of the communal life. It is a violation of communal trust, a failure in integrity, for a member of a community to make a decision that undermines the communal life. It is, for example, a violation of communal trust, and an abuse of authority, when a teacher subscribes publicly to communal declarations of educational intention, yet makes no effort to ensure that these

Our schools will not achieve a distinctively Christian character if we go on copying organizational models forged at the anvil of individualistic secularism.

intentions are fulfilled in his own classroom practice.

However, such a failure, or any other kind of failure in making decisions, is not to be dealt with by limiting the scope for decision-making. It is to be dealt with by communal action that empowers the person to be responsible and effective in making decisions. If the person is not responsive to such communal empowering, then it can only be concluded that the person lacks a calling to this particular office and, possibly, does not belong to this community. In this case, the appropriate communal action is to remove the person from the office. Leaving the person in the office, while restricting the right to make decisions relating to that office, should never be regarded as an option.

Secondly, there are collegial decisions that concern the shared life of those who jointly hold the same office—e.g. teachers or administrators or students. Thirdly, there are collegial decisions that deal with areas of overlap between more than one office. In both kinds of collegial decisions it is important to involve all whose office is involved in the matter to be decided. It is not important to involve the whole community in making all collegial decisions. Indeed, to do so is more likely to inhibit

than to nurture communal life. What is important is that those whose office is involved in the matter are *involved in making the decision*, and not merely in providing input.

As to the process of making decisions, the nurture of communal life requires a process based on consensus rather than the power struggle of competitive debate that is typical among those making decisions in an individualistic society. The aim should be for a decision that incorporates the insights of all rather than one that represents the triumph of one view of the matter over competing views.

The achievement of this demands that we proceed on the basis of mutual respect, inclusion, and collaboration. Mutual respect means that the views of all are solicited and treated with respect. Inclusion requires us to take all contributions seriously, looking for ways to include them in the decision that is ultimately made. Collaboration means that, rather than arriving at decisions by way of a contest in which one party wins, all work together toward a decision that is forged by making use of the contributions of all.

Such a process does not mean lack of vigorous debate. The clarification of the issue and the critical testing of possible solutions demands vigorous and penetrating dialogue. However, the purpose of the debate is not to secure a win for one party or viewpoint but to clarify the issues in the interests of a more effective communal consensus.

Conclusion

What I have outlined calls for fundamental change in the way our schools and colleges operate. It demands significant organizational restructuring. More fundamentally, it requires a change in taken-for-granted beliefs implied in existing organizational structures.

This kind of transformation will not be achieved easily. Yet if we are to present to our age an authentic educational witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is, I believe, imperative that we begin such a process of transformation as a matter of urgency. Failing to meet this challenge may well mean that, in the day when all is revealed by fire, much in which we take pride here and now will prove to be wood, hay, straw (1 Cor 3:10-5).

End Notes

- 1 The term "artifact" is used here to describe a product of human inventiveness.
- 2 The statement of the thesis stripped of confessional language is important if we are to engage in dialogue with those who

do not share our faith. Such dialogue, it seems to me, is required of us by our Christian calling.

The use of confessional language in stating the thesis does not, of itself, constitute a barrier to dialogue. On the contrary, it can be important in clearing the way for effective dialogue. Any understanding of the human person will be grounded in a religious belief; that is to say, in a belief about the ultimate source of meaning. The failure to disclose this ground of understanding constitutes a serious hindrance to dialogue. Discussion is either dominated by one religious ground to the implicit exclusion of all others or the undisclosed differences among the participants render the various contributions mutually unintelligible. In either case, dialogue does not occur.

Frank disclosure of the religious ground of understanding on the part of all participants, therefore, is an indispensable prelude to dialogue. Stating our basic thesis in confessional language may serve to effect this disclosure.

However, having clarified the differences in our religious grounds of understanding, we can move on to dialogue about the human person only as we proceed on the basis of our common experience of personhood. To facilitate this, our basic thesis needs to be stated without the use of confessional language. Otherwise the discussion is liable to become a sterile debate over confessional and religious differences instead of dialogue about human personhood.

- 3 In earlier treatments of this theme I have used the term "existential" community for what I am now calling "expressive" community. The difference represents no more than a change in terminology in the interests of greater clarity.
- 4 The assumption that community is politically qualified is also made by Berkson (1958: 280) and is implicit, at least, in Bellah *et al.* (1985).
- 5 It is a mistake, it seems to me, to speak of any authority exercised by humans as being delegated by God. A delegate exercises the authority of another on behalf of that person. God delegates his authority to none but Christ. The authority we exercise as humans is a creaturely authority that God as Creator assigns to his creatures. We do not exercise authority on God's behalf. We exercise our own creaturely authority under God as his creaturely servants.

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