

## **Sense of Community in Churches: A Practical Theological Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Sense of community and the related concept, sense of belonging, are crucial features of church life. A well-accepted model of Sense of Community is that of McMillan and Chavis.<sup>1</sup> This article takes a Practical Theological methodology to the McMillan and Chavis' model in order to consider its applicability to church contexts. Suggestions for appropriate application of the model to foster sense of community in churches are described.

### **Introduction**

It is not the purpose of this article to set out a theological case for the importance of community in the life and mission of the Church. It will be assumed that readers are already convinced of this. The purpose of this article is to bring a Practical Theological perspective to a social scientific model of "Sense of Community" and generate recommendations on how churches can develop stronger community on the basis of this interaction.

### **Methodology**

The methodology of this article is Practical Theology. Swinton and Mowat define Practical Theology as "critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."<sup>2</sup>

In particular, this article will practice "mutual critical correlation." Practical Theology is "correlational" because it tries to hold together and correlate at least three different perspectives—the situation, the Christian tradition and another source of knowledge that is intended to enable deeper insight and understanding.<sup>3</sup>

However, theology and the social sciences are not equal conversation partners. Theology has logical priority. Theology is "an independent source of knowledge that draws on qualitative research for the

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<sup>1</sup> David W. McMillan and D. M. Chavis, "Sense of Community: A definition and theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14(1986).

<sup>2</sup> J. Swinton and H. Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006). 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

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purposes of clarification and complexification, but has no need of it in terms of its self-understanding.”<sup>4</sup>

It should also be noted that the goal of this process is not primarily pragmatic—to solve problems and help communities function more effectively. Rather, the goal is interacting with situations and challenging practices in order that individuals and communities can remain faithful to God and to participate faithfully in God’s mission.<sup>5</sup>

The specific method in this article will be to begin with a social scientific model and critique it from the theological perspective. This dialogue will generate principles related to community formation in churches. The dialogue will be further enriched by consideration of cases where community is flourishing in local churches. The author visited three churches in 2010 which had high levels of “strong and growing sense of belonging” as indicated in the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS). This enabled him to observe strong sense of community in action. These observations form the final correlating factor – “the situation” in Swinton and Mowat’s model.

### Sense of Community

The origins of the concept, “sense of community,” may be traced back to Tönnies who made the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (the village or small town with strong kin and friendship linkages) and *Gesellschaft* (the impersonal city).<sup>6</sup> He argued that the supportive interdependence, mutual responsibility and common goals of village and town life were being lost to the highly differentiated and individualistic nature of larger scaled structures of *Gesellschaft*.

Sarason defined “sense of community” as the feeling that one is part of a readily available, supportive and dependable structure that is part of everyday life and not just when disasters strike.<sup>7</sup> He said community offers support and identity derived from those nearby or with whom there are meaningful ongoing interactions.

However, well-functioning communities are supportive, even though one may not have personal relationships with each individual member. Furthermore, members may continue to have a sense of community even though individuals come and go. Sense of community transcends individual-level constructs such as social support. It is an extra-individual construct.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and association: (Gemeinschaft und gesellschaft)* (Norfolk: Routledge & Paul, 1887/1955).

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Bernard Sarason, *The psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a community psychology* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Grace Pretty et al., “Psychological Sense of Community and its relevance to well-being and everyday life in Australia.,” The Australian Psychological Society, <http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Community-Updated-Sept061.pdf>.

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Sense of community is a concept that has considerable currency within a vast range of disciplines and practices.<sup>9</sup> However it is also employed as a common lay term to refer to feelings of belonging, identity and support. It occurs in public domain discourse such as reporting community response to disaster, promoting the value of a rural lifestyle, and even advertising urban residential developments.

Even though much of the work in sense of community has been conducted in specific contexts, and some of the dimensions arising from this work are unique to their respective context, there is a commonality of dimensions arising repeatedly, such as belonging, ties, interaction with other community members and a sense of support.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that there are dimensions to sense of community which are common to a variety of communities, including churches.

### **Sense of Community and Churches**

Research indicates that sense of community and related factors have significant positive impacts on a range of outcomes for individuals and groups. Conversely, a lack of connections, identity and support inherent in sense of community may lead to less positive outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

But a strong sense of community not only meets a basic human needs, it is also linked to church growth.<sup>12</sup> This is because belonging, as expressed in the interactions between members, is fundamental in generating and maintaining commitment. When belonging is provided in a consistent and comprehensive way, the commitment of the members is remarkably strong and enables the provision of services attractive to new members.<sup>13</sup>

There is an intuitive connection between the concepts "sense of community" and the NCLS concept of "sense of belonging." One can hardly have a sense of community if one does not sense one belongs. Miers and Fisher observed a statistical correlation between the two in their research within an Australian Baptist church.<sup>14</sup> The two may not be synonymous but they are certainly related.

The NCLS research has confirmed that growing sense of belonging is related to overall church vitality.<sup>15</sup> Other factors associated with a strong and growing sense of belonging include:

- Frequency of church attendance.
- A sense of growth in faith.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup> P.L. Obst and K.M White, "Revisiting the Sense of Community Index: A confirmatory factor analysis," *Journal of Community Psychology* 32(2004).

<sup>11</sup> Pretty et al., "Psychological Sense of Community and its relevance to well-being and everyday life in Australia." 9.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas B. McGaw, "Meaning and belonging in a charismatic congregation: An investigation into sources of neo-Pentecostal success," *Review of Religious Research* 21(1980).

<sup>13</sup> Laurence R. Iannaccone, Daniel V. A. Olson, and Rodney Stark, "Religious resources and church growth," *Social Forces* 74(1995).

<sup>14</sup> Ron Miers and Adrian T. Fisher, "Being Church and Community: Psychological Sense of Community in a local parish," in *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications, and implications*, ed. Adrian T. Fisher, Christopher C. Sonn, and Brian J. Bishop (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> John Bellamy et al., *Enriching church life* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2006).

- A commitment to the vision and direction of the local church.
- Positive experiences of worship services.
- Involvement in outreach activities.

These benefits of sense of belonging are suggestive of the benefits of sense of community as well. Sense of community is obviously a valuable quality for churches and individuals alike. But how does sense of community develop, and what can churches do to develop it?

### **A Model of Sense of Community**

The most widely accepted model of sense of community is that of McMillan & Chavis.<sup>16</sup> The first element is membership.<sup>17</sup> This model has retained its prominence partly because a measure of sense of community, the Sense of Community Index, is based on it and has generally confirmed the model's validity.<sup>18</sup> This model will serve as the basis of the following discussion on developing sense of community in churches. After a description of each element, it will be considered from a theological perspective. A mutual critical correlation will then be presented and application to the local church context considered.

#### **1. Membership**

##### *Sociological Description:*

Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. According to McMillan & Chavis, to have a sense of community, members must feel they are a member of that community. There are five attributes of membership:

- Boundaries.
- Emotional safety.
- A sense of belonging and identification.
- Personal investment.
- A common symbol system.

Membership creates boundaries which distinguish between people who belong and people who do not. The boundaries provide members with the emotional safety necessary for needs and feelings to be exposed and for intimacy to develop. A boundary is a line drawn that also defines and establishes identity.<sup>19</sup> It provides essential limits, for what is not limited and bounded merges with its context and ceases to exist in its own particular way. Neither good nor bad in its own right, a boundary determines something that can be pointed to and named: a person, a family, a geographical region, a city, a town,

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<sup>16</sup> Pretty et al., "Psychological Sense of Community and its relevance to well-being and everyday life in Australia." 6.

<sup>17</sup> McMillan and Chavis, "Sense of Community: A definition and theory," 9.

<sup>18</sup> D Adam Long and Douglas D Perkins, "Confirmatory factor analysis of the sense of community index and development of a brief SCI," *Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Caroline A. Westerhoff, "Boundary and Hospitality," in *Hospitality*, ed. Robert B Kruschwitz (Waco: Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2007), 88.

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a nation, a church, a denomination, a faith. Boundaries are marked by such things as language, dress, and ritual.

Membership also depends on sense of belonging: the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place in it. It also involves a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to invest in or sacrifice for the group. The role of identification may be represented in the reciprocal statements, "It is my group" and "I am part of the group."

Understanding common symbol systems is also important to understanding community membership. Groups use symbols such as rituals, ceremonies, rites of passage, forms of speech and dress to indicate boundaries of who is or is not a member.<sup>20</sup>

*Theological Perspective:*

The Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27, Rom 12:4), implies the concept of mutual belonging and honour in membership. The members of the body are told to consider themselves important to the body, but no more important than the other parts (1 Cor 12:21). The parts share the suffering and honour of the other parts (1 Cor 12:26). The body image of the church is a powerful stimulant for healthy community where each part senses belonging and seeks to embrace other, different, parts as well.

Membership of the Kingdom of God is also to be marked by behaviour (Matt 5:19-20). Christ highlighted that the loving behaviour of his followers would be the means of identification (John 13:35). Christianity has also called for costly investment in the kingdom if not the church. Personal sacrifice is presented in the NT as the natural response to the message and modelling of Christ. The obedience to these commands has had the peripheral consequence of stimulating personal investment in a church and building sense of belonging.

Through the centuries the sacraments have provided clear boundary markers for membership. Infant baptism and first Eucharist have given church and individual alike a tangible symbol of who is in and out of the faith community and a sense of identity and security to go with it. Even dress and language have provided common symbols to identify church members through history.

Paul is unapologetic in his use of insider/outsider language: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders (τοὺς ἕξω); make the most of every opportunity" (Col 4:5, see also 1 Cor 5:9-13, & 1 Thess 4:12). Those in the community are brothers (ἀδελφοὺς) while those who are not are the outsiders. The boundary could hardly be clearer.

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<sup>20</sup> McMillan and Chavis, "Sense of Community: A definition and theory," 9.

Protestant denominations have historically made a point of distinguishing between the regenerate and the un-regenerate. In reacting to the all-inclusive nature of the Catholic Church they highlighted believer's baptism to delineate the Church from the world. Partially driven by legal and financial concerns some denominations have developed formalised membership which have even heightened those boundaries. Others motivated by texts such as 2 Timothy 2:22 have even built physical fences to delineate themselves from the world.

*Mutual Critical Correlation:*

Both McMillan and Chavis and Church tradition would highlight the importance of the concept of membership. However, the rationale is different. McMillan and Chavis would argue that a strong concept of membership is necessary to create the sense of emotional security and personal sacrifice necessary for community to flourish. However, in addition to the theological reasons discussed above, the Church has often emphasised membership for legal, control and exclusion purposes. However, a strong concept of membership should be prevalent in churches not because of these purposes, but as a result of obedience to the body image, sacramental observance and *agape* love.

At the very least, strong membership boundaries are not inconsistent with church tradition. Hence church membership, whether formal or informal should be embraced, not rejected. This does not mean that non-believers should be unwelcome in churches, but the boundaries of actual membership of the organisation should remain strong. Boundaries of church communities enable an individual to clearly determine whether they are "in" or "out" of membership. Such boundaries are needed for a healthy identity.

Strong membership actually enhances evangelism. As Westerhoff points out, we must have something into which we can extend authentic invitations. Inclusion and exclusion are opposite sides of the same coin. Neither makes sense without the other. If anyone and everyone are too easily included, we are saying in effect that anything goes. We are disclaiming our boundaries, and without bounds, we do not exist.<sup>21</sup>

*Application:*

Some churches have sought to reduce an emphasis on membership boundaries to make it easier for people to transition into the church community. As admirable as this sentiment is, from a social scientific and theological perspective, this blurring of the boundaries should be re-considered. A strong sense of membership, reinforced by strong boundaries, creates a healthy sense of identity and a wide range of benefits in areas such as emotional security, personal commitment and mission.

Baptism and the Eucharist represent powerful boundary markers which foster a sense of belonging for the participants. They serve as a clear indicator of who is in and out of the community. These

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<sup>21</sup> Westerhoff, "Boundary and Hospitality," 88.

activities, and others like them, should have a prominent place in church communities not only because of their theological mandate but because of their contribution to sense of community.

The churches observed by the researcher demonstrated strong membership boundaries in a variety of ways. For example, all three placed an emphasis on conversion and believer's baptism. The Salvation Army church still wore uniforms – a powerful boundary marker indeed. But even the wearing of identical "Team Member" t-shirts during the service achieved the same outcome. A commonality of certain language (such as "excellence" and "awesome") was also observed to strengthen sense of belonging and community.

However, while maintaining strong membership, churches should be careful to ensure the outcome is not exclusion or control. If a church maintains healthy boundaries, it must also ensure that the pathway into the community is also very clear so that those seeking to join the church community are not excluded and prevented from investment. Otherwise, the community will dwindle over time regardless of how healthy it is.

## 2. Influence

### *Sociological Description:*

The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. Influence is a bidirectional concept. In one direction, the member only feels part of a group where they feel that they are influential. On the other hand, cohesiveness is dependent on a group's ability to influence its members. Influence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently, and one might expect to see the force of both operating simultaneously in a tightly knit community.<sup>22</sup>

The pressure for conformity and uniformity comes from the need of the individual to know that the things they see, feel, and understand are experienced in the same way by others (consensual validation). "People will perform a variety of psychological gymnastics to obtain feedback and reassurance that they are not crazy".<sup>23</sup> Thus, conformity serves as a force for closeness as well as an indicator of cohesiveness.

Interestingly, people who acknowledge that others' needs, values, and opinions matter to them are often the most influential group members, while those who always push to influence, try to dominate others, and ignore the wishes and opinions of others are often the least powerful members.

### *Theological Perspective:*

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<sup>22</sup> McMillan and Chavis, "Sense of Community: A definition and theory," 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 11.

Influence is a salient feature of churches. The concept of leaders having influence on their followers fits comfortably with theology – it is called discipleship. For example, the writer to the Hebrews says: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb 13:7).

In contrast, the question of the influence of congregants on their leaders is more problematic. The NT assumes that leaders will make decisions and urges followers to obey (1 Cor 16:15-16; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13: 17). However, the description of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 at least suggests that the elders took into account the opinion of the whole church. Despite this, through most of the history of the church, democracy has not been an important value. Certainly churches based on congregational government have allowed congregants to influence their leaders, but this has not been driven by a desire to be democratic but by a desire to seek the mind of God.

*Mutual Critical Correlation:*

As counter-cultural as it may be, both the literature on sense of community and the bible are quite comfortable with the idea of community, and especially in the case of the NT, the leaders, having a powerful influence on member behaviour. The correlation of the two would suggest a model where leaders foster a community which seeks to intentionally shape the behaviour of its members.

Although the Bible would seem to assume the role of leaders to exercise authority in the church, there is no explicit direction against congregational participation in decision making. It is possible that a congregation may hinder their leadership from acting on the will of God but the reverse scenario is equally likely.

Certainly, for a group to be attractive to members, an individual must feel they have some control and influence over the group. However, that control may be either direct or indirect. Through the leadership role, people can feel that they have influence even when their influence may be only indirect.

*Application:*

In order to build sense of community church leadership should seek to influence the church members. This influence not only produces behavioural coherence and consensual validation, it also builds sense of community. Many have highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on discipleship in the church, but the researcher observed a surprisingly heavy emphasis on semi-formal training in the churches he observed with strong sense of community. All three churches made a significant investment in discipleship classes and practical skills training and all members were expected to participate. These events were powerful instruments of influence.

However, church leaders must also allow the members to influence them. The most obvious context for this is in the decision making process. Leaders should be perceived to be influenced by the members of the church whether the church has congregational governance or not. Indeed, the

churches observed by the researcher were not congregationally governed yet still the members felt the leaders took their ideas into account to a large extent. The key word is consultation. Even if the leadership makes unilateral decisions, members must feel that their ideas have been taken into account if sense of community is to be fostered.

### 3. Integration and fulfilment of needs

#### *Sociological Description:*

The third element of the McMillan & Chavis' model of sense of community is integration and fulfilment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. It is akin to the psychological concept of "reinforcement." Member's ongoing involvement in a group is reinforced as their needs are met by the group. For any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members.<sup>24</sup>

The types of rewards individuals receive from community membership are diverse. Some of the rewards received from community involvement are the status of membership, the success of the community and the sharing in the competence or capabilities of other members. However, shared values are also important. This is because personal values indicate our emotional and intellectual needs and the order in which we attend to them. The extent to which individual values are shared determines the ability of a community to organize and prioritize its need-fulfilment activities. When people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy their needs. Shared values, then, provide the integrative force for cohesive communities.

#### *Theological Perspective:*

Most theologians would consider a focus on personal need fulfilment contrary to Christianity. Jesus taught and demonstrated servanthood (John 13:14-15) and Paul encourages his readers to, "in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Phil 2:3-4). An obsession with personal need fulfilment is a product of 21<sup>st</sup> century Western individualism and is something to be discouraged. Yet it remains a powerful motivator of behaviour in fallen human beings – even redeemed ones – and it is a contributor to sense of community.

Although theologians may reject an emphasis on churches focussing on meeting the needs of their member's in order to build sense of community, they may feel more comfortable with the concept of shared values. Unity, which includes the concept of shared values, is an important theme in the NT. The work of the leaders of the church is "so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 12.

measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:12–13). Unity of faith, reflecting the already existing unity in the Body and Spirit, is to be a focus of the church. Given that doctrine shapes, among other things, values, the idea of using those common values to build community is certainly not intolerable from a theological perspective.

*Mutual Critical Correlation:*

Although theology will not allow a focus on personal need fulfilment as a method of building sense of community, as individuals in a community focus on meeting the needs of others, as per the biblical injunction, their own needs are often met by others. Hence even though churches should not embrace a focus on personal need fulfilment, meeting the needs of others can build community anyway. Secular communities which focus on personal need fulfilment would benefit from the Christian value of seeking to meet the needs of others first.

However, shared values have been shown to produce need fulfilment and are a reinforcing reward for community involvement. For most people spiritual values rank high on the list of things which are important to them.<sup>25</sup> Hence, shared spiritual values, as demonstrated in a church, build sense of community. The already existing unity in the Body and Spirit, which the NT emphasises as the reason for seeking functional unity, is an enviable feature of Christian communities not available to secular communities. Christians have an intrinsic unity with other Christians (whether they like it or not) which provides a powerful centripetal force for functional unity. Unless secular communities can identify such an intrinsically unifying factor they will lack a significant stimulant for strong community.

*Application:*

If churches only emphasise that they are places where people can have their personal needs met, they may be attractive but they will not foster a strong sense of community. To counter the poison of individualism, churches should go to lengths to frequently highlight core values, especially spiritual ones. This may push some away if their core values do not align. But for those whose core values do align, a strong awareness of shared values with others in the congregation will contribute to a sense of unity and of community. If one of the strongly espoused values is "meeting the needs of others" there is a double benefit for the community.

The mission of the church is another core value around which members can gather. All three churches the writer observed strongly proclaimed outreach to the unsaved in the community as a core value. This produced effectiveness in drawing new people into the church, but also produced a sense of unity in the pursuit of the common goal.

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Hill, "A rationale for the integration of spirituality into community psychology," *Journal of Community Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2000).

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#### 4. Shared emotional connection

##### *Sociological Description:*

McMillan & Chavis indicate that shared emotional connection is the definitive element for true community.<sup>26</sup> Shared emotional connection is the commitment and belief that members have shared, and will share, history, common places, time together and similar experiences. This shared emotional connection is not restricted to small-scale local community or a particular location. A shared emotional connection is based, in part, on a shared history. It is not necessary that group members have participated in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it. Strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honour members and opportunities to invest in the community.

Another important feature of shared emotional connection is the “spiritual bond.” Although present to some degree in all communities, MacMillan & Chavis conclude, “It is very difficult to describe this important element.”<sup>27</sup> Yet it is of peculiar interest to theologians.

##### *Theological Perspective:*

Jesus appeared committed to building shared emotional connection with his followers. He called the twelve so that they might be with him (Mk 3:14). In the upper room discourse, an emotion-charged event to be sure, he said he eagerly desired to spend this time with them (Lk 22:15). This shared Passover proved to be the foundation of the new community that Jesus was establishing. He directed that the narrative be re-visited at each meal the disciples shared. New believers were, and are, introduced to the shared history of the community as they participate in the meal.

In the pattern of the upper room, the believers in Jerusalem shared all they had (Acts 2:44) and spent extensive time together. Paul wrote to the Romans about his desire to be with them (Rom 1:11) and when he farewelled the Ephesian elders he wept, reflecting the strength of the connection he had built with them (Acts 20:37). In Galatians 6:2 Paul urged his readers to share one another’s burdens. The writer to the Hebrews urges his\her readers to not give up meeting together (Heb 10:25). This was probably written as an antidote to apostasy but a bi-product would be the production of strong emotional ties. Whether an explicit strategy or not, the outcome of the agendas of Jesus, Paul and the early church was a community with a strong emotional connection.

##### *Mutual Critical Correlation:*

The rituals shared by church members, such as corporate worship, christenings, baptisms, weddings and funerals are powerful shared emotional activities. The Lord’s supper/Eucharist is especially significant. In the Eucharist the story of the last supper is retold and re-enacted. Similarly, the rite of baptism is not only is it a significant rite of passage for the neophyte, but is a memorable shared event

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<sup>26</sup> McMillan and Chavis, “Sense of Community: A definition and theory,” 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

for the whole community where the heroes who have played a role in the baptised one's spiritual journey are honoured, a party shared and the spiritual bond that unites the whole community made tangible and celebrated. These church events create the shared history which binds communities together. The sharing of life (if not possessions) in small groups supplements these whole church events.

Although McMillan & Chavis struggle to define the shared spiritual bond they discern in all strong communities, Christian theologians are able to supply numerous stimulants for its presence in Christian communities. Not the least is a mutually shared salvation which breaks down the barrier of individualism and draws each into a community of grace on the same terms:

<sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26–28).

The “oneness” of body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism, God and Father of all (Eph 4:5-6) provides a powerful spiritual bond for the Christian in community.

*Application:*

Churches need to deliberately give opportunity for members to build emotional connection. This involves creating events where there are opportunities to honour members, invest in the community and experience the spiritual bond. The sacraments/ordinances and significant rites of passage fulfil this role perfectly.

Despite the challenges of a time poor society churches need to continue to create contexts where members can experience quality interpersonal relationships which will produce shared emotional connections. This is not always possible at the corporate worship services, especially in larger churches. In the larger churches with strong sense of community observed by the author, the churches put considerable effort into fostering training, bible study, prayer and mission groups where individuals could form the shared emotional connections at the heart of healthy community.

Church's should especially consider short term mission focused groups to stimulate sense of community. The growing influence of post-modern thinking means that people are motivated less by loyalty to an institution, even one as innocuous as a small group, and more by functionality. If a group has a cause which people are passionate about they will gravitate towards it and sacrificially invest in its success and in the process experience a powerful sense of community.

**Conclusion**

The model of McMillan and Chavis, although widely accepted, is not the definitive description of community. No matter how extensive it is there are still aspects of healthy communities that it does not describe. This would be true of any community, but it is especially true of Christian communities.

The practical outcome of the mutual critical correlation process can be summarised according to the four elements of McMillan and Chavis' model:

- Membership: Churches should maintain strong boundaries to emphasise who is in and out of the community and what one needs to do to get "in".
- Influence: Churches need to maintain a focus on discipleship to build influence but they also need to emphasise consultation in order to ensure that church members feel they have influence on the operation of their community.
- Need Fulfilment: Churches should focus on strong communication of the shared values of the community especially in seeking to put the needs of other's first.
- Shared emotional connection: Churches need to strongly invest in creating the environment where history is shared, memories are created and individuals are able to relate to others on a deeper level. This may occur at a church wide level or in mission driven small groups.

But there are dimensions of community present in Christian communities that the definition of McMillan and Chavis does not describe. One is a self-understanding as family. Although Paul uses other metaphors to describe the church, his predominate descriptor is family. The fatherhood of God produced the family of his children and the powerful commitment and language of brother and sister. Family brings with it the elements of community: membership, influence, need fulfilment and shared emotional connection, but to a whole new level of strength.

Christianity also brings an emphasis on hospitality which is an element missing from McMillan and Chavis' model. In the ancient near east culture hospitality was a cogent symbol of acceptance and inclusion, a sentiment still apparent when churches share meals together today.

A second additional dimension in Christian communities is the shared sense of the presence of Christ (Matt 18:20). In *Life Together* Bonhoeffer says the visible, face-to-face living together of Christians is a privilege by the grace of God. The companionship of a fellow Christian is the physical sign of the gracious presence of Christ. Christian community is not some extraordinary social experience - it is a divine reality.<sup>28</sup>

Although the church is blessed with these additional features of community, the model of McMillan and Chavis has confirmed, and brought into focus, other aspects of the Christian community suggested by the Bible which are sometimes lost or obscured by the influence of a powerful

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<sup>28</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1954). 17-39.

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materialistic and individualised context. Social science is here providing the church with an unlikely ally in the quest for a more humane, just and communal society.

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