

FROM THE EDITOR

IT'S THE COMMUNITY, FOLKS!

By Elbert Eugene Peck



Is it possible for the Church to be our primary community even though we spend less time with it?

WHILE exploring *Sunstone on Disk*—the fruit of Cass Butler's year-long, scanning, keying, and proofing every *SUNSTONE* and *Sunstone Review*—I searched for "community"; of 1,667 uses, only 68 were by me. This essay ups it by 29.

To be saved, we must individually keep the commandments, but salvation is equally communal. We are, as David O. McKay repeatedly preached, "social beings"; it's not just that our lives unavoidably affect others, but our very identities, self-understanding, and ideas are constructed by others in society. "We did not create us . . . we owe what we are to the communities that formed us," wrote a renowned sociologist.¹ Heaven, too, is communal: God's family enjoys the same, but glorified, sociality that exists here. (D&C 130:2.) Our endings and beginnings connect; we cannot be saved without our dead—in whose inherited social order we live, and breathe, and have our being—because, to misapply Pogo, "they are us."

After grace (the sense of one's acceptable relationship to God through Christ), spirituality is more social than mystical; revelations and visions rank a distant second to the call to "live together in love." (D&C 42:45.) Our core texts, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Paul's essay on love, stress the interpersonal, the communal: meekness, kindness, apologizing, forgiving, peacemaking, not judging, not being angry, loving enemies, tolerating, forsaking riches, giving alms, sharing, going extra miles, long-suffering, not envying, not being puffed-up, enduring. (Matt. 5–7 and 1 Cor. 13.) As Gene England noted, the Church is as true as the gospel because the ward community hones these traits.²

To be a Christian means to acquire those interpersonal traits; for Latter-day Saints, it also means to live them collectively, to establish Zion. There've been terrifying failed attempts at communal Christianity. Perhaps

the primary mission of the Restoration is to bless the weary world with knowledge by example of how to be Christians communally. That's the emphatic call of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants.

To outsiders, Mormonism is impressively, sometimes frighteningly, communal; ironically, many insiders pine for earlier, more potent LDS communities and lament trends that reduce the Church's mission to teaching the gospel and providing the ordinances so people can live the commandments as families and individuals. Still, Latter-day Saints interweave their lives in small congregations where all faces are known with an incredible busybody watchcare of speaking, teaching, counseling, service, fast Sunday storytelling, ever-shuffling callings, home and visiting teaching, welfare aid, equalization among rich and poor wards, plus a linking family and temple theology.

Why, then, do many mourn the loss of community? What's lost? Chapel construction, fund-raising projects, weekday Primary and Relief Society (and bazaars), music festivals, and an array of MIA and other activities—much of the time-consuming fun stuff, the occasions for interaction, the culture.

What is community? What do we want it to achieve? For Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah and his associates, a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices . . . that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past. . . .

[A community] is not a collection of self-seeking individuals, not a temporary remedy, like Partners without Partners, that can be abandoned as soon as a partner has been found, but a context within which personal identity is formed, a place where fluent self-awareness follows the currents of communal conversation and contributes to them.

. . . [A] therapist affirms that "everybody needs to belong to a group" because "everybody needs to have an identity." . . . This . . . sense of identity in which the person is never wholly separate from others is clearest in the family. It is a context in which identity is formed in part through identifying with and incorporating aspects of other members, . . . [where] a person is formed and a character takes shape.³

The Church may be a temporary structure, but the social dynamic of community is eternal, and if Mormonism presumes to shape our characters into those of Saints, we need "quality time"—rubbing shoulders, swapping stories, helping out. Community memory can be preached, but the communal conversation that tells us, to quote *Fiddler on the Roof's* Tevye, "who we are and what God expects of us" often occurs informally.

We yearn for community, but who wants the earlier, over-whelming schedules? We must do more while doing less. During our remaining together time, we need to enhance our social interaction, deepen our rituals, ordinances, and practices, hone our storytelling, ensure time to chat, and broaden involvement in decision-making. When we get together now, it's too often to preach, teach, and sit and listen to others preach and teach. We need more interaction that cultivates the Christian virtues and shared communal events of the spirit that burn in our collective memories. At the same time, we must build a community that doesn't exclude (by self-righteousness or over-scheduling) involvement in the world. Here are some ideas:

1. THE SACRAMENT. Jesus taught that we must reconcile with those who have ought against us *before* we bring our gift to the altar to reconcile ourselves with Father. (Matt. 5:23–24.) For at the sacrament altar, collectively, the members of the congregation are the body of Christ, of which there should be no schism. (1 Cor. 12:12–27.) What if we took that commandment literally? Each Saturday night there'd be a blizzard of calls, letters, and visits asking forgiveness and making wrongs right (with Saints and gentiles) with the consequent forgiving, tears, and expressions of love. That'd invoke the sacrament's call to remember him and its promise to have the spirit and transform us individually and forge community ties. With talks, articles, lessons, testimonies, and leader-modeling, this weekly refining alone could purify Mormon community.

2. SUSTAININGS are, doctrinally, elections (see D&C 124:144). What if nominations for major callings and projects were announced in advance and Saints were asked to prayerfully consider them before voting? That active involvement would increase revelation,

ensure heart and mind voting, and connect us to each other and to the Church. Apostles lament that the Saints don't properly regard section 138 since it was added to our canon in 1980; advance notice (perhaps the conference before) would have prompted greater spiritual and intellectual commitment to it.

3. WARD CONFERENCES are better titled ward lectures—little *conferring with*, lots of *talking to*. But who remembers, let alone works on, a bishop's goals an hour later? Members don't need more talks on what to do; we know what to do and feel guilty. People get more motivated when they're involved in decision-making because the deliberations educate them while heightening their commitment to the outcome, even if the final plan's not their preference. Make ward conference an annual, month-long, goal-setting project where auxiliary and quorum leaders collaborate with their organization to plot "How can we best achieve what God (through general and local leaders) calls us to do?" By emphasizing the democratic "common" in common consent, we get to know each other better—our minds and hearts open, meet, and accommodate. Leaders don't abdicate their calling to receive revelation by using collaboration, they facilitate its fulfillment, which involves everyone. (Revelation's an individual charismatic gift; administration can be democratic.) On ward conference Sunday, each group reports on its plans while others listen intently and sustain enthusiastically because of their part in a parallel process.

4. THE LORD'S SUPPER was, for the earliest Christians, a thanksgiving meal. For good, practical reasons it was ritualized, but something's lost without the community gathered around a table eating until filled a meal of bread and (unfermented) wine, sharing memories and experiences with Christ. Consider the effect on our other sacrament and testimony meetings throughout the year if that simple feast concluded ward conference, to which we came fasting, praying, repenting, and forgiving.

3. STAKE CONFERENCE. Jews and Christians celebrate year-long religious calendars of communal events that retell, often with vigorous participation, their defining stories (Passover, Easter, etc.). A modern religion, Mormonism has an administrative calendar—ward, stake, regional, and general conferences—which could be reformed into memorable community events instead of duty-free weekends. Have a yearly stake conference host a Saturday festival that showcases local art celebrating the living Restoration in their regional Church story (plays, poems, paintings, and, of course, food).

5. SERVICE PROJECTS. Previously, much social interaction happened while entertaining ourselves: road shows and banquets fostered fellowship and low-key conversations. Such moments happen while building a Habitat for Humanity house or decorating the Gold and Green Ball. Let's merge social and service: being busy, I'll skip an ice cream social but squeeze in roofing a house.

6. CLASS DISCUSSIONS. There was a lot of talking after church B.C.S. (Before Consolidated Schedule); now, exhausted, we rush home. Given that, and the fewer occasions to talk, we now must talk *during* church to know each other. Many lessons are better taught and community is built when we present a topic in an open-ended way that invites thoughtful discussion and candid personal experiences. Consider these results compared to those of lectures: (1) *Entertainment*—monitoring a discussion as it bounces around the classroom keeps attention and fights boredom; (2) *Thinking*—minds are engaged as they mentally respond to each comment; (3) *Friendship*—thoughts and experiences are put with nameless faces, engendering intimacy, and even hallway conversations; (4) *Knowledge*—all needed doctrinal points get made, and concerned Saints gently correct falsehoods; and (5) *Citizenship*—people feel that they matter to what happens at church.

7. PUBLIC RITUALS. Mormonism rightly eschews high ritual (temple excluded), but we still need communal ceremony to create common spiritual events that are remembered and retold; events that bind us to each other and to the group, like the Kirtland Temple dedication did. In simplifying for the satellite Church the elaborate solemn assembly to sustain a new prophet, we decreased its impact. What if the sustainings were followed by a simultaneous, Church-wide, white handkerchief-waving, hosanna shout in every satellite-linked chapel? Likewise, in my youth, Aaronic priesthood leaders were set apart in front of the quorum. Those blessings helped me regard my comrades' callings and feel a part of an important work. Should settings apart and ordinations be publicly done after the sustainings of bishops, stake presidents, apostles, and prophets?

There are other, better, ways to tinker with how we do church, but we can't merely assume the existence of community as we revise the Church formula. Please share your ideas. These points avoid the Doctrine and Covenants' main preoccupation concerning Zion's establishment: the redistribution and equalizing of riches, and the setting up of self-sustaining stewardships. Given our un-

successful attempts, I agree with Orson Pratt (and the sequence of the temple endowment covenants) that radical property sharing culminates rather than begins community building.⁴ We make incremental progress as we acquire the prerequisite attributes of community living.

Is it possible for the Church to be my primary community even though I spend less time with it? I have a mental image, no doubt historically inaccurate, of an urban group of first-century Christians who met weekly to buoy each other by sharing the Lord's supper and their spiritual experiences. Rich and poor, slave and free, educated and illiterate, they discussed what it meant to be an Early-day Saint and the concomitant struggles. They critiqued each other's behavior, expressed love, exhorted good works, sang hymns. If one was needy, others helped. Perhaps the only time most gave to the community was that Sabbath meeting. But that community was their primary one; their lives were in dialogue with it; it defined what they did the rest of the week. In contrast, pioneer Mormonism was a comprehensive community; the unrealized call of the Hebrew prophets was to be a similarly exclusive people of God. For most of history, however, Christians' spiritual homes have been in one key community while they resided in others. Jesus calls us to be a visible, *gathered* community where Saints can be made—the city on the hill whose shining light of the more excellent, communal way draws others to God (but not necessarily to the city). But his next metaphor *disperses* the Saints in order to distill good—the salt is sprinkled throughout the earth to bring out the earth's inherent good flavor (the earth has the value; the salt is only good when it is a catalyst). (Matt. 5:13–16.) These back-to-back metaphors define the oscillating Mormon dynamic between radical separateness and embracing the world's strengths. In the Mormon ghetto, identity is formed that gives savor to Saints whose daily lives bring out the good in the world. We are only beginning to understand how to do both tasks without arrogance and condescension. ☐

NOTES

1. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 135.

2. Eugene England, "The Church Is As True As the Gospel," *SUNSTONE* 10:10, 30–36.

3. Bellah, et al., 333, 295.

4. Orson Pratt, "The Equality and Oneness of the Saints," originally published in *The Seer*, July 1954, 289–300, and also found in numerous Pratt collections, such as *Masterful Discourses and Writings of Orson Pratt*, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 624–649.