

CONTAGIOUS COMMUNITY

By Bill Vamos

Community: A group of people who have committed themselves to be submissive to the Spirit.

The power for evangelism is God coming to us in prayer, and it is also God reaching out to us through contagious community. The Christ of the empty cross lived and died and rose for the dead in community. Jesus Christ needed people.

For example, it was through the unique obedience of Mary and Joseph that God fulfilled His design when Jesus was born.

John the Baptist went out ahead of Jesus and prepared the way for Him. Jesus needed people. Peter, James and John stood with Christ as He raised Jairus' daughter for the dead.

And Jesus invited them to stay nearby as He prayed in Gethsemane. Jesus needed people!

Earlier in His ministry Jesus was eating supper at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. A woman came in and she was crying. She let her tears fall on Jesus' feet. Then she knelt down, wiped His feet with her hair, kissed them and anointed them with ointment. Jesus recognized that she was expressing gratitude for forgiveness, by lavishing Him with uninhabited caring. I really believe Jesus needed that caring.

And when Jesus was crucified, and rose from the dead, other people struggled and suffered and shared with Him. Simon of Cyrene carried His cross. Following the agony of Jesus' crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea took His body down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. On the day of Resurrection, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" ran to tell Jesus' disciples the momentous news that He had risen from the dead.

Christ Jesus needed people and that includes us. Why would He need us? In order to have someone to love. And because we are His instruments as He seeks to call others to Himself. I remember a poem that first inspired me during the very early stages of my discipleship.

Christ has no hands but our hands

to do His work today
He has no feet but our feet
to lead folks in His way.
He has no tongues but our
tongues to tell folks how He died.
He has no lips but our lips to
lead them to His side.
We are the only Bible
the careless world will read.

We are the sinner's gospel.
We are the scoffer's creed.
We are the Lord's last message
given in deed and word.
What if the line is crooked?
What if the type is blurred?
What if our hands are busy
with other work than His?
What if our feet are walking
where sin's allurements is?
What if our lips are speaking
of things His lips would spurn?
How can we hope to help Him
unless from Him we learn?

Jesus Christ needed people. He needs us. And we also need each other. In one of the churches that I served when I was a pastor, we started a series of small support groups which included teens and adults. Everyone in the group was invited to share needs and concerns, and asked to listen carefully to the sharing of others. About six weeks after these groups started to meet, a teen-age girl said to the adults in her group: "You are the first group of adults that has ever treated me like someone about to be a grown-up. Everyone else has treated me as a little kid, or a know-nothing, or a potential delinquent. But you people accept me as a person. I have never needed other people as much as I need you."

Our Lord is deeply aware of our need for one another, so much so that, after His resurrection and ascension, He came to live within His disciples as Holy Spirit through a very exciting community event – the day of Pentecost. It was an event in which the community became contagious. When Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come, He also predicted that the Apostles' witness would have a momentum kindled and sustained by God's universal love. In Acts 1:8, we read these words of Jesus: "...when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And so the people in that first Christian community ministered to each other, caring for all who were in need, and proclaimed this Christ of the empty cross. His power was real. Miracles of God's love happened. Caring poured out in every direction. And the witness to Christ, which God generated in this community, was vibrant and effective. Acts 2:41 reads: "Many of them believed Peter's message and were baptized, and about 3000 people were added to the group that day."

Notice the words that follow, in verse 42: "They spent their time in learning from the Apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers."

What a lifestyle! Evangelism, support, worship, and prayer! And the momentum continued. It was contagious witness, irrepressible joy, and, most of all, power, the Holy Fire of the compassionate, convincing, risen Lord.

And so it is with us. When your church members focus on the needy, hungry, inwardly starving people of the world, the Holy Spirit will come and give you power. Center your worship and preaching and fellowship on the Christ of the empty cross and He will empower you.

I'm going to make some practical suggestions for becoming a contagious community in your church:

1. Let your worship express the call of the Gospel to repentance and commitment to Christ. Include an evangelistic appeal that speaks to your constituency as you come to God in worship. For each of us, the specific method may be different. I offer two suggestions. For the last year and one-half, I have worshipped with a church that includes a time of personal sharing in their worship. For instance, a few weeks ago, a Purdue Professor of Economics was the person who shared. He said that the Associate Pastor of the church had called on him one night and invited him to ask Jesus Christ into his life. The Professor replied that such a thing was ridiculous. Said He: "I need scientific proof that all this hoopla about Jesus is true." So the Associate Pastor said, "If you need scientific proof, try an experiment. Say to Jesus, 'If you really are who you say you are, than prove it in my life.' The pastor continued: "Keep a record, day by day, of just what happens. In time, the economist was led into Bible studies and the group life of the church. One day, he realized that the experiment had worked, and he asked Jesus into his life. During his sharing in worship, he commented as follows: "It was as though a heavy gray cloud was removed from my life and I realized how totally selfish I had been."

The same church that includes the time of sharing in worship also has a prayer of commitment following the sermon. PRAYER OF COMMITMENT (prayed personally to receive Christ and His promises.) Lord Jesus, I ask you to come into my life. I trust you to take charge of my life for this moment and forever, to forgive my sins, and to grant me the assurance of eternal life in Your name. I expect now to receive the energizing power of your Holy Spirit, to live victoriously now and forever sharing this faith, strength, joy, and love with others in Jesus' name. Amen.

Then a brief invitation is given before the Benediction. The people are invited to meet with elders and deacons in the prayer room near the Sanctuary, at the close of worship to make a commitment to Christ. The results are positive. I asked one of the persons involved to evaluate this method of evangelism and whether or not people actually come to the prayer room after worship. He said: "Sometimes nobody comes, and other times, people do. It took a while for folks to get used to this approach. However, we are encouraged by the response that we get. People actually follow through with their commitment to Christ. Let your worship reflect the call of Christ to repentance and commitment. Let Sunday morning be a time of celebration in which new people are welcomed with warmth and acceptance and friendliness. Reach out with Christ's love and His invitation to new life.

1. And let your preaching do the same: Preach the Christ of the empty cross. I had a professor in seminary who said that every sermon needs to include the Good News of Christ. Preach it in different ways. Preach it creatively. But always seek to make the message of the Gospel vivid and exciting! The Gospel of Christ is not a sermon subject to be covered every so often followed by a deep sigh and the comment, “Well, I don’t have to deal with that for a while.” Preaching the Good News of Christ Jesus is like announcing an unbelievable happening that takes place over and over again: Even though we human beings act like we are God, God loves and accepts us anyway, comes to live as one of us in Jesus, and dies for us, forgiving our egotism. Jesus Christ rises from the dead to live within us and calls us to lose our lives for Him. There are many ways to preach the Gospel message as we focus on the specific needs of our people.

We met early the following week and with bubbling enthusiasm, each one made her or his contribution. It had been agreed that these meeting meetings would be taped, so I could listen to them afterward. During the next two days I continued my own exegesis and research, and listened to the tape. Then, I wrote the sermon. Of course, one of the positive side-affects of this process was that I was always sure there would be at least eight people in worship on Sunday, and each one reported great joy whenever one’s own content was included in the sermon.

Three weeks later, I recruited another group for a four week stint. Another interesting side-affect happened. I started listening more carefully to conversations and spontaneous comments, to be open to my peoples own story of what the Gospel means to them. Can you imagine what may happen if you focus such a process on Evangelistic preaching? On the first night, along with selecting the Scripture passages from a list that you provide, you could discuss the message of the Gospel with your group. The challenge for each of us the next three weeks could be as follows: In the context of the Scripture passage for this Sunday, look for insights and illustrations for the Gospel as you live, and watch also for experiences of Christian witness. Seek to make your witness, and share what happens with the group.

Each week, listen to the personal sharing from your group members, and lead them in a discussion of the next Sundays Scripture and what relationship it may have to evangelism. Then, three months later, recruit a new group. Such an approach includes: Preaching partnership, Bible Study, mutual support, and training in witness, all at the same time.

Let your preaching reflect the call of Christ to repentance and commitment. The Holy Spirit will speak with power as you preach!

3. And let your church program also focus on evangelism. Let the Bible studies and prayer groups and youth group and church school and Adult Education and Social Action Committee gear themselves toward outreach to new people.

Ask each group to develop a style of witness that structures their life and mission on strangers and new arrivals in the community and inactive members, and especially on those who openly reject the church. Lead the people in your church groups to listen carefully to the atheists and agnostics and the in actives and to invite them to the church. Ask your members to go out and call on people when their moving van is arriving. Your people can greet the new folks and invite them to worship and to the church's fellowship and service.

Your church members may resist this approach of reaching out to others. I recall that God called Jonah to open his arms to the people of Nineveh, and Jonah flatly refused. God outwitted Jonah. The people of Nineveh repented, and Jonah felt insulted. This poses a question that we need to answer: Do we, will we, in the church react to new and renewed Christians coming into our churches like Jonah reacted to the conversion of the people of Nineveh? Will we be jealous of their conversion because they might take our places? Will we be threatened, or even angry, as Jonah was, because our nice, neat, tidy club of Christians has to be upset by making room for new Christians?

Could this be one reason why we do not reach out with evangelism? I suggest a way to deal with this question. Combine Spiritual growth and evangelism in your church. Introduce Christian witness to your people one step at a time in a manner that reaches their needs and relates to their readiness.

- a. Begin by teaching a course on evangelism or leading a bible Study on the Book of Acts, or recruit another teacher to do so. Include short discussion in groups with two or three people in each group. Open, or conclude each class session with bidding prayers in which you name three or four subjects for prayer, and, after naming each subject, allow a minute or so for silent prayer. Assign a short Scripture passage for your people to read and think about the same passage during class time. In other words let your teaching on evangelism connect with mutual support, personal Bible study and prayer. Here, as in other ministries of evangelism, invite the involvement of new members and seekers.
- b. Next, teach a course on praying in solitude. Use the same approach the course on evangelism, combining traditional teaching with dialogue each person a verse of Scripture with brief commentary, each week, and ask everyone in the class to pray 5 minutes each day with that scripture verse. When the class meets each week, have the people form a partnership with one or two other persons and spend ten minutes sharing with each other out of their 5 minutes of prayer each day. Bring them back into the whole group and invite questions and comments. Keep the same persons together in pairs or triads each week

As the class moves on, ask your people to focus their 5 minutes of daily prayer time on the Christ of the empty cross, giving them appropriate

Scripture passages, and then teach prayer as power for evangelism, giving them passages which deal with witness, to pray over.

Clearly, I am not thinking that everyone here will follow the exact same teaching process which I have outlined. In fact, some of you may be way ahead of my suggestion. I do believe that some kind of teaching/experiencing/sharing/praying process is essential to ignite people with the Holy Fire of evangelism. Out of this teaching approach, some deeper expressions of evangelism may come, i.e.:

- a. A retreat on evangelism and spiritual growth. Combine the disciplines we are using in this Academy with your own members' ideas, concerns, hurts and dreams for their church. As you plan the retreat, ask a planning committee to honestly discuss with you how they feel about witnessing for Christ. Make sure that the retreat includes 2 or 3 twenty to thirty periods for praying in solitude, and ample time for sharing with partners. At the conclusion, have time to discuss follow-through – What do you do next? How do we become a praying witnessing church? Such a retreat may need to be planned well in advance and leadership secured and possibly at the same time you are planning your courses on evangelism and prayer.
- b. Following the classes which I mentioned a moment ago, or, as an outgrowth of the retreat, you can also encourage your people to form spiritual partnerships. These have been modeled by the several opportunities for sharing with partners whom you have provided. Invite interested persons to pray about a spiritual partner, asking God to guide them to a person with whom there can be rapport and understanding. Invite each one to become accountable to her or his partner for 5 minutes, Christ of the empty cross. Be willing to keep on providing appropriate Scriptures to the spiritual partners who come together, if they request you to do so, and challenge them to become accountable for their personal witness to Christ when each one is ready.
- c. Another outgrowth of retreat or of prayer and evangelism classes is the formation or re-formation of groups in your church. Everyone will not be ready for spiritual partnerships or even for prayer in solitude. There will be people whose fear or laziness toward evangelism will stand in their way for a while. For the folks who are not seeking to pray, make some support groups available, groups that deal with teens or social issues, or pre-schoolers, or mid-life, or retirement. Start with whichever group aims toward the deepest need in your church, and after the group has developed a relationship with Christ and with one another, keep building from there. Be sure to include discussions with partners and bidding silent prayer, to plant seeds for deeper spiritual growth.

Perhaps you will have some people who want to plunge into prayer in solitude and to form partnerships, but need the help of a group. A Care Group can be started in which people meet weekly to share their experience with praying in solitude, to encourage each other, and to pray, in silence or aloud, or both with each other. Again, their focus can be the Christ of the empty cross and their purpose can be to develop their group into a cadre of ambassadors for Christ who help each other as they grow into witnessing.

With all that I have suggested, please take only one step at a time. My purpose in giving several suggestions is to provide a number of ideas from which you may choose one as your next step in evangelism and spiritual growth, and then, when it is well in place, to take step #2.

Let's remember that the power for evangelism is not only God coming to us in prayer. It is also God reaching out to us through contagious community.

There is a familiar story of a woman who had a dream one night. In her dream she visited both heaven and hell. First she was taken to hell, and there she was surprised to find a large banquet hall containing tables laden with sumptuous food. On the wall was the one rule of the establishment which said that everyone had to use the utensils provided by the management. All of the people seated at this gourmet meal were starving, because all of the forks and spoons and knives were so long no one could get a morsel of food to his mouth. Then the woman went to heaven. She was astonished to discover the same setting, the same bountiful food, the same rule on the wall, and the same long forks and spoons and knives, but all of the people at this banquet were joyous and full. For they were feeding each other.