



Being of One Heart and Soul

ELIZABETH MACKIE asks if we are as radical and committed in community-building today as were the early Christians.

In the Acts of the Apostles we find intriguing references to how the early disciples began to build their first communities. The characteristics included a shared vision, leadership and the common good: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4: 32). This model of community living was a radical change in their lives. It was so radical that, as we read in Acts, some tried to avoid giving full commitment to this way of living and so held back some of their possessions (Acts 5:1-11).

Today the call to community, whether in families, workplaces, churches or countries is just as radical and demands a similar level of commitment. So what does it take

to build community or help existing communities to grow strong?

Shared Vision

To have "one heart and soul" requires participation and engagement around a specific purpose. This may be as straightforward as organising a staff outing or as complex as managing the United Nations or a global Church. It is imperative that as many members as possible take part in determining and communicating the overall vision. The vision will attract commitment from members and draw them together only if they feel they have been heard and they see their hopes and dreams included in the purpose or mission statement.

Shared Vision Produces Fruit

I observed a vivid example of people catching the vision in a South Asian

country in the early 1990s. Mia (not her real name), a young educated woman encouraged by her women friends, started community-building among very poor women in an urban area.

She went door-to-door gathering the women to talk about their situation and their needs. The women then formed into local groups and under Mia's leadership they developed ways of working together to improve their lives.

Mia's original idea evolved into a shared vision. Now the vision incorporates the wishes and voices of the thousands of women making up the organisation. And emanating from this community vision come outstanding results.

There are now several hundred local groups, all working for the good of women. They come together in regional assemblies to share

information, success stories, problems and to develop new plans.

The women have improved their literacy and numeracy, set up small businesses, campaigned against the excessive use of alcohol by their husbands and served in local government, where they significantly reduced the level of corruption and achieved tangible results for their communities.

I'm inspired by this community. They are empowering the most oppressed members of the population; they draw strength from one another; they are confident in claiming their rights of which they had previously been deprived or ignorant; and they have achieved greater security for their families. Mia (no longer young) is still working with them – but she's confident that the work can go on without her now.

I wonder – can we see a similar level of participation and commitment in our church communities? Do we listen to everyone and consider their ideas and needs? Do the least or the different know that their aspirations will be caught up in the overall vision of parish or diocese? Or, do we still have a long way to go in this regard?

Common Good

"Everything they owned was held in common." We see the practice of sharing in common in families, religious congregations of sisters and brothers and other forms of intentional community. But our modern societies have moved away from this notion of the common good.

In contrast to the community in Acts, we're confronted by individual and national consumerism, hoarding, tax evasion and greed in our societies. At the same time the poor remain poor, the hungry go without, and the homeless look for the safest doorway or bus station to shelter in.

We invite failure if we try to build community without challenging these individualistic and anti-community attitudes and values.

We understand the common good well at the family level – sharing and saving for what we need. And we admire the generosity of those who give to others in the form of

cash grants, clothing, food and other assistance. But if communities are to be strong, then the good of each member is paramount and each of us needs to contribute to ensure that all members have their needs met. This is a challenge for us today every bit as radical as for the first Christian communities.

The Rights and Good of All

The key lies in an understanding of the rights of all and the good of all. It is not simply a matter of some being generous and others needy. It is a deep belief in the rights of each person to share the goods of this Earth together in such a way that no one has too much, no one goes without and Earth is revered and cared for.

Communities depend on the strength of the relationships established among their members. When we genuinely love one another, then we can receive divergent opinions respectfully and debate vigorously without damaging our common vision and our bonds of relationship.

When we take the large picture view we know we are far from realising the common good, but we can see it flourishing in smaller community groupings.

I'm encouraged by the shift in language that some political leaders made in the last election campaign in New Zealand. Yes, we heard about the economy – endlessly. But we also heard about compassion, kindness and fairness in the rhetoric. And how refreshing and novel that was!

I remember how the South Asian women's organisation worked at sharing for the common good. In each local group they set up a system of small contributions which they held in common – like a community bank. Individual women could borrow from the community fund when they had a particular need. This system meant that the women could support one another and in doing so they deepened their reliance on one another.

Leadership

An important element in any community is to agree on the form of leadership. History provides endless examples of monarchical and hierarchical leadership, mostly patriarchal in nature and autocratic in practice. And vestiges of this leadership remain even in modern and enlightened democracies. To combat all-male control and to keep developing democracy, the United Nations and analysts publish records of the numbers of women and of minority groups represented in the parliaments of the world.

The Church is slow to make changes to the structures of leadership which are almost entirely hierarchical, patriarchal and clerical. But within the Church we find different models of leadership. For example, religious congregations, for the most part, have moved from a single "major superior" to a model of team leadership. In this model, decision-making happens in prayerful consultation and with deep respect for each member.

For communities to function positively and for the good of all in the group, the members need to know that their voice is vital for good decision-making and that their opinions matter.

The Greatest Is Love

Ultimately, communities depend on the strength of the relationships established among their members. When we trust freely and practise openness, when we genuinely love one another, then we can receive divergent opinions respectfully and debate vigorously without damaging our common vision and our bonds of relationship.

Such communities flourish and, like the early Christian communities, may elicit from "outsiders" the surprised response: "See how these Christians love one another!"

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Elizabeth Mackie OP, former assistant editor of *Tui Motu* magazine, is involved in community and parish and promotes *Tui Motu* each month.