

# WESTGATE PAPER

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... In a series of papers on or from Westgate Baptist Community...

## COMMUNITY : THE VISION

Why does the vision of community keep me excited? Why do I continue to use a word which is stretched, abused and worn?

The vision of community is really the vision of the Kingdom of God. It's the nearest I get to a picture of what life under God ought to be. Community is a quality of life springing from a one-ness in Christ and a fragrance arising from deep fellowship: it's a togetherness coming from serving one another, accepting one another and facing a hostile world together.

Of course every gathering of Christians possesses community to some degree. On the other hand no group has it perfectly. So every time we call ourselves 'a community' we claim more than we are. It's the danger of being the Westgate Baptist Community. It's the danger of having any sort of rhetoric which sounds better from the pulpit than it looks in the lives of the members.

But if we remember that 'community' is something we aspire to, a goal, like the full reign of God in our lives, we can avoid the danger. As long as we say 'This is the vision, though of course we don't achieve it fully', we don't become hypocrites. It only becomes a danger if we talk all the time about the vision and never move towards it.

### THE VISION

Here I want to outline the vision a bit. What do we mean when we talk about community here at Westgate? What are the things we aspire to here in Footscray? Don't worry about the shape community takes in other places just for the moment. What would we like to see and experience right here and now?

Let me take things in three dimensions, our relationships to God, to each other, and to the world at large.

#### 1. Relationship to God

The vision of community means that worship is a together thing. We are gathered to offer praise and obedience as a group. I agree with Graeme Garrett when he says that we need to work hard at worship in our Baptist tradition. He suggests that we need to move in the following directions: from aimlessness to genuine liturgy, from monologue to

dialogue, from being passive to being involved, from isolation to friendship, from biblical poverty to biblical richness, from keeping the world out to bringing the world into our worship.

My vision of community is that we will help each other to develop a spirituality. Those who value prayer and solitude will help those who find it hard, and there will not be a division between the "spiros" and activists.

## 2. Relationships to each other

The central concept in community is love, of course. Christian love calls us to include those we don't warm to as well as those we do. It calls us to treat with honour those of the other sex, of other races, of inferior understanding, of weaker will, of the 'wrong' ideology.

I don't find Christian love to be an airy-fairy thing. Our vision sees love as making real differences to our daily lives. We will want to live close enough to each other to be of practical use to each other. Here at Westgate we have said it's good to be within 10 minutes' walk of the others in our small group. We will want to share our possessions, showing a detachment from material things and a sacrificial attitude towards sharing money too. We will want to ensure that no-one in our community is unable to lead a normal life due to poverty while others are rich.

We will share our time too. We will realise how fragile and easily discouraged we often are so we will try to listen and encourage one another. We will be forced by every crisis and our own failures to grow and mature and we'll learn that forgiveness is one of the central Christian virtues. We'll not only be forgivers, but also footwashers. Not status seekers, but status-givers, enobling others by our humble service. All this is straight from the life and teaching of Jesus, our Lord. This is what it means to be his disciple.

One of the big differences between a Christian community and average Australian groups will be our open homes. Instead of jealously guarding privacy, and spending all our time and money on our small castle, I have a vision of people who welcome others: inviting them to meals, putting others up in spare rooms, taking in the homeless. Such hospitality is another virtue close to the heart of being a disciple in community.

Because of our tendency not to live up to our own ideals, we will help each other to stick to our commitments - we will be accountable to each other, something not often practised in our small groups yet. Our commitments will be clear and costly, expressed in covenants which bind us and inspire us. Because of the overwhelming pressures of the outside world to live by its values and not those of Jesus, I have a vision of the Christian community thrashing out the details of what it means to follow Jesus. It will sustain the vision, and flesh it out. The further into costly mission the community goes, the more it will need solidarity for survival, the more its members will need each other to keep rooted in God's values, keep clearheaded about the subtle pressures of society in the 1980's.

### 3. Relationship to the world

I have a vision, perhaps above all, of a church which stands out as a beacon in the world because it lives out the life of the Kingdom - it demonstrates love between its members. In a fragmented world falling apart, it shows care, practical love and an ability to keep people together - in themselves and as a group.

A community of Jesus' disciples will be known for their simplicity and care-free attitude to possessions. They will be defenders of the poor. That means they will live where the poor live, experience some of the limitations of being poor, share time and money sacrificially with the poor, and become co-workers with them in fighting oppression against the poor by the rich. Such a community will be driven by compassion and a desire to change the structures that are not fair, or put people second to profit, or threaten our environment. Such a community would be able to make a real contribution to the campaign for world peace because its members were peacemakers in their own community, knowing how hard it is to live at peace in Footscray, let alone between nations.

Well, that's a sketch of the sort of Xn community which inspires me, draws me on and makes me want to continue the journey.

### SOME SHORTCOMINGS

There's no doubt that Westgate has started on the road. In fact it has a bit of a name amongst others.

But again we know that the rhetoric is much better than the reality. We know that small groups can often be a disaster - even going to them can be a duty for months on end. I know that members of small groups can go for a month or even three months without a caller to their place or a phone call to say 'How are you?'. A person who visited Westgate to do a field study report for her Urban Mission unit in theology found herself standing alone during our morning tea - no-one talked to her until after it was all over. I know that we still value our independence, our privacy, our income, and our right to do our own thing, so much so that group feeling is hard to generate. I know that most of us have an almighty struggle to pray and study God's word, and that worship is still often a case of a few being active and the rest passive.

I know that personality clashes have sometimes led to lack of forgiveness, so that here at Westgate some feel there are cliques, and there are people who hardly talk. I know that although we get several requests a week for emergency accommodation, there are few homes in the community we can turn to - our housing arrangements are made in such a way that the homeless seldom get a look in. I know that there is very little concrete activity going on for social justice and that for many it is just an armchair radicalism. I know that despite a wider than usual spread of jobs in the church, there are still many people who don't feel important and, if asked, would say that they don't have any gifts which are useful in the community. Some are overworked and others are feeling useless. I know that the sense of community, the feeling of oneness, the joy of being together, is often missing in the organisational busyness of Westgate.

We are only beginners in community. We have so much to learn about commitment, about sacrifice, about joy, about identifying with the poor. It is sometimes said 'scratch a radical and you find a conservative underneath'. Well, 'scratch a community member and you find an individualist underneath'. We like the sound of togetherness but we also like the life of doing one's own thing.

I haven't listed all these shortcomings simply to depress us. It is a common thing for people to place all their faith in a panacea, or a universal remedy. People flock to community just as they did to the Jesus movement or the charismatic movement or the ecumenical movement or the radical discipleship movement. When the first exhilarating phase is over people usually become dissatisfied, because somehow things aren't as good as they had hoped. And we are the reason. We imperfect people are the limitations of small groups, for instance. We are our own enemies in spiritual growth.

#### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Of course, people usually come up with a variety of things to blame. Here at Westgate I have heard several, all of which have a degree of truth about them.

1. Some say that the vision has been lost, or that people don't understand community like they did before we got big. The ideals have become diluted. Perhaps we cater to everyone and satisfy no-one. The solution is clearer teaching, a setting out of the vision. Well, that's the purpose of this paper. It's needed. It's important.
2. Others say that when it all boils down it's a lack of will or nerve to live it out. It's disobedience. Or, more gently, the way is hard - don't expect many to follow it. This type of blame usually comes from those who are working their guts out and wonder why others won't join them. The solution is to preach tough. Fewer comfort sermons and more challenge ones. And it's needed. It's important (though it's easier to generate guilt trips than it is to motivate people for the long haul).
3. Others would say similar things in a different way. We block the Spirit, they would say. What we need is for us to open ourselves to God's power, his joy and his leading. They would blame spiritual blindness or coldness or too much "head-stuff" without the "heart stuff". The solution is prayer, retreat, tuning in to what God wants us to do. This is also true, and important. It's a combination of saying that we lack the vision and lack the nerve (1 and 2). When God guides us and empowers us, we have both clarity of direction and inspiration to do even hard things.
4. Others say that the limitations lie in the leadership. The pastors and deacons are a hopeless lot - well we all know that! Actually, I hear the leaders thinking this the most. When you feel shortcomings in a group where you exercise some leading role the first place you look is at what you are doing wrong. Am I too low-key? Do I develop others' gifts enough? Is the teaching adequate? How can I get around to everyone who feels isolated? Why can't I get my message

across clearly enough? The solution is to work at it harder, or do things a different way. This sort of adjustment occurs all the time, and it's needed. It's important. It's one of the reasons the community appointed two part-time additions to the pastoral team, to broaden and make more creative the leadership team around here.

5. Others say that the pressures of the world are too strong, that Westgate has caved in to the prevailing culture. We all watch TV, drive our own car, have wardrobes of clothes, and think in a 20thC individualistic way. The solution is to work harder at lifestyle changes, to develop our own counter-culture, live out a real alternative.
6. Others say that the problem is that the church in general has moved so far from its first century vitality that we are almost exploring uncharted territory, so we've got to expect to find the going hard, and make big mistakes. It will take a long time for community to be the accepted goal of all churches, and we will have been pioneers.

Well, there is truth in all of these reasons, but I come back to the simple but profound root of it all - us in our humanity and imperfection, carrying a bag of fragility, prejudice, fear, foolishness and pride. We can't expect perfection in this life. But we can hope for steady growth. Over time, if we find more trust in each other, more commitment, deeper understanding of the poor and why the fight must be continued - if there is movement, then there will be joy and vision.

So I don't feel depressed about Westgate as long as there is progress along the pilgrim path. If having more people worshipping with us means that the vision is lost, then I'm alarmed. We will have to return to the strategy of four years ago, and form small groups who mean business and aim to inspire the whole church. No looking sideways and blaming others, but a strong desire to live it out ourselves.

#### THE NEXT STEPS?

There are four things I'd like to pick out as important for us all at this stage of things. I sense they could help us to regain momentum towards community.

1. Develop commitment to each other in our small groups. By this I mean pledge to care for each other, and discuss in the group whether it happens. I hear of a couple of groups who only see each other at their weekly meeting. They are meetings not community groups. Commitment is essential if we are to love each other.
2. Find ways to open our lives to others. Begin with each other and move out into the wider community. How often do you have neighbours in, or others from work, or playgroup, or school, or other groups? Consider putting someone up occasionally on a folding bed, and follow up the contact. Have a regular time each week or fortnight when you invite others home for a meal. At the pace at which you feel comfortable, grow out of the need to live in a castle and learn to share more of your life with

3. Remember the profound truth that the divine is the ordinary transformed. Jesus washed his disciples feet. He said feeding the hungry and putting up the homeless was divine worship. Do things for each other as if you were doing it for your Lord. Baby-sitting, inviting elderly people for a drive, picking someone up for church, mowing lawns, listening when someone pours out their woes, writing a short note of encouragement, ringing to see how an exam went - all these are ordinary things, but through them we can learn to see God himself. A lot of people who come wanting to see community go away puzzled because all they see are ordinary things happening in Spotswood or Yarraville. The divine is the ordinary transformed.
4. And finally, keep your eyes on the vision. Don't lose the horizon because of the mud at your feet. If you read, make sure you stimulate yourself to be a radical disciple with a book like The Upside Kingdom, or Watson's Radical Discipleship. Or become incensed about the arms race by reading Sider & Taylor's Nuclear Holocaust and Christian Hope. If you don't read, join a tape library like the Platypus Library at the Gentle Bunyip, and listen to some of their scores of speakers at conferences on community, on social justice, on prayer, on Australian society, on bible-study - on anything you want. Don't rely on one or two leaders here at Westgate to keep your inspiration up. Be a vision-keeper yourself.

We must help each other by keeping the lamp held high, reminding ourselves what it is we aspire to, what it is Jesus calls us to do, what it is we struggle for, with pain and joy.

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