

(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), and M. T. Kelsey, *Healing and Christianity* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1973). These books, while not elementary works, should be quite readable to anyone who is used to reading reasonably serious literature. Oates looks at some of the distortions of religion; Weatherhead explores the relationship of psychology, religion and healing throughout history with particular reference to Jesus' ministry and approaches in the last century. Kelsey also treats his topic over the range of history since New Testament times and asks, in particular, why present day Christianity has lost some of the accent on healing which was clearly part of Jesus' ministry. He traces how this emphasis was lost in the church and asks whether we ought to consider restoring it today.

# 3

## THE BUILDING OF GOD'S COMMUNITY

*That was the kind of affection we had for you which made us ready to share with you, not only God's good news, but our own lives, too.*

—I Thessalonians 2:8 (Goodspeed)<sup>1</sup>

As Christians we are architects, redesigning community life in conformity with Christ's specifications. Our chosen instrument is the church which for centuries has been the visible symbol of Christ's presence and activity in the world. Despite distortions which have periodically blunted the impact of its true purpose, the church has continued to mediate God's spiritual presence to the human family, transforming the quality of its life.

Today, as the community obedient to Christ, it continues to exert a leavening influence on society, enabling it to rise to a new and better plane of communal living. As part of the church in our era, our role is to dramatize, through our own lives, the concern for others upon which true community is built.

### "BEING-THERE-FOR-OTHERS"

During the last months of his life, while confined to a Nazi prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sketched the outline for a book which he never lived to complete. In the fragments preserved for us, we find him defining the essence of Christian discipleship as "being-there-for-others". For him, this captured the accent on servanthood which marked Jesus's career.<sup>2</sup> Life for Jesus, as it must be for us, was "defined by a wholehearted response to the claim of the neighbour in the midst of the world".<sup>3</sup> There is ample evidence that Bonhoeffer's phrase grasps a major theme of the Christian life as the scriptures interpret it. For in Jesus' estimation, the law is largely summed up in neighbourliness and greatness is associated with servanthood.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the church becomes the servant community and being the church means being there for others, on Christ's behalf. However, it is clear from a study of the passages noted above that community among people only becomes possible in the deepest sense in the context of communion with God. For, as a branch of God's activity in the world, we cannot bear the fruits of his Spirit if we are cut off from the source of life which makes us grow. Love of neighbour, Jesus repeatedly reminded us, is a byproduct of devotion to God.<sup>5</sup>

### \* THE CLAIM OF THE NEIGHBOUR on the church

"Neighbours", as we are defining them here, appear, of course, in the church community as well as the wider community in which the church stands.

- What do church members (what do *you* as a church member) look to the church for? What needs do you/they expect it to serve? What claims do they (or you) make upon it?
- What might the wider community be expecting of the church? What claims does it make?

NOTE: Rather than merely guessing at the answer to these questions you could conduct an actual survey to find out. You could survey church members. You might also make enquiries in the community by:

- asking non-church people you know,
- door-to-door survey,
- asking key personnel in community services and institutions e.g. school headmasters, doctors, hospital or prison superintendents.

What role do these people see the church as playing in the community? We may not always agree with the responses they give, but, in asking the question, we are helping to establish a basis for dialogue. Knowing what other people are expecting of us is important.

It might be objected that the community no longer makes claims on the church. Certainly this may be true for some citizens. But many are apt to see its value in times of crisis (such as problems, weddings or death). At least that offers an initial point of contact. And perhaps their views may challenge us to re-think our role.

Being there for others clearly reminds us of the importance of our presence with them in situations of personal need. However, it has another application which we in the church attend to less often. It means giving moral and practical support to underprivileged groups in our community who have a vested interest in initiating certain changes in the structure of community life.

Many groups and individuals suffer under social or physical conditions which they are powerless to change by themselves. They face injustices and discrimination which they do not have the resources to fight alone. In some of our cities, for instance, there are immigrant communities who do not fully understand our customs and are disadvantaged in situations where they neither understand their rights nor comprehend the laws.

We sometimes forget that the social structure of our society—which we have inherited from Britain and other western countries—is totally strange and unsuited to many other cultural groups. Australia faces this clash of cultures with the Aboriginal people. In New Zealand, it appears with respect to Polynesian peoples who, even among themselves, have many diversities of custom which we are prone to overlook or ignore. The "problem" (if that is the right word for it) belongs as much to the white citizens of these countries as it does with the Aboriginal or Polynesian peoples. In Auckland, some people are puzzled when Pacific Island immigrants do not avail themselves of city counselling services, visit the city's lawyers, attend the technical institute or utilize other services when they have particular problems or needs. They forget that the pattern according to which these things operate is geared to our individualistic, western way of life. Certainly, if immigrant peoples are to make their home in our countries, some flexibility and adaption will be required of them. But we who are residents schooled in western ways can also learn that their cultures have something to offer us and that the structures of our society must respond to other people's customs and needs as well as our own.

Of course, there are other cultural groups apart from those we have mentioned. The point, however, is essentially the same. Some of our cities, in particular Melbourne, Sydney and Auckland, are notably cosmopolitan in character. This creates special needs which we should respond to. There are many groups who because of their race, their culture, or their attitudes do not feel welcome in our countries. They feel trapped by stresses which they are unable to alleviate alone or swamped by grievances which they are impotent to redress. Many of us have the ability to do something about the situation, yet lack

the inclination. Being there for others means that we *must* become involved, standing by others and speaking for them when they cannot speak loud enough to be heard themselves.

Some Christians have felt that it is not the proper concern of the church to express opinions on social questions or to become involved in political struggles. Certainly Jesus carefully shunned politics, and we cannot argue, as some have, that he was really a political activist. He was concerned lest the primary purpose for his life should become obscured by political overtones. However, it should also be remembered that what he opposed was a futile nationalistic rebellion of Jews against their Roman overlords. He wanted no part in such partisan struggles because his was a global concern which transcended national and racial barriers.

However, the prophetic tradition in Israel addressed social issues and fought oppression and injustice on a community scale. And, while Jesus shunned political revolution, he blatantly ignored the social prejudices of his day. He spoke with a Samaritan woman—an act which defied local custom (John 4:9) and made the focal character in his illustration of true neighbourliness a Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). He was accused of associating with segments of the community which the religious people, judging by their criticisms of him, would have nothing to do with. The parable of Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31) is clearly directed at social injustice, while there were times when Jesus was concerned not just about individuals but about the city as a whole (Luke 19:41). We cannot adequately respond to the challenge of Matthew 25:31-46 without expanding the scope of our mission beyond simple one-to-one pastoral relationships either. For we know that feeding the hungry means more than giving people food, and that clothing the naked means more than donating clothes. We are more enlightened than that, which is why we foster programmes like the Colombo Plan as a means to help and encourage people to develop the art of feeding and clothing themselves. But this, in our era, means political and social involvement among other things.

Societies are accountable to God for the way they are run, and individuals are responsible for the kind of society they produce or permit. Inasmuch as Christians fail to join the fight against the prevailing injustices in their community they are partly responsible for them. For, as we established in our very first chapter, the failure to act when action was needed was regarded by Jesus as one of the primary impediments to the establishment of his kingdom. To care genuinely for individuals, we must be concerned to eradicate the social evils which distort their lives and stunt their growth. We cannot

restore wholeness in people when society is broken by strife; we cannot adequately sustain individuals in a ministry of caring when social unrest undermines the very stability and security they need. Neither can we promote reconciliation when elements within our community will not accept one another as brothers and sisters in spite of personal differences.

Being-there-for-others, then, focuses on the theme of the church as the serving community continuing the accent on servanthood and love which marked Jesus' career.

## WAYS OF HELPING OTHERS

The scope of our involvement in the community embraces three general areas of concern: prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. They are concepts borrowed from the field of mental health but they offer us a useful framework for considering ways of helping others.

### Prevention

In many respects this is the key area—and frequently the most neglected. Involvement with others at the prevention level requires us to become more fully aware of the kinds of situations which might foster personal problems.

The aim is to create the kind of community conditions which generate health and mature growth and which give people every opportunity to develop their God-given abilities in the fullest way. When difficulties do emerge, the aim is to respond to them before they snowball. The emphasis here is in the early detection of problems. These two patterns of prevention may be distinguished as follows.

| Primary                                                                                                                     | Secondary                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus on the quality of life in our homes schools churches places of work and recreation.                                   | Concerned with early detection of and help for brewing problems or developing tensions.                                                                         |
| Primary prevention seeks to encourage a quality of relationships and environment where people can become what God intended. | Intervention to provide appropriate help before the situation worsens. We can offer direct help ourselves or enable and assist people to get professional help. |

## Treatment

People who have difficulty coping with their behaviour or feelings, and those who become physically ill or injured, may reach a point where they require specialized treatment. Some secondary prevention, as we have said, involves treatment. Here we are focusing on treatment in the community and that received in an institutional setting such as a hospital.

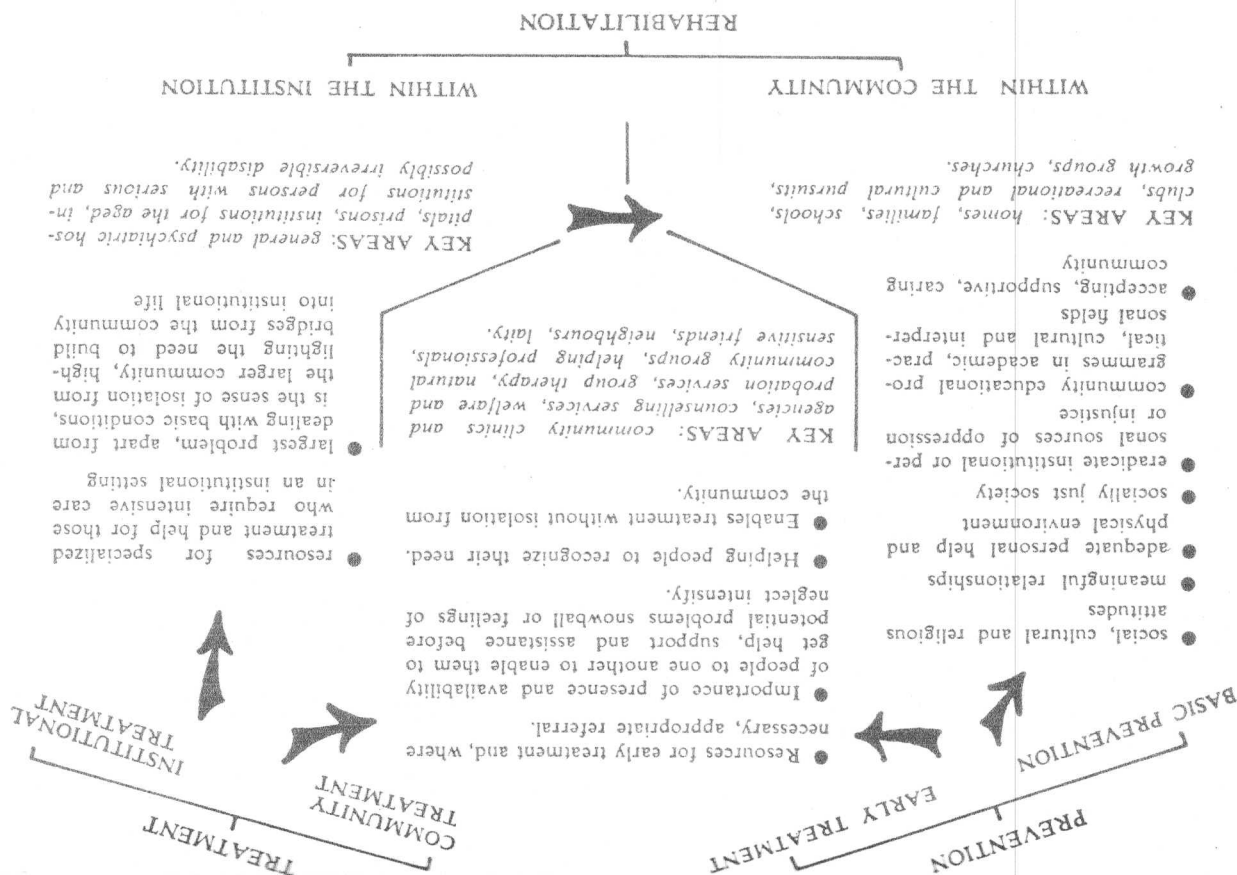
| Community Treatment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Institutional Treatment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No social isolation. Person remains in the community.<br><i>Examples:</i> community agencies and services, counselling centres, outpatient clinics.<br><i>Basic Needs:</i> emotional support while they receive specialized care.<br>Practical help if their condition makes this necessary. | Withdrawn from community and thus socially isolated.<br><i>Examples:</i> hospitals, borstals, prisons, geriatric homes, institutes for the disabled.<br><i>Basic Needs:</i> Dealing with feelings of social isolation and about being in an institution.<br>Contact of some sort with the outside world and concern about how things are going without them, e.g. in the family or at work.<br>Practical help, e.g. reading material. |

## Rehabilitation

Re-entry into the community after major illness or a prolonged period of institutional life (e.g. prison or hospital) can require considerable support and help.

For some it may involve temporary or permanent readjustments (for example, where people's illness or injury means that they must adjust to a different lifestyle). Many people, upon being discharged from prison or a psychiatric hospital, find the wider community threatening or bewildering. In some circumstances, society can feel like a hostile environment, and people who feel this way about it need emotional and practical support.

Through involvement with people in these three areas (prevention, treatment and rehabilitation) we have an opportunity—even a responsibility—to offer material, spiritual and human assistance. The chart on page 41 seeks to sum up this section and offer a basis for reflection concerning our involvement in the community.



## COMMUNITY INVENTORY

The aim of the following is to familiarize yourself with the nature of the community in which your church stands and which it is seeking to serve. Broadly, the key questions are:

- What is your community like?
  - What are its primary needs?
  - How might your church contribute to their fulfilment?
- The first task is to *describe* the community you are in. You may be able to answer some of the following questions from informed guesses. Other sources could be census statistics, local bodies, schools or your own survey.

### Population

- What sort of people live in your area? Specifically:
- *Age*—what proportion of children, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged, elderly are represented. Which groups are most and least numerous?
  - *Marital status*—what proportion are married, single, widows, widowers, solo parents?
  - *Cultural and ethnic composition*—what are the main cultural and ethnic groups?
  - *Occupation*—what proportion are professionals, skilled/unskilled workers, part-time workers or students? Do a significant proportion of the women work? Is there an unemployment problem? Are there large numbers of students?

### Social activities

How adequate are recreational and cultural services in the community, such as clubs, sports teams, theatres and social service groups

### Community services

What community services are available in the way of medical and counselling services, hospitals, welfare and probation services etc?

### Special needs and problems

- Is there something special about your area which might influence your church's ministry?
- Are there needs which are presently unmet?
- Do special difficulties require attention?

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Once we have grasped the nature of the community we can consider how we might relate to it.

- How representative is your church of the population profile in your area? Are some groups under-represented? If some are, why are they? How could you respond to this situation?

(Note: It does not always follow that because certain groups are under-represented the church is not doing its job. For example, there may be a particular ethnic group in the community which prefers and regularly attends its own church. This might account for their absence in other churches.)

- Are there community services, social needs or recreational opportunities which the church could provide? Where are the greatest areas of need? E.g., provision of a day care centre, club for the elderly. . . .

- How do you see your church's role in co-operating with and complementing existing community services? For example, are there hospitals, psychiatric facilities, homes for the elderly, borstals or other institutions which might profit from the concerned interest of church lay people?

- Are there agencies relying on volunteer workers still requiring help?

- How adequately do you feel your church life is geared toward meeting the needs of persons and groups in the community?

- What do you see as the *distinctive* role which the *church* can play in community life (i.e. what contributions can it offer which are not provided by any other group or agency)?

- Using the chart on page 41 outlining the relationship between prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, where in this system do you feel the church could play an active role?

## HOW TO VALUE OTHERS

In his relationships Jesus dramatized the importance of valuing others. In fact, it was because he valued them that he was so concerned about the quality of their lives. For him, love was the supreme quality in all relationships. Most of what we know about it is derived from the nature of his own life. We see it exemplified in his encounters with people. And when he taught about it, he preferred stories to lectures, feeling that it was best illustrated in that manner. In reflecting upon what Christian love meant for Jesus, we are struck by at least four dimensions.

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1. *Firstly, there was a concern for truth.* People were encouraged to be honest with one another and with themselves. Deceit, by contrast, was seen as a destructive force.

2. *The provision of support.* Jesus did not use truth in a cold rejecting way to cut people down. Rather it had a constructive function as a basis for growth. And his concern for people was always reinforced with encouragement. Ultimately, people were directed toward God as the sustainer of life.

3. *The accent on freedom.* The purpose of support was not to make people totally dependent. Emotional support, as Jesus knew, could become possessive, and he asserted his own independence on one occasion when his family was concerned about him. Part of valuing others is permitting them the opportunity to develop and use their own freedom. There is always the possibility that, once free, people may develop in ways which we do not like. But this is part of the risk involved in maturity. As we saw in the story of the Prodigal Son, the father did not attempt to confine the boy's aims, even though he knew that there was a chance that things might go wrong.

4. *The promise of acceptance.* As we pursue that same story to its conclusion we find that the father accepted the son even though he had used his freedom unwisely. In this way, he emphasized that the son's worth and importance to him could not be eroded by a shoddy performance in life. The son, who was able to recognize the ways he had abused his freedom, returned with a humble sense of perspective, confessed and asked for the forgiveness he received. He was startled when he found that he was not required to earn it. The point was that he had matured and learned something from going his own way, even though he had run across some troubled moments and desperate times. He certainly grew far more than he would if he had stayed at home.

## SUMMARY

We concluded the previous chapter by noting how Christianity stressed the eternal worth of the individual. In this chapter we have focused on the ways in which we can value others. We have emphasized the importance of our being available to them in their moments of need. Sometimes this involves one-to-one personal relationships. But it also invites us to stand by groups in the community who rely heavily on our help in order to sustain their emotional, physical and spiritual survival.

We cannot adequately relate to the needs of others unless we fully understand the community in which they (and we) live. The only

adequate pathway to understanding is dialogue. And the church must learn to dialogue with people in its neighbourhood, listening to their needs and concerns and responding with the resources which it has come to value as part of its tradition. But here we are raising a question of communication which is sufficiently important to be dealt with on its own. Thus, the question which we carry with us into our next chapter is this: "How can the church build and sustain better communication lines connecting its personal and spiritual resources with the needs of community members?"

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Bible: An American Translation*, New Testament translated by J. E. Goodspeed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931).

<sup>2</sup> D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, E. Bethge, ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc, new enlarged edition first published 1971, first MacMillan paperback edition 1972), p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:43-44; Matthew 2:34-40; Luke 10:25-37; John 15:11-13.

In Paul, see Romans 13:8-10 and 15:1-3; Galatians 5:14 and 6:2.

<sup>5</sup> John 15:1-17; Matthew 22:34-40; 1 John 3:23-24 and 4:7-21.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

*On community life within the church*

D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1954), is a devotional book which grew out of his experiences in an underground Christian community established by the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. It focuses on the depth of Christian fellowship in that setting with much that is of abiding value to Christian communities anywhere. Two books focus on fostering the development of small groups for a variety of growth functions in the church. H. J. Clinebell, *The People Dynamic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and R. C. Leslie, *Sharing Groups in the Church* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971).

*On church involvement in the wider community*

J. B. Ashbrook, *Be/Come Community* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971) and H. J. Clinebell, ed., *Community Mental Health: The Role of Church and Temple* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970) which is a collection of a wide variety of articles on the subject.

C. L. Goddard has assembled a useful resource focusing on some of the themes of this chapter in terms of their application to children. Entitled *Learning to Live with Others* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953) it offers an outline for encouraging community in children in a junior camp setting.