

**Towards a Christian understanding of the  
concept of human “Community”, with special  
reference to the praxis of a non-government  
human services delivery organisation**

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to develop a coherent Christian understanding of an approach to the concept of community that will inform program and service development and delivery for a major Christian urban mission and community care organisation. It begins not with theories of community but with a biblical theology of community which forms the basis for synthetic theological and cultural conclusions. These, in turn, guide a series of statements which, taken together, are intended to provide decision-making principles for the care organisation, in this case, Anglicare Sydney.

*1. DEFINING COMMUNITY*

‘Community.’ It is a term that evokes warmth, belonging and a sense of home. Almost everyone wants it, endorses its promotion, and rues its demise. But almost everyone struggles to define this entity.

If the massive entry in OED<sup>1</sup> is anything to go by, there is good reason to be at sea. ‘Community’ can simply point to people living in a place. In its more conceptual guise, it describes commonality of ownership, of identity, of agreement or of character. It describes localised concepts of sociality, communion, fellowship, or association. High-level associations such as society, or the polity of ‘states’, also attract the appellation ‘community’. A broad collective term such as ‘community’ can be defined in many different ways. ‘Community’ is small or large, abstract or personal, conceptual or concrete, intimate or technical, and much more.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, CD-ROM v. 4.0.0.2. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Such enormity of semantic range might suggest to us that any analysis of ‘community’ is meaningless. Yet as with many concept concepts, even as we give up and walk away in fright or despair we realise that something real and important remains. Despite the vagueness of its boundaries and the ambiguities it connotes, ‘community’ still begs to be specified.

ANGLICARE Sydney is the urban mission and community care arm of the evangelical Anglican Diocese of Sydney. As one of Australia’s largest Christian not-for-profit and non-government care organisations, ANGLICARE reaches out to thousands of people every year. In the Australian context, non-government organisations from all faiths and no faith act as delivery agents for many government funded programs. Not all of ANGLICARE’S work is funded by government, but its programs are often conducted in partnership with government or as an agent of government. In the 2009 financial year its government funding of around \$A47 mil. (£22.6 mil.) accounted for some 65% of ANGLICARE’S total income.<sup>2</sup> In its strategic plan,<sup>3</sup> this organisation undertook to ‘focus on human community’, to ‘have a positive relationship with the wider community’, and ‘to serve the whole community’. Toward these ends, it also undertook to ‘develop a coherent Christian understanding of an approach to the community that will inform program and service development and delivery’.

We were invited to help develop this understanding. This article arose from our efforts. We sought to wrestle with the concept of community theologically, but with special reference to the specific vocational needs of field-workers who seek to enact a Christian ethos within a non-government organisation.

Rather than surveying and arbitrating between all the theories of community available, and given the evangelical Christian roots of the organisation, we sought firstly to examine the concept of community in the Bible. We then offer some synthetic theological and cultural conclusions based upon these biblical observations. In seeking to develop practical ways of applying this concept of community within ANGLICARE, we then provide a series of statements which, taken together, help to define community more specifically.

In a very real sense, we present the article as the first iteration of a heuristic process. Given our human creaturely limitation and the enormity of the topic, we seek and are interested in the kind of conversation and comment

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<sup>2</sup> ANGLICARE 2009 *Financial Report*. Online: <http://www.anglicare.org.au/about-us>.

<sup>3</sup> ANGLICARE *Strategic Plan 2007-2009*. Online: <http://www.anglicare.org.au/about-us>.

that might sharpen our thinking and further enable ANGLICARE's praxis, while also enabling ANGLICARE to remain authentically Christian.

## 2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL<sup>4</sup>

Such a broad concept as 'community' is infinitely examinable from Scripture. We have adopted a 'biblical theological' approach to the topic, looking at how the concept develops as God's involvement with humanity unfolds through Scripture. (Space forbids an exhaustive consideration of all possible data.) In summary, the Bible moves from the creation of beings in communion with God and each other, through a narrative of disunity, corruption and all the consequences of rejecting this communion, to the restoration of the communion by God and the promise of a return to unity between God and humanity where God dwells with his people in harmony (Rev. 21:3).

Some themes can be observed:

*2.1. God's community.* The earliest biblical idea of community occurs in Genesis 1:26, when God says, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' God 'cooperates' within himself to create something 'like' himself—mankind. Verse 27 adds the dimension of sex, indicating that mankind is created in God's image as male and female. God blesses this created 'community' of man and woman with the gift of the earth and everything in it. The nature of the human communion of man and woman is one of 'helping', a term that does not imply status differentiation but loving attentiveness (Gen. 2:18). The man and woman 'hold fast' to each other (Gen. 2:24), so close that they are 'one flesh', 'naked' and 'not ashamed'. It is an image of intimacy where individuality and togetherness are not in tension, but in harmony.

*2.2. Breaking community.* The unity of creation is quickly and dramatically disrupted by creaturely disobedience. The result of disobeying God is 'enmity' between creatures; animal, woman and man (Gen. 3:15 and 16b). Genesis 4-11 describes the historical consequences of disobedience, where relations between God and humanity are fractured and murder, immorality, shame and hubris characterise human relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not our intention to survey relevant secondary literature, but we note the following helpful works (although without claiming always to have reflected their content): Robert Banks, *Paul's idea of community: the early house churches in their historical setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); W. J. Dumbrell, *The faith of Israel: its expression in the books of the Old Testament* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989); Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 2004).

*2.3 Abram’s family.* In Genesis 12, God calls Abram with the promise of community: he will begin a ‘great nation’, a great name and a great blessing. ‘All the families of the earth’ will be blessed through Abram, promises the Lord (Gen. 12:2-3). This extraordinary divine call to a new community directs the rest of Scripture. Out of Abram and Sarai’s barrenness, God raises a community, sealed by the covenant of circumcision—what was humanly impossible is made possible by God.

*2.4 God’s people.* The plan to prosper Abram’s name begins to be fulfilled through the Israelites in Egypt, whom God refers to as his people (Exod. 6:7). God’s people are to be distinctive—holy—and God delineates this community’s life by giving the law to Moses on Mt Sinai after rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. Israel is to be a community that obeys God, rests in God’s goodness, and enjoys his fellowship. To the extent to which they do this, they are blessed. However, the record of the Old Testament reveals how far Israel betrayed this covenant; they remained a ‘holy nation’ only because God was merciful in judgement. Prophet after prophet would call Israel back to true community with God, but to no avail. It would require God to form a ‘new covenant’ with them in order for the promise to Abram to be fulfilled.

Israel was always also to be an inclusive community, with ‘outsider’ welcomed in a variety of ways. By constituting Israel as a ‘priestly kingdom’ in Exodus 19:6, God intended this nation to mediate him to the outside world. Moses performs just such a role when proclaims God’s goodness and pleads with his Midianite father-in-law to join them (Num. 10:29). The theme of inclusion is made explicit in Isaiah 56:3-7. In a milieu that had forgotten Israel’s ‘priestly’ call, Jesus radically reaffirms it in his extraordinary detour to Syro-Phoenicia (his only recorded ‘international’ journey) and by his ministry to the women there (Mk 7:24-30).

*2.5. The kingdom of God, the new covenant, the Body of Christ.* Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom of God, the news that God would rule, righteous judgement would take place, and Israel’s true destiny would be fulfilled. To live in the kingdom would mean to become God’s people. It would be made possible by the ‘new covenant’ signed in Jesus’ blood, spilled to pay for the sins of all (Matt 26:28). Bloody circumcision of the flesh is superseded by bloody circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:29), so that all can be part of the new Israel, not just ethnic Jews. The new community of God would know no racial or cultural boundaries. Sinners could now be in communion with God, because Jesus’ sacrificial death has made them clean, holy and acceptable in his sight.

Hence Paul is appointed as ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ in a brief given him by Jesus (Acts 9:15, 22:21, 26:17), and repeated in many of his letters. These letters are filled with the vision of God smashing down barriers that divide.

Romans 1-2 emphasises that God's judgment comes against Jew and Gentile equally, 'for God shows no partiality' (Rom. 2:11), and the subsequent argument of Romans sets out in part to show that God's grace comes to Jew and Gentile alike. Similarly, Paul declares that 'as many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:27-28).

In short, Christ now defines who 'they' are. Their 'community identity' is no longer reducible to their histories, their preferred friendships, their institutional roles, or their ties of blood and kinship (significant as these are). Walls are crumbling, and groups who banded against each other are blended to become 'one in Christ Jesus' (cf. Col. 3:10-11 and Eph. 2:14-17.) Hence an important image of community for Paul becomes the 'body'. It acts for Paul as an analogy of church identity and behaviour, a way of describing unity and diversity, different roles and functions within the one grouping. Paul subverts the body metaphor by saying that the 'less honourable' parts of the body receive greater honour in the Christian faith, elevating the weaker and 'useless' members to exalted recognition and service (1 Cor. 12:21-26). There is a radical expression of inclusion 'in Christ'.

*2.6 Family.* One of the most significant kinds of community in Scripture is the family. The Hebrew Bible tells the history of a set of families; the New Testament uses family language to describe the early church; and family imagery is used to understand the nature and character of God. The most common terms still used to describe the Christian community are family-based: 'brothers and sisters in Christ', 'children of God', 'the church family'. These are appropriate, and the Christian ethic of love guides the biblical understanding of how such family-style communities should operate.

It must be noted that the New Testament descriptions of church as family do not imply a supplanting, eclipsing or replacing of the natural family. Christian communities uphold and seek to maintain existing marriages, and honour existing familial bonds between parents and children, as well as encouraging and sometimes exhorting intra-familial care for children and the elderly (e.g. 2 Cor. 12:14; Col. 3:20; Heb. 13:4).

*2.7. The future community of worshippers.* A true understanding of Christian community is essentially eschatological, since belonging to Christ means being part of 'the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven' (Heb. 12:23). In a beautiful scene, John looks, 'and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"'

(Rev. 7:9-10) Christians long for this diverse but united future community, where God finally ‘dwells with’ humanity in tearless, deathless, painless divine marriage (Rev. 21:2-4). Christian living in the present is directed towards this future. Such an understanding guards against utopianism, where we might imagine that such an excellent state is attainable here and now. With that check in place, we conclude that the great pictorial language used to describe this future state is strongly communal—a heavenly city, the celestial Bride and Bridegroom, co-inheritance with Christ. At their best, the communities we form now anticipate and enact this future community.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION<sup>5</sup>

3.1. *Trinitarian shaping.* The primary ‘community’ is that within the Godhead—Father, Son and Spirit in perfect union. So close is this union that it is described as ‘mutual indwelling’ (‘I am in the Father and the Father is in me,’ John 14:10). This closeness is emulated in the human institution of marriage, and reflected in the church’s relationship with Christ. It can also be argued that the Trinity offers other ‘social outcomes’, that is, that certain views of society flow from the nature of God as Trinity. These outcomes can be difficult to establish in practice, partly because the hermeneutics and social analogies of ‘social Trinitarianism’ are contested. But the principle holds that there is something significant for our society in the grounding of reality in the relationships of the Triune God.

3.2. *Covenantal shaping.* Christian community depends upon the covenant of God with people, that he will be their God, that he will reveal his Law to them, and that he will redeem them through the Gospel of Jesus (the New Covenant). The Christian community exists by way of a ‘formalised promise’ from God to

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<sup>5</sup> We note the following helpful works (again without claiming always to have reflected their content): Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Christoph Schwobel, et al., *Persons, divine and human: King’s College essays in theological anthropology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991); Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996); Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially chapters 6-7; Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, “Community Repentance,” *Transformation* 14 (1997); Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford, N.S.W., Australia: Matthias Media, 2002); Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); Oliver M.T. O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), especially ch. 14.

humanity, first in creation, then in subsequent promises, all of which assure human beings that God wants a relationship with them. These covenants contain particular details (laws, commands, behaviours) by which God's people will prosper if obeyed, or languish if disobeyed. (Again, the precise schema of biblical covenants is contested among theologians and biblical scholars; yet we may still discern an overall 'pattern' of covenantally-shaped communities.)

*3.3. Christological shaping.* The gospel of Jesus Christ marks the formation of a new community whose members are included in Christ himself. Unlike other human communities, this one is not marked by fear but rather love; by peace, not enmity; and by fellowship, not competition for scarce resources. In the new community, quite remarkably, a plurality of identities is included without being at the same time dissolved. Thus, though I am a citizen of the heavenly kingdom, my identity as an Australian, as a Briton or as any other native nationality, is not erased. However, my affinity with this grouping is certainly relativised, and even transformed (as we see fulfilled in Rev. 7; see above). In Christ I can be my nationality in a new way, learning how it might be expressed in service of the divine ruler. We have seen how the coming of Christ signifies the breaking down of barriers between peoples (Eph. 2), so that communities need no longer be understood as mutually exclusive of one another. Here is then the possibility of unity without the dissolution of plurality, via friendly reciprocity between different groups of natural affinity. The gathering of this new community is for the purpose of extending God's blessing to all peoples. Not only are disciples of Christ called to follow after him: they are also sent by him into the world. They are not to creep unobserved into the corners of the world; Christ rather calls them to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations, 'in Jerusalem, Samaria and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8) – which activity is most certainly for the public sphere and for the public good (hence the New Testament language of 'light/salt of the world', or the 'royal priesthood' of the church). The churches thus are rightly addressed by Peter as a diaspora (1 Peter 1:1-2): they are a 'scattered gathering', with a shared task of the further gathering and building of God's community throughout the earth.

*3.4. A church 'ripple effect'.* But so far, these observations and reflections might sound 'sectarian', as if they can have no relevance in societies where many are not Christians. In the logic of modernity, to imagine that this Christian account of community should have any bearing upon the wider community is to take Christian 'values' and wish them to be 'imposed' upon unwilling others.

However this objection misses the way churches act as powerful schools of moral formation. Not only do they school members in new modes of

community; the ongoing praxis of these divinely tutored communities irresistibly alters societies that surround them. P.T. Forsyth once referred (in a different context) to the gospel's 'creative, self-organising, and self-recuperative power.'<sup>6</sup> The gospel's effect upon people is to generate certain patterns or forms of life, and wherever the gospel is present, it unmakes social structures that are inappropriate to it, and re-makes social structures fit for the body of Christ. In Stanley Hauerwas' typically evocative delineation, 'Put starkly, the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church...the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.'<sup>7</sup>

The unmaking and re-making of social structures in churches, continually effected by God through the Spirit and via the gospel, has 'rippled out' and will often 'ripple out' to communities beyond the church. Having learnt and re-learnt social order, churches by a variety of means affect communities. Barth gives an example of this 'ripple effect':

That which took place in [God's] history was the activity of the mercy of the one God, which touches every man. What does this history say to us? It says: 'You are all brothers.' Christian ethics repeats this summons to community on the basis of men's common need and the help which is common to all. Christian ethics is not individualistic. Christian ethics shapes community, the community of Christians, first of all, the community of those who have heard this call. But Christian ethics cannot allow men outside the community of Christians to cut themselves off or construct some sort of party. It can only form community also outside: the civil community.<sup>8</sup>

Barth goes on to give another example of what he means: the same humility that governs the relationships between people in the church can liberate all people. In the following passage, Barth does not specify whether he is talking about relationships solely within the Christian community, or if he intends to include the civil community as well. The ambiguity may deliberately drive home his previous point that the gospel's effect on the Christian community can 'lap over' or 'ripple out' into the civil community: Christian ethics in its entirety repeats [God's] summons to service. Christian ethics is not aristocratic, knows no royalty, no sovereignty of leader or master other than that which consists in a man being at the disposal of other men, as one link in a chain, as a Christian among Christians, as a brother among brothers. (This is the highest dignity of man, that he is called to intercede ever again for the others before God and for God before the others and to clothe this highest dignity in deepest modesty.)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Lectures on the Church and the Sacraments* (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1917), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 99.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, "Christian Ethics," in *God Here and Now* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1946]), 112-13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

In other words, civil communities can form in a similar way as the gospel forms churches. The gospel does not just ‘bowl out’ bad ideas on social life. It also ‘goes into in to bat’, constructing better ways of social order.<sup>10</sup>

3.5. *A logic of care.* As the gospel unfolds throughout the Bible’s great ‘story-arc’ and as our social structures are remade, human communities are offered a very deep logic of care.

For we could offer this plausible summary of the ‘story-arc’: that human beings are created to be with and for God; but people need God to be for them in and through His Son, before they can be with God. The corollary for human society is as follows: human beings are created to be with and for each other; but some people need us to be for them, before they can be with us and others. In this way of seeing, human being is revealed and interpreted as a way of being that is expressed through communities of care, where there is an emphasis upon gracious inclusion of the outcast (irrespective of whatever has made them so, including their own folly), and with a view to enabling them and everyone else so included to contribute to the good of the other.

This way of seeing is the direct antithesis of those anthropological construals where human being is understood as being without or even against the other (as in competitive models of individualism, and as in various theories of ‘social contract’).<sup>11</sup> With our renewed and ‘gospel-shaped’ anthropology, we can begin to discern further aspects of community.

3.6. *Sharing as the social core of community.* In community with others we hold things in common rather than in private, so that sharing is the heartbeat of community. In community, goods are communicated between two or more people. This sharing may be of material things, and of our witness to what is uncreated. But community also involves the sharing of a common understanding of the significance of shared things. An example is the sharing of food: in human communities the eating of meals is not merely functional, but given a representative function as well—whom I eat with, and what, and when—all mean something. What is more, communities share in, or aspire to share in, an identity—a shared self-understanding. Various signs and

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver O’Donovan invents this metaphor in his disagreement with Honecker (who thinks that the gospel names and reforms evil practices, but does not really build anything to replace them). *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), xii-xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Michael C. Banner, *Christian Ethics: A Brief History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 105. See also Oliver O’Donovan’s polemic against ‘social contract’ in the works previously cited, the offensiveness of which consists for O’Donovan in the presumption that humanity can somehow be understood as ‘pre-social’ or ‘pre-political’, and as if our humanity has not always been enabled and mediated through systems of social interdependence.

ceremonies and practices mediate this self-understanding to the individuals within a community. They facilitate recognition of other members of the community.

There is then for human community the necessity of effective communication of this identity—of ascribing significance to our shared possessions. The narration of our shared history, on the one hand, and the creation of works of art (songs, dances, festivals, etc), on the other, combine to make a community a tradition that can be passed on. Features of human social existence such as our shared languages, the structures of employment in a company, or the operation of markets are organised expressions of sharing. In these ways, human communities can feel themselves secured somewhat against the ravages of time and the inevitability of death.

We recognize that in the late-modern world, the chief problem for many people is exclusion from the goods offered by human community. The individualism which is so characteristic of the age has resulted in the disconnection of many people from the forms of human community that they need in order to flourish. If community means sharing, it is precisely the case that some individuals are unwilling or unable to share in what is common that is most problematic, even anti-human. However, it is also the case that access to a human community is not, in and of itself, sufficient to meet the human need.

*3.7. Protection and the problem of hubris.* Another function of community is that of protection and security. This aspect of care recognises the difficulties of life among the ravages of a broken world. Human beings huddle together because humanity is vulnerable to nature; and because they need protection from other human beings. If there is a good in community, then it needs to be secured. There are other communities whose significations and representations may cut across the path of mine. Each community is a community among other possibly competing, possibly threatening communities. The protection of the city wall is needed— membership of community X entails distinction from community Y.

The self-communication and self-representation of a community may strengthen its bonds, and benefit its members. A community's self-understanding can open the way for many helpful forms of reciprocity with other such communities. But at its worst a community's self-understanding can actually be deeply hubristic. Protection gives way to pretension. Without God, a community, whether as small as a family or as large as a nation, may develop the illusion of its own totality and sufficiency. It may come to believe in its own transcendence, and in its own destiny. The besetting sin of communities is, then, idolatry. The story of Babel (Gen. 11) is offered as a restraint against just this sort of over-weening pride: the Lord scatters the people and confuses their languages in order to restrain the possibility of an idolatrous belief in the

power of human community. They will make a 'name' for themselves, and thereby not recognise the name of the Lord from whom true authority stems. Thus, the plurality of communities is both positively a protection of humans from their own lust for power and a threat to the promise of human community to fulfil human longings.

In the Biblical narrative we see both God's judgement on human communities and his determination to redeem human beings in community (Gen. 12). The election of Israel was both a choice for them over against the nations that surrounded them, and a sign of God's determination to bless all the families of the earth. The Torah was intended to insure that the character and actions of God were at the heart of Israel's communal life, just as it was absent from the other nations.

Christians are certainly enjoined to preserve and uphold the communities in which they find themselves, insofar as they are in the business of restraining and punishing wickedness and rewarding good (Rom. 13). They are to honour and uphold rule insofar as it administers God's justice. In the NT, this rule especially refers to practices of retributive justice; but may fairly also be applied to the challenges of distributive justice. But Christians also continue to witness to the immodesty of the claims of human communities, by reminding human communities of God's ultimate rule in Christ. As we have been suggesting all along, 'community' alone is an insufficient term to describe a good, because community itself may be perverse or idolatrous, or serve perverse and idolatrous ends. A criminal gang might provide its members with a remarkable degree of fellowship, but still be obviously a corruption or misuse of community. While human sociality is needed for human flourishing, there are forms of sociality that are in themselves destructive.

*3.8. Communities shaped by love.* The guiding Christian ethic in all of life is love, and it has particular importance for developing a Christian concept of community. It is the very strong Greek concept of love (agape) that guides Christian understanding: not just friendship, not just blood-ties, not just affection or attraction, but unconditional love. Such love is a divine goal, and the goal for all humans is mutual love relationships with God and their neighbours, where love entails a commitment to the good of others.

In a world damaged by sin, part of the pursuit of love requires the 'retrieval' of good from a bad situation. That is, rather than sinking into the defeat of failure and compromise or ignoring evil because 'one day the Kingdom will come', Christians ought to aim to retrieve what is good out of this world of suffering and pain. This retrieval involves reintroducing people to the truth that they flourish in relationships of love, where each thinks, feels and

acts for the good of another.<sup>12</sup> When this dictum can take its stand among societies as a seemingly ‘self-evident’ truth, the ripple-effect of the self-organising power of the gospel has begun to do its work.

3.9. *Postures toward wider communities.* The New Testament authors conceive of a variety of postures that Christians and Christian communities can adopt towards others. (These have Old Testament antecedents that cannot be reviewed here.) They arise from proper conceptions of the Lordship of Christ, the social nature of humanity, and the call to love; and the discernment of which posture to deploy is context-dependent. A spectrum of possibilities is presented in the New Testament literature:

*‘Cooperation’:* Christians are able to cooperate with authorities uncontroversially, even when the plans and purposes of the authority concerned are not obviously those of Christ. Such cooperation is seen when slaves wholeheartedly give themselves to the plans and purposes of a master, even while knowing Christ as their true Master (Eph. 6:5f, Col. 3:22). Similarly in 1 Peter 2:13, readers are exhorted to submit to (literally) ‘every human creation’—that is, to various humanly constituted expressions of authority. Cooperation is the ‘default’ posture: ‘If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone’ (Rom. 12:17).

*‘Subversion’:* Although usually understood as a negative social force, joyful ‘subversion’ is expressed in Christian responses that are off-balancing, unexpected and different, and which either delight others or leave them distinctly uneasy. The salty speech of off-balancing grace (Col. 4:5–6); the gentle joy of hopefulness (1 Pet. 3:15–16); the attractive excellence of ‘light’ (Matt. 5:14–16); or the lavish generosity of hospitality (Lk. 5:14–16)—these all express humanly the grace of God seen in Christ, and create doubt regarding ideologies of vengefulness, despair, merit or scarcity.

*‘Exposure’:* Modern Christians often resort to open challenge and rebuke of others; but we have to admit the rarity of this theme in the NT. In 1 Corinthians 5:9–10 and 5:12 such a posture was not the first choice for the apostle Paul, and by implication is not for the Christian either. However the exposure of ‘deeds of darkness’ in Ephesians 5:11–14 suggests that this posture is sometimes required. In all likelihood, ‘exposure’ is the flashpoint for the outright disagreements (and returned expressions of contempt) seen in the starkly polarized communities of 1 Peter 4:3–4, a text that also illustrates a trajectory toward the next posture: ‘separation’.

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<sup>12</sup> These paragraphs are drawn from the main theses of Michael Hill’s *The How and Why of Love* (cited above).

*'Separation'*: There appears even to be a 'monastic' option in 2 Corinthians 6:17–7:1. Although the referent in the passage is unclear (and may refer to false teaching), it is not unreasonable to think that the metaphor symbolizes every practice that avoids endorsement of or participation in some social evil. When the apostles declare in Acts 5:29 that "we must obey God rather than men!", they have taken a course of separation, and others must then choose whether to oppose or join them. These texts could also be taken to warrant literal geographical separation, as when the life of Christian praise is considered best expressed through a 'dark ages' monastery, or a modern Christian school or hospice. But in the light of Paul's passing remark in 1 Corinthians 5:10b that Christians are not those who voluntarily 'leave this world', this posture cannot possibly be the default. At most, geographical separation is an emergency condition.

This survey of 'options' goes beyond a Christian specification of true 'community'. But like any Christian community, ANGLICARE is regularly involved in judgments about whether to cooperate, subvert, expose or separate. Its officers may even have to manoeuvre through the daily details of a particular discussion, partnership or program using a subtle combination of some or all of these postures.

#### 4. CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ARISING FROM THEOLOGY

There is a vast literature on the subject of community in sociological, philosophical and historical research. The following few points emerge from the reading as particularly pertinent for a social welfare agency.

*4.1 The basic unit is neither individual nor social in Christian thinking.* There is agreement among theorists that not only do human beings constitute society, but that societies also constitute human beings; in other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the social. The individual is part of the society, but the society has also shaped the individual. However, it is useful in ethical discussion to ascertain whether the individual or the society is to be the primary. If we accept the theological ground that God is only God in his relationships (Father, Son and Spirit), we can come up with an alternative 'basic unit': the person-in-relationships. This cumbersome phrase expresses the idea that you are only you by definition of who you are related to and in what ways you are related. I am my father's son, my wife's husband, my employee's boss, my publisher's author, my friend's companion, my dog's feeder, and so on. All of these elements define a 'person-in-relationships'.

Such a way of describing the basic unit is powerful, albeit complex, for policy development.<sup>13</sup> It acknowledges that no one is complete as an individual; that an individual exists in a range of relationships; and that if such relationships are missing there may be some deficiencies in life's goodness being experienced. This is not to say that there is no meaning to the 'individual', but it is to acknowledge that a great deal of what is understood as 'the self' is in fact relational; it is derived from our social connections. This obvious yet often overlooked insight implies that we enable a human being to flourish not when we 'maximise his or her individual potential', but when we assist him or her to participate in the many transactions that constitute society, and at the same time constitute the 'self'.

*4.2 Christian community challenges social hierarchies.* There has been since New Testament times a distinct counter-cultural element to Christian community. Some of the achievements of the gospel seem to be expressed in terms of social transformation, as seen in the biblical material above where 'community identity' is no longer reducible to histories, preferred friendships, institutional roles, or ties of blood and kinship. To the degree to which these divisions are relativised by the gospel, the church must relativise them before a watching world. In so doing, we also offer to the world an alternative way of being a community, based on the gospel.

In this way, the value of culture becomes relative to other, more important values such as peace, kindness, service, sharing and so forth. Even in diverse and multicultural cities, particular cultures will gather together in clubs, sports teams, arts groups and family groups. To a large extent, these are positive and natural expressions of community. However, Christian community needs to express something more than culture; it needs to be a separately defined and pursued idea of togetherness that it is not culturally limited, yet without always having to be opposed to aspects of a particular culture's flourishing.

We might summarise this point by saying that Christian communities are both cultural and transcultural; their culturality is never the primary expression of their communality.

*4.3 'Thick' communities are usually better than 'thin' communities.* The development of the online world has significant consequences for thinking about community. Whereas a decade ago it might have been disputed that 'virtual communities' have any real impact on people's lives, it is now well

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<sup>13</sup> In this connection we note the pioneering work of the Jubilee Centre and its associated Relationships Foundation to effect such relationally-oriented policy. See further M. Schluter and D. Lee, *The R-Factor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993); M. Schluter and D. Lee, *The R-Option* (Cambridge: Relationships Foundation, 2003); and Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft, eds., *Jubilee Manifesto: a framework, agenda & strategy for Christian social reform* (Leicester: IVP, 2005).

researched and established that many individuals value their online relationships (through email, blogs, Facebook, MySpace, Skype, etc) as much as, and sometimes more than, their relationships expressed in physical space (family, workplace, neighbourhood). A person may know more about, and know more intimately, someone they have never met in the flesh but have corresponded with in visual, audio and written form over the internet. If these are real communities, and the word 'virtual' is decreasing in value, there will be implications for trying to facilitate community building.

Nevertheless, there can be a 'thinness' to virtual relationships, whereby people have connections but not friendship, or know each other partially or one-dimensionally. Obviously, a great many social goods cannot be fulfilled through virtual relationships. 'Thicker' forms of community are preferable, by and large, to a large number of 'thin' connections. There is a certain physicality to community, such that it is better to meet in the flesh than just over the phone; it is better to be friends who get together rather than merely Facebook friends; it is better to know someone in body, mind and spirit rather than just by email. But there may be times and occasions where the 'thin' connection is a respectful way of relating to someone in need (e.g. providing information services for anonymous clients via a website).

A related issue is the optimal sizing of communities. Some communities seem to require certain sizes to work well (for example, there seem to be limits to the size of a 'family'). Particular sized communities provide particular opportunities for togetherness. It is well established in contemporary church practice that the small group, or cell group, affords greater opportunities for rich friendship, for intimate prayer and for confessing sins, than do larger assemblies. Similar thinking needs to be applied to aspects of welfare work, in order to achieve particular goals. Policies and programs need to be realistic about proximity, group size and ease of access to services in order to pursue 'thick' versions of community rather than thinning out services in order simply to serve more people.

*4.4 Many communities have a specific purpose and this is acceptable.* All sorts of communities exist because they have a specific purpose. For example, a cricket team exists in order to play cricket; it has become a community (a team) for this specific purpose. However, most communities with purpose also become communities of broader relations, that is, their communality becomes more than just that purpose for which they came together. The cricket team also becomes a community of socialisers, of spouses and children who befriend each other, of business partners, or perhaps of congregational brothers and sisters.

A Christian agency needs to consider to what extent is it legitimate to shape a community with one purpose, in the hope that other purposes will be fulfilled. For example, is it legitimate to begin a street kids' football team with

the hope that this will develop into a Christian fellowship group over time? Is this a betrayal of community, or a fair way to develop community? We suggest that the legitimacy of forming such communities is related to how much freedom exists for members to leave the community without ‘penalty’ or approbrium when the community’s initial purpose in forming no longer exists (e.g. the soccer season has finished). If it is open to that extent, then such a community would seem to have integrity.

Communities with purpose often have an ‘expiry date’, and yet Christian communities often resist the idea that the community may at some point end. At one level, this resistance is a good counter-cultural instinct since it assumes that people are not mere means to an end, but matter in and of themselves. However, this tendency to ‘keep the group going at all costs’ can simply reflect an inability to recognise when the purposes for which the community was founded are no longer being served. It must be acceptable to end community as well as to begin it.

*4.5. The language of community.* As indicated earlier in this paper, community is a necessarily broad term, which needs supplementary words—such as family, neighbourhood, club, company, church or nation—in order to be useful. ‘Community’ is a buzzword for government, but a bugbear for policy developers. Until some specific elements are expressed, the word ‘community’ is a shell term for various goals that any policy-forming institution sets itself.

One valuable contribution a Christian welfare agency can make is to provide a specific, meaningful language of community for others to consider. Biblical language is our starting point; directing its use according to the logic of the Christian gospel is our difficult task. The language of community in the church may not entirely parallel the needs of the society at large, but it will certainly contribute to discussions of the nature of family, the nature of neighbourhood, our understanding of ‘care’ and the wrestling match between ‘individual’ and ‘society’.

Since Christian language has become less influential in our society over the past century or so, it now seems fresh. Phrases such as ‘other-person centredness’ or ‘unconditional love’ or ‘honouring the weak’ have a novelty now that may attract interest and attention. Terms used in the biblical section of this paper can be employed, along with clear explanations of their meaning, in order to specify Christian concepts of communities and how they differ from other concepts.

One other important contribution a Christian agency can make is to critique contemporary understanding of community through a biblical and theological lens. This is already taking place in areas such as the understanding of marriage and family. It could be further developed in relation to neighbourhoods, social service and clubs, and in contrast to policies and practices that implicitly are destructively individualist and competitive.

ANGLICARE'S public expression (including its advocacy work) needs both to critique understandings of community given by alternative worldviews, and to include positive statements that use specific biblical and theological language to espouse a Christian understanding of community.

### 5. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ANGLICARE STAFF

The following statements flow from the discussion of community above, either directly or indirectly. They are intended to form the basis of decision-making tools for use in ANGLICARE.

ANGLICARE supports the building of communities initially by bringing people together in meaningful, loving and rich relationships of any kind, this being a basic good. Inherent to all ANGLICARE programs is a goal of drawing people into new, positive relationships, at the very least with ANGLICARE staff and ideally with each other and with God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

ANGLICARE serves the Christian concept of community when it upholds and enables families of many kinds, as the meaning of family is outlined in Scripture. These mini-communities are foundational to other communities, and to the next generation of communities through raising children. While ANGLICARE is supportive of a range of models of family life (e.g. intergenerational) this does not mean that all descriptions of 'family' in contemporary life will be consistent with a biblical understanding of family.<sup>14</sup>

ANGLICARE seeks to remove barriers to community, including barriers caused by sin and its consequences. Where these can be identified and their consequences faced and overcome, ANGLICARE is engaging in a Christian 'retrieval' of the good of community. ANGLICARE supports the work of churches in removing these barriers, and believes that the local church can be an important asset in community building, and is also the fruit of such barriers being removed.

ANGLICARE supports activities which sustain and fortify communities, by improving social cohesiveness, expanding opportunities for serving others and expressing the love of Christ, training and extending those who are leaders and

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<sup>14</sup> See for example the argument of the Social Issues Executive, a think-tank of the Anglican diocese of Sydney, which concludes that 'while a "good" society must accept, support and care without prejudice for families without a "nuclear" core [i.e. a married man and woman and their offspring], something seems to have gone wrong in a society that does not naturally produce and keep a large proportion of families with a "nuclear" core.' Social Issues Executive, *Family: A Christian Approach* (Newtown: Anglican Diocese of Sydney, 2005), 18; online: [www.sie.org.au](http://www.sie.org.au).

facilitators of community life, and prioritising relationship issues above other issues wherever possible and appropriate.

ANGLICARE can and ought to enable access to ‘church communities’ of many kinds, whether local parishes, small groups, Christian interest groups or larger service organizations. ANGLICARE can enhance the likelihood of people being drawn to church communities, and it can provide conditions under which people can join such a community.

ANGLICARE can and ought to model Christian community within all of its operations. When its staff communicates well with each other, transcending rivalry and conflict through repentance and forgiveness, creating relationships of love, thinking, feeling and acting for another, they are modelling community to each other and the watching world.

ANGLICARE may construe itself not only as a professional human services delivery organisation, but also as an organised expression of the gospel’s ‘ripple effect’. Although ANGLICARE is not itself a ‘church’, it is a most natural venue for many Christians to be found pursuing the work of care. Of course, they can gladly work alongside others who do not currently profess to be Christian and who for various reasons agree with ANGLICARE’S account of humanity and community. But this account of humanity and community is frankly and openly derived from the Christian theology, requiring no apology or disguise. The account creates an ‘ethos’ which attracts Christian workers to the organisation’s ranks, and is in turn upheld and reinforced through the articulation and practice of the organisation’s Christian workers.

ANGLICARE can provide public discourse on community that uses biblical ideas and language, and thereby alerts the watching world to the distinctive shape of a Christian understanding of community. Such language ought to be a ‘bridge’ between the church and the society rather than a wall dividing them, although this discourse may also deploy postures of cooperation, subversion, exposure and separation as the need arises. ANGLICARE will continually base its understanding and expression of community on biblical and other research.

ANGLICARE should prioritise activities which have the most potential to build communities that:

- Highlight, promote, encourage and adorn the lordship of Jesus Christ;
- Break down barriers between people, both spiritually significant barriers and social and cultural barriers;

- Encourage sharing of all manner of goods and resources, this sharing being a distinctive element of Christian communities from their earliest origins, and taking many political forms;
- Encourage ‘thick’ rather than ‘thin’ connectedness, multiple and ongoing relationships rather than ‘quick-fix’ or ineffectual solutions to the need for community.

### CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding some difficulty with its definition, ‘community’ is a term that is part of the substratum of Scripture and a significant category for ethical reflection within the Christian tradition. It finds specificity in connection with the formation of Israel, the economy of the Trinity, the life of Christ, and the church on earth and in heaven. This emerging Christian concept of community can inform quite specifically the kinds of questions that a charitable organization such as ANGLICARE Sydney needs to answer as it strives to manifest its vision of ‘lives changing and communities growing by care through Jesus Christ’. Furthermore, a biblically and theologically shaped philosophy of community can generate decision-making tools for Christian care workers, who need to choose wisely between a myriad of competing good works. Even in a secularist and post-Christian culture, there is nothing remotely problematic about workers in a Christian care organisation conducting their practice according to a Christian account of community. For it is also a good account, which time and again has commended itself by offering to humanity what humanity really needs.

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