

Creating Christian Community Out of Chaos.

After a long youth ministry stint at an upper middle class church it was time to visit the 'other side of the tracks'. I had been offered a job at a new church plant in an area that was not known for successful youth ministry. Not quite a concrete jungle, but imagine one part welfare state, one part blue collar stronghold. Before I moved in the minister told me that the youth group was of a "ragtag group of about 15 uncommitted kids who didn't know each other, didn't like each other and, only came to youth group to 'pick up' or because it 'could be a condition of their parole' (I *think* he was kidding). Youth group ran every other Friday night and consisted of some games, a short Bible talk and a bite to eat.

On the first night I met Donny. He came up to me with one of those scrunched up confused looks that is common to a 15 year old male and said, "Are you that new youth leader guy? I wanna ask you a question." He paused and said, "Is it wrong to kill a man?" Now I need to tell you that I was quite stunned (obviously). I was used to answering questions such as "Is it bad that my dad is going to give me a beamer for my 18th?" Or, "Will my hamster be in heaven?"

I looked at him with a look that screamed, "Quick, run man, he's packing heat." Regaining my composure I said to him, "Ahh, yeah, its usually wrong to kill someone. Why do you ask?" He replied, "Well, my dad and I want to kill my mom's dealer as we think he's a scumbag for selling her drugs. Last night we went to his house and my dad gave me a baseball bat. He took the crowbar and said you take the front door and I'll take the back door. The first to find him smashes him."

While I understood his pain, I sat down with him and explained that killing someone was not really the best business plan whatever the desired outcome. It took some time but I think he got it after a while. I need to admit that I had ulterior motives as well- I had just moved to the church and it was a long drive to the nearest prison. I had planned to spend my visitation time in other ways.

I was now in a situation different to any that I had been in before. I was now confronted with so many questions, "How do I build a Christian community out of this chaos? How do I communicate the message of Jesus in this desert?"

Well, what do I do? The previous guy tried to put on a whiz bang program designed to attract the locals, skim off a few of the ones who showed a bit of interest and then try and form a small community. That didn't work (he's now spending some time in a recovery farm up the coast). Nope, I wouldn't try that one. You see, our problem wasn't attracting locals. That was because we lived in an area

That had very little to do if you were a teenager. Unless of course you count hanging out at the local gas station that sells these hotdog like things that look pretty dicey. I

soon realized that if we were to put on any sort of activity on a weekend evening we would be swamped with young people. Just imagine a scene from one of the latest zombie movie and you get the picture. Hundreds of crazed bored, charged up teenagers moaning with their arms outstretched slowly walking towards the church.

I knew that I must scrap any hopes of a mass evangelism crusade. The first thing I needed to do was to build a strong community from the band of young people that I inherited. I would aim for community first, evangelism second. Now you must realize that I had my work cut out for me. The concept of community was one that was totally foreign to these kids. They didn't see it in their homes. One young man told me years later that whenever he did something wrong his mother would say, "You just remember who you are young man, you're the product of a one night stand gone wrong!" These kids certainly didn't experience community in their school. It had two fences around it topped with barbed wire. After roll call the outer gate was padlocked. I was in a foreign country preaching a strange message. To try and bring community into their lives was going to be a tough job to say the least. Well here's a few of my 'guiding principles' that dictated what I did to try and turn chaos into community. Now I need to warn you, many of you may find my guiding principles unsettling. You may even shake your head and say to yourself, "No way. You can't do that!"

Chaos to Community Principle #1: Will you play by the rules?

The temptation for any youth leader is to form their program around the desires of the youth they are trying to reach. This is seen in running programs that are designed to be soft on Christian content in order to 'first win the trust of the outsider'.

This is natural and understandable. After all, who wants to alienate their target audience with unrealistic Christian demands or expectations? However, I would advocate a different approach. These young people, and I would argue all young people, needed clear boundaries and rules. They live in a world that lets them do what they want even if it is harmful. They can hang out with who they wish and no one looks over their shoulder to say, "Hey, slow down there fella, that may not be the wisest thing to do."

In order to form a true community built around Jesus I needed to show my care for the young people by setting clear boundaries. I had to say to them, "This is who we are going to try and be and this is how we are going to try and do it."

As part of my contract I agreed to run one 'old style' youth group before we brought in change. I grudgingly agreed. We ran the obligatory series of chaotic games (where we had a dislocated shoulder, a bloody nose and one young man scratched the communion table proving to us that he could moonwalk). At the end of the night we told the young people that "things were going to have to change a little bit". This was a slight understatement, there were going to change a lot. We told them that from now on this was going to aim to be a 'Christian youth group'. That is, we were going to try to do excellent Christian things such as get to know each other better. Pray for each other

and study the Bible together. We were also going to try and become a unified group- a community of young Christians who loved each other and helped each other to follow Jesus. I asked them if they would be willing to come next week and give it a shot. Well, you can imagine the response. It ranged from outright hostility (“This new guy sucks. I’m never coming back here again!”) to simple bewilderment (“Does this mean I have to go back to hanging out at the gas station?") At least the couple making out in the corner stopped for a second, wiped off their chins and said, “Hey, why is everybody so quiet all of a sudden?”

Now I know the response that some of you may have. “How can you dare to try and create community when you don’t have the trust of the young people?”

I would argue that that we need to be careful of getting the cart before the horse. In order to have community, real community the boundaries need to be set up first. You can’t be a Christian community if you don’t do Christian things. To go from chaos to community meant that we needed to set some clear perimeters.

The next week we began to put a program into place that said, “We are a Christian youth group that will do Christian things. Our goal will be to help each other press on in their relationship with Jesus.” As we do these things we will slowly become a tight community that knows and cares for each other.

As you’d expect, our numbers plummeted. Those kids who were there- all 9 of them came partly to check us out and partly to see if we were really going to get rid of fruit salad and try and run a prayer time. Over the next few weeks the program was basically the same. We would welcome everyone, have a short prayer to kick us off, run a helpful get to know each other activity, play a game designed to teach some Bible facts, and have an open prayer time, I would give a talk from the Bible and we would finish with a bite to eat. It was hard slow taxing work. They didn’t pray, didn’t seem to listen to the talk but still they came. I am convinced that this was due to the graciousness of God who honored our efforts.

Chaos to Community Principle #2: We set clear expectations: Are you in or out?

The next thing we did was set clear boundaries of belonging. In a sense we were like a sporting team or music group. We told the kids “If you want to participate you are very welcome (and warmly invited) however, you are expected to be a part of us. This means we want you to come along- each and every week!” Again, my guess is this will sit uncomfortably with many youth leaders. We are so used to letting kids come on their own terms in this busy crowded world. This rarely worked for me and certainly wouldn’t have worked here. In fact we found just the opposite. These kids were so used to being unloved and having no expectations placed on them that they thrived when they found out that they were wanted and needed. We soon had a regular number that we could count on each week. Gone were the days of wondering who and how many

would show up. We grew to 12 young people who, by and large, were there each and every week. When trying to build community regularity in attendance goes a long way.

Chaos to Community Principle #3: To become a community we need to spend a large amount of time together.

In order to be community you need to develop relationships that have impact. Our strategy will not be new to most of you. We started up weekly small groups that prayed for each other and studied the word of God. We ran a weekend retreat that transformed the group. So much so that we decided that we would do this four times a year- these young people were time rich, the pressure to study or learn a musical instrument wasn't an issue here.

Our first weekend away together was difficult to say the least. During our team building afternoon we had one kid drop his pants, moon his brother and tell his team to #@^&*!. The day ended with Joanne deciding she would end it all by taking nine aspirin. We had a long way to go. However, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Two young people became Christians and the group as a whole began to have a little bit of a taste of what it meant to be together. The next retreat a few months later was even better. Our year ended with a summer camp that was truly amazing. These kids were starting to get it.

The weekly meetings slowly began to improve as well. Gone were the prayer requests for 'Fluffy the duck' and 'my granny's farting' and we slowly began to have young people share what was really on their hearts. This took four long months.

What I found was quite amazing. We never got to the stage where I said, "Ahh, this is it, we have finally made it- we are now community." Instead I realized that it just kept slowly getting better and better. The more we hung out together the better it became. And, the easier it was to spur each other on to love and serve Jesus more. I guess it is a bit like my view of Heaven. It will never get boring because we will constantly be growing in our relationships with each other.

Chaos to Community Principle #4: I need to equip young people to be community. It doesn't happen naturally.

I immediately realized that the young people in my youth group were totally unable to be community without some real assistance on my part. They couldn't talk to each other and were highly suspicious on anything new or unfamiliar. Like most groups, we tried to have a 15 minute 'hang out time' at the start of youth group. These kids just stood around hunched over looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes. We spent nearly two years trying to fix this. Once, I went so far as to dress up my barbecue grill and punching bag to look like two people. I then asked every young man in my Bible study group speak to them for 45 seconds. It was a good experiment in trying to be friendly and ask questions that would lead to further discussion. It was a tough exercise for most of them.

This issue is where the leadership team must lead the way. I had brought with me a band of leaders from my old church who were willing to help me kick things off. We soon became aware that these kids were constantly watching us. We made sure that we related in a way that was good example and a model for them to follow.

Conclusion

Community is not easy. It can be tough whether in lush green fields or in a dry desert. In our world chaos tends to reign supreme. However, it is our jobs to turn chaos into Christian community. Go for it.

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