

# **Building the Kingdom**

## **A Personal Reflection on Community**

by P. MacRae, *Kairos* Community, Prairie Region

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Although this is the official “Prairie Region” month for submission to *Update*, a nearly-dropped ball has occurred in preparing a submission. The following is therefore a purely personal reflection by me, its author, and although regional activity has been influential in developing these ideas, it is not necessarily represented by them. *Most particularly*, my final description of the struggle to pin down the Prairie Region Mission Statement is *only* my own interpretation of events. Anyone else may disagree!

The reflection is meant to generate further reflection, and perhaps even conversation. For this reason, I’ve chosen to leave it a bit conversational and discursive. This will annoy some of you who never have enough time. My advice in that case? Browse the headings and merely dip in---or, frankly, just don’t read it; it’s not required reading after all!

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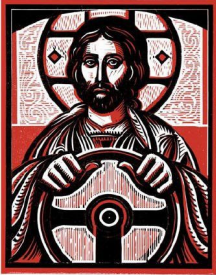
### **‘As Christian Life Community of Canada we will act as communities, not as individual identities.’**

In CLC Canada, we are currently reviewing our National Mission Statement, which begins with this strong assertion. This has been a big feature in my prayer life recently, as my local community prepares for the National Assembly, and as our region recently held a retreat focused on this review.

Another strong feature of my prayer life is, as always, the Daily Examen. I am sure that, like me, all CLC members are involved in many, many things in their daily lives, and that, like me, they review them in this daily prayer. In parish meetings, I talk and labour with others over ‘community building.’ In my work and study as an ESL/EAL teacher, I reflect on integrating newcomers into the Canadian community. In Prairie Region, where our Common Mission asks us to work to come into community with First Nations---to end the Two Solitudes, as it were, of First Nations and ‘Canadian’ community---I attend a workshop on the treaties. I begin charitable work in service *to* the marginalized, and realize that while they may be helped in some small way by what I provide, I am purely transformed by what I receive. And in my daily Examen, I constantly process and re-process it all.

Another interesting source of prayer for me is found in the intrinsic kind of contemplation that is required by any kind of creation---even of the most paltry sort, such as when I compile the monthly news bulletin for Prairie Region members. Every month (more or less ☺) I follow up on suggested resources for regional

members as I put together this bulletin. These are resources that people have thought might help other members in following the Regional Common Mission. I find that the best and most thoughtful of these are not just about working with the ill or the homeless or the world's displaced or the ravaged environment, but also begin to move me towards something bigger, something deeper and broader. I notice that as those 'somethings' take shape for me, they consistently begin to look more and more like the same thing. I see threads about compassion; I see threads



about seeing others' points of view; I see threads about God in All Things; I see threads about giving *and* receiving. (And I, along with my whole CLC community, *Kairos*, am *constantly* seeing threads about relinquishing the need to control, which in fact is the generative impetus behind our group name. It's become something of a mantra for us.)

And so in all of my modes of prayer, as they interact in this life that is my own, I begin to see these threads come together--if only through that glass, darkly--into a web about community: about what it means in itself, and about what it therefore means to be 'called' to community. And I cannot help but recall the new and (for me) revolutionary awareness I received while doing the Spiritual Exercises quite a few years ago: Christ is love.

... ..“Well...duh?” you might justifiably say, after a shocked hesitation, and while trying to be nevertheless tactful (because you're kind! ☺). And yes, I suppose I am what you could call slow. But I think I was hampered by the cliché that has built up around this truth. For this is no longer, for me, a glib statement destined for t-shirts and embroidered wall samplers; and this isn't, for me, about any fatuous, facile, or merely feel-good love.

This is about powerful, dynamic, and sometimes frightening, stripped-bare connection: about the pulse of God through all of us, and all of Creation, that connects us all as One. It's about a demanding interdependence in which the Christly admonition to 'Love your Neighbour as yourself' is about more than my sending her my extra socks when hers have holes. It's about my seeing her as an integral part of the vast web that I am also a part of. It's about looking her in the eye, and seeing myself there---and what's more, allowing her to look me in the eye

and see herself. Both of us looking at and into each other and seeing God, seeing Creation, seeing the face of Christ: all of us, all of It, all to be found in that one particular Incarnation across from me at this exact moment who is my 'brother.' In this paradigm, living and acting as 'Community' becomes the living out of this immense, flowing, fundamental and *visceral* connection which is the 'Love' of Christ: recognizing it; celebrating it; upholding it; repairing it.

## **The Church, including the New Evangelization**

Once I recognized and began to view the world from this new idea of community, it informed other concerns of my life. In turn, the other concerns of my life began to inform my understanding of this view of community. In parish work, I recognized that 'community building' is about more than the numbers of seats filled at masses. Well, naturally! So do all of us see this, in very truth, and we honestly go out there saying, "Come as you are!" But I wonder if we really confront the evidence of what we say on the one hand, and then do on the other, as we invite and welcome people, and then turn around and tell them how to belong, and how things are done in this community? Or even more, as we sometimes shame them into conforming in order to belong, by letting them clearly see that 'as they are' isn't, in fact, good enough in the end. And as I look through the lens of my new paradigm of community, I wonder if we don't instead need to recognize the God-face of all those we say we wish to include, and then be willing give up some control over what the community will look like when those new and different members arrive.

This isn't to say that we should have *no* say in what the community becomes; just that perhaps our own 'say' isn't necessarily *intrinsically* more valuable than anyone else's. If our ways are indeed superior, one assumes that will inevitably become apparent to a community that lets us do it our way, even as others do it theirs. And if by chance it's someone else's way that (will wonders never cease?) comes to appear superior to us, well then, we can do what cultures all over the world have done when they chance to interact with others who have good ideas: adopt and adapt! Indeed, I wonder if this kind of focus on acceptance and community as the most important thing isn't what Pope Francis has in mind when he speaks of the church as a field hospital; of letting some of the dogma rest for now,

and just focusing on recognizing and welcoming so many isolated and wounded souls.

...And as a bonus, maybe we'll find that our own broken souls were among those most needing comfort.

## **Immigration and New Canadians**

I keep finding my thoughts being reinforced in unexpected places. I'm very much thinking the same inclusive way about 'integrating' new Canadians into the alleged mosaic of Canadian life. While studying various aspects of teaching English to newcomers, I came across a very interesting article about the idea of community 'commons' (an idea rather like a pool of shared resources, including intangibles such as insights and culture, to which everyone in a community has equal and open access). In this article, Alysha Sloane, a teacher in Winnipeg working with newcomer high school students and their families, asserted the importance of the aim:

*to work in solidarity with newcomer families so all citizens in Winnipeg enjoy the same democratic rights and freedoms....To have just communities, all citizens must have the right to enter into and fundamentally change the commons. The purpose [of assistance to newcomers] is not to create mirror images of people who enjoy the most power and privilege in society. It is the actualization of the belief that a community should become different because someone new has arrived.<sup>1</sup>*

This struck me forcibly, because---of course--- it's so tempting to just want others to fit in with what *I'm* already comfortable with. But it also struck me, especially as a student of history, that I was actually able to see this idea of the enlarged commons quite manifestly at work in what has happened in Canada—or at very least here on the Prairies, to my own eyes' evidence--- as waves of immigrants have arrived, and certainly adjusted their own mindsets, to greater and lesser extents, but also demonstrably contributed to changing the mindset and way of life of the community they've entered.

Over the years, Canada itself has changed, and most of us wouldn't really want it to be what it was 150, 100, or even 50 years ago (be realistic about what it was truly like, now...). And it has changed because countless people, old and new community members alike, introduced new experiences and ideas, and perhaps then shared ongoing experiences and ideas, and together, worked and struggled

their ways to new understandings and accommodations, both for others and for themselves. The changes in the next 50, 100 or 150 years, if shaped by similar interaction, will produce still other, different Canadas, ones that respond to the constant exchanges and struggles of an ever-changing community. (Here's where I could digress into 'education for active citizenship'--while still on the topic of community, of course--but I'll spare you! ☺)

## **First Nations: Renewing the Relationship**

I recently attended a workshop on the treaty relationship of Canada and First Nations, presented by James Wilson, the Commissioner of the [Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba](#). It was a fascinating history, and led to one particularly striking insight. The treaties, whether negotiated originally for trade, for peace, for land, or whatever, were entered into essentially in a spirit of this type of reciprocal community, at least between those actively involved in the negotiations. Each 'side' knew a new community was inevitably being built; each side was willing, in that more-or-less manner dictated by human imperfection, to find the ways to accommodate the other and live with them in "an enduring relationship of mutual obligation"<sup>2</sup> between essentially co-equal parties.

Only subsequently (and in some cases almost at the same time, as the left and right hands of government seemed to do opposite work) did the 'dominant' cultural forces (a telling adjective, that!) decide that there was no co-equality, no need for reciprocity, and nothing worthwhile to be gained from peoples who were, somehow, intrinsically, *less*. So we have the 1876 Indian Act, and its attendant residential schools, and banning of aboriginal languages and cultural ceremonies, and so much more, all in the apparent name of raising up the lowly primitives--of essentially "telling them how to belong, and how things are done in this community," to quote what I said above about so many attitudes to welcoming people (back) into the Church.

As a perfect example of violating the idea of community as a mutual recognition of self and the sacred in the other, it's hard to find a better one than this dismissive behaviour towards First Nations and their place in the emerging new community of Canada. It's also a wry example of irony that this devaluing of First

Nations is now coming to be replaced in some spheres by a belief that a typically First Nations' sense of stewardship is the way out of an environmental crisis that was created from within the unchecked and unquestioned ethos of precisely that supercilious 'dominant' society. One of many ways in which the separate 'solitudes' of First Nations and the rest of Canada have been debilitating to all of us.

## **Shaming Precludes Connection**

When the connections to an idea start happening, they're never-ending, and you see them everywhere. Is this coincidence? Synchronicity? Are we selectively viewing to support our own view, or are we just finally ready to see? When I look at resources I've been sent for inclusion in the Prairie bulletin, I see so many things dovetailing: I get a notice about a presentation on compassion that social researcher Brene Brown will make in Winnipeg. I can't go, but in finding out a bit about her in order to inform others of the talk, I discover a recording of her talking [about shame](#) and how it decimates the possibility of true connection. I in turn see that the exact phenomenon she talks about manifests itself in what was done to First Nations people in residential schools and continues to be done out in society in general. I happen to see some of it particularly vividly because I have over time spent hours and hours in meandering, casual conversation with survivors---and with others, often also non-aboriginal but shamed and marginalized in different ways---who have come to spend time at an art program I oversaw for several years at a drop-in centre for street people in Winnipeg. Shame is indeed crippling and inhibits connection, even as people are yearning and yearning and yearning to connect.

## **Point of View: Moving Beyond Self-as-Centre**

Several years ago, I happened to read David Foster Wallace's short book, *This is Water*, in which he talks about our assumptions about the realities of our lives, assumptions, sometimes even laughable, which we hold simply because we cannot move ourselves outside our own point of view. We cannot see, as we would from a larger perspective, that there are in fact many different angles from which to view this same thing, and that the world does not, in fact, revolve around our own limited

view. Within this, he gives particular examples of our seeming inability to get outside ourselves, and ways we might choose to do the work of looking beyond this.

At that time, we had recently been talking, in my CLC group and in the region, about this idea of expanding our centres beyond ourselves. So I was excited enough at the time to take *This is Water* to my community's weekly meeting. And now some years later---in fact last week, as I was contemplating what on earth to write for this article---*This is Water* was sent to me again: it arrived suddenly in my inbox, via a weekly newsletter<sup>3</sup> of interesting idea tidbits. This time it was [in audio format](#), and I found out the book had originally been a commencement address. The next day, again coincidentally, a friend forwarded to me a predictable, sometimes hokey, but nevertheless strong [little video](#) about the tolerance and even deep compassion that comes from deliberately 'adjusting' ourselves to see from another point of view.

Wallace called it *choosing awareness* of what's in front of us (or behind or beside us), over the default settings within us. He also called it hard work. But perhaps most importantly, he called it choosing the most important freedom of all, over imprisonment---isolated and alone---within ourselves. It seems to me that the ability to get outside our own view of things (to truly see or truly listen to the 'other'?) is perhaps precisely the major work of being Community.

## **Vulnerability as a Prerequisite for Connection**

In a different month, and interestingly, from an entirely different source (more synchronicity?), I saw the same Brene Brown I mentioned earlier in a gone-viral TED Talk about the flip-side of shame: [the ability to hold oneself open and vulnerable](#) to others, and how the pain of this is paradoxically a prerequisite for true connection and 'happiness.' In order to connect with others, we need to allow ourselves to be seen, something which is guaranteed to open us up to the potential pain of rejection. We also need to allow ourselves to see others, in all their vulnerabilities, something which can be remarkably painful, given that, with 'my' view of community, we will 'see ourselves' in them. As psychologist David DeSteno says in talking about compassion (in another resource that came to my inbox out of the blue only yesterday), "Who we help are people who we can see ourselves in."<sup>4</sup>

Brown's talk reminded me powerfully of my earlier image of truly seeing and being seen by my neighbour, and helped me enlarge my understanding of precisely why this vision of community can be so alarming, even as it is so profoundly rewarding. DeSteno's words reminded me of the expanding and contracting quality of our notions of 'community' or 'neighbour,' and reminded me also that, in the context of seeing my neighbour in All, I believe that we are called to expand infinitely the size of what we consider our community; to resist parochialism and exclusivity.

### **“In CLC Canada we will act as communities...”**

The idea of coming through painful uncertainty and vulnerability into the rewards of community also reminds me of some of my recent contemplations, using Pam Daigle's excellent prep material, about the statement with which I began this article: the first sentence of our National Mission statement. “We will act as communities and not as individual identities.” My own contemplation involved recalling the preparation for our last Prairie Region assembly, and the frustration and difficulty that we had as a planning group, and then as a community of delegates, in arriving at acceptable wording, format, content, etc. for our mission statement. Most (many? some?) of us found ourselves inwardly seething, at least now and then throughout the process. But those very processes---the processes for listening, the processes for meetings, the assembly process for consensus-building--that are tools which we have learned through CLC, were part of what enabled us to persevere, so that when we finally arrived at that unexpected moment in which very suddenly it all fell into place, everyone looked at it, stunned, and knew in some awe the meaning in their hearts of that Ignatian discernment expression: “like water on a sponge.”

But the tools alone were not the only thing that brought us to that place. The other was the perseverance engendered by faith (and *in extremis* maybe only the great *desire* for faith) in the community as a whole. The idea of what we were together, and had been together, and wanted still to be together, was enough to push us on, through uncomfortable and vulnerable territory, until finally, out of the muck, we were able to emerge, both exhausted and renewed, on the other side. In



other words, we felt community, and we truly valued that community---even when at times it seemed that everyone (else!) in it was surely annoying and obtuse. We had and we cherished our community of strong, supportive (even while, apparently, frustratingly blind and stubborn☺) companions on the journey. And because the particular community was CLC, we also had, rather fortunately as it turned out, a few processes as somewhat rough maps to help us chart our way through the wilderness we travelled.

By 'proceeding' with acting in community, rather than abandoning the common cause and acting alone when it seemed it wasn't going as we each thought it ought, we accomplished several things:

1. Through the basic struggle to find and express our common mission, we deepened our understanding of the content and significance of what we were saying. (More clichés broken open, anyone?)
2. Through the struggle against throwing our hands up and surrendering to individual behaviours, we deepened our faith in our CLC community as a viable vehicle for acting out our call to go with Christ on mission.
3. Through the struggle to truly see others: to continue---when it was hard---to listen deeply and respectfully to them; and to move---when it got harder and harder---outside our own points of view, we ended up deepening our trust in the community and its ability to support the deepest needs of each of us.

Note that none of these things would have occurred were we acting as individuals. Community, I'm thinking, is a huge strength, and not just for the policies and actions of communities acting together in the obvious external ways. It is also a great strength for the individuals that make up that community and for their (seemingly) individual actions, because the processes, arguments, accommodations and affirmations that occur in community bring depth--the *magis*-- to our personal understandings and beliefs, and can also give us the deep faith and security to act, all within and through our powerful connection to the community.

### **And to conclude (finally!)...**

So what have I been rambling on about for (yikes!) 8 pages? (You will by now not be surprised to hear that a tendency to ramble on was something about me

that was ‘annoying and obtuse’ to other members at our regional assembly ☺). What does this have to do with mission statements, and First Nations, and newcomers, and encouraging people to our churches, and expanding our point of view, and the call of Christ to “Love thy Neighbour”?

Well, I tend to think that if we can (and will) so greatly, immensely, expand our point of view as to truly see God in All Things, that we cannot help but come to recognize this vast oceanic community of which we are all really a part. If we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and to open any of our communities to ‘the other,’ then we are reflecting this reality that we have come to perceive. And if then, instead of forcing anyone to change in order to belong, we each of us in the community instead forced *ourselves* to really *see* the other: to listen and attempt to understand and accommodate; to attempt to find what we could agree that we wanted for our communities; then we would reflect and support this interconnected reality even more strongly. And then, supported and ‘sent’ by this strength, we would of course all be stronger, both as individuals that exist within community, and as that community itself.

And what community is that? Well actually...the Kingdom of God, I think.

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<sup>1</sup> Alysha Sloane (2010, Spring), “Building a Peaceful Village: Enlarging the Commons in Winnipeg’s Inner City,” in *M.A.S.S. Journal*, 11(1) p 26. Retrieved from: [http://www.mass.mb.ca/documents/mass\\_journal\\_spring2010.pdf](http://www.mass.mb.ca/documents/mass_journal_spring2010.pdf), March 15, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Phrase repeatedly used by Mr. Wilson in describing the spirit of the treaty negotiations and the concomitant relationship ( at least up to and including the Numbered Treaties of Western Canada?)

<sup>3</sup> from <http://www.brainpickings.org/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxXw-rl0n\\_I#t=125](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxXw-rl0n_I#t=125) (quote at about 32:48) Retrieved March 16, 2014