

PEOPLE WHO NEED PEOPLE

Most of our lives are full, exciting, even hectic. We come home to a comfortable environment — maybe to a family that loves us. But it's not enough. There's still an emotional void that nags at the back of our minds. It's hard to put our fingers on exactly what's wrong, to pinpoint the missing ingredient. We feel empty, but empty of what? This article will give you an idea of what might be lacking and how you can put it back into your own personal life.

by Carole Ritter

We covet privacy. We go to all kinds of Howard Hughesian lengths to maintain it. Six-foot fences around our backyards, unlisted phone numbers, carefully avoided car pools — they're all symptoms of our nearly paranoid desire to avoid contact with the rest of the human race.

But paradoxically, we also crave intimacy. Many of us seem to be searching for a lost sense of community, a closeness that has slipped through our fingers in the last three or four decades.

Practically nobody has a "hometown" any more. Our jobs have turned us into nomadic wanderers who travel from oasis to economic oasis, never really putting down roots. The places we live awhile before moving on to something better all look alike — Xerox-copy franchises and look-alike supermarkets give a feeling of comfort, familiarity, or at least *deja vu*. But the checker behind the counter doesn't remember us from day to day — and we're probably glad he doesn't, because we also crave anonymity.

A Nation of Strangers. This lack of community has hit people in the United States a lot harder than those in Europe or the rest of the world, who generally maintain a less-mobile lifestyle and closer family ties. According to Ralph Keyes, the U.S. character seems to be based on three cherished things: "mobility, privacy, and convenience — which are the very sources of [their] lack of community" (*We, The Lonely People*, p. 15).

But a sense of community is a basic human need. Take it away and we start feeling uneasy, even a little desperate. U.S. young people were the first to translate this feeling into action, grouping themselves together into counterculture communes. At times flouting conventional religion and mores, they tried to recapture this lost feeling of tribal or extended-family closeness. The young vanguard of the sixties was followed by a surprisingly large number of middle-aged and even old people searching for belonging outside the mainstream. Many communes today include a mixture of young and old people who make up a self-chosen "extended family." And this movement, or fad, or whatever you want to call it, has begun its spread through Canada and even Western Europe.

This flight to the communes is a sad commentary on our society's lack of community. Communes may provide a temporary feeling of belonging and sense of identity, but most of them don't last very long. Unless they are authoritarian in structure or have some sort of transcendental goal or religious purpose, as a general rule they fold in a year or two. And some communes degenerate into crash pads for communique-hoppers; members searching for community can't seem to overcome the call of the open road, the easy mobility our society offers.

What Are We Looking For? But just what is a community? Would we

know one if we saw it? And would we know whether or not we really wanted to become part of it if we did recognize it?

Ralph Keyes, who has extensively studied the problem, states that "for me... the minimum criterion of being in community, for being known [is] that my absence, as well as my presence, be noted.... The minimum question about whether a group of people is really a community for me is: 'Would anyone notice if I didn't show up?'"

Keyes goes on to say that this is "a frightening question, perhaps the most scary one I could put to a group of people. I'd dread so what the answer might be. Better not to ask it at all — anywhere. This fear, I think, fuels a lot of our frantic rushing around — the feeling that if we just keep moving we'll have an excuse never to raise such a question with any group of people. The fear of being rejected also fuels our lust for seclusion. By living in splendid isolation we can beg the question of whether anyone else would want us around. Not accepted, at least we're not rejected. Nor do we risk getting known" (*ibid.*, p. 146).

Most of us live in fear that people will "find us out," that our deepest personal secrets will be revealed, as indeed they almost certainly would be in the typical small-town community of the past. We are too scared of each other to be known as whole human beings, to reach out and begin the process of relating to each other as a group or commu-

nity. Dr. Sidney Jourard writes: “Many of us dread being known because we fear that if we were . . . known by others — as intimately as we know our own experience — we would be divorced, fired, imprisoned, shot or otherwise harmed” (*The Transparent Self*, p. 41). We might open ourselves up to some sort of ego-destroying rejection — people might not like us, and we might have to deal with it. Hiding is so much simpler and easier.

People Need People. But hiding is not healthy, and it doesn’t solve our problems or fulfill our needs. Where then do we go to find roots, people who know us fully and still accept us? There is no way most of us can return to those cozy days of yesterday and live in an everybody-knows-everybody-and-their-ancestors-all-the-way-back hamlet tucked away in the foothills somewhere. If there are many such hamlets left, the inhabitants would probably look on us as outsiders anyhow. And we might find such an atmosphere stifling.

The ideal would probably be to build our own community of people like us, who are willing to make a long-term commitment to love and friendship — who accept us in all of our flawed humanity and still like us — and want to hang around us for the duration.

What about you? Are you satisfied with your life just the way it is? Or do you really want company — want to feel like you really *belong* somewhere?

Suppose you’ve decided you’re somebody who needs people. You honestly don’t want to be alone anymore and aren’t afraid to admit it. Where do you go to find those people you need, people who will accept you and want your fellowship in return?

A Ready-Made Community. Almost two millennia ago, a small group of men and women gave up a place in their own local community to follow a Teacher who promised them an abundant life here and now and immortality in the hereafter. The book of Mark records how one of their number, a man named Peter, “began to mention all that he and the other disciples had left behind. ‘We’ve given up everything to fol-

low you,’ he said.” And that Teacher, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, answered: “‘Let me assure you that no one has ever given up anything — home, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or property — for love of me and to tell others the Good News, who won’t be given back, a hundred times over, homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land . . . All these will be his here on earth, and in the world to come he shall have eternal life’” (Mark 10:28-30, *The Living Bible*).

This promise wasn’t just for those first-century followers, though. Christ promised that He would found a community of believers that would last down through the ages (Matt. 16:18).

Christ promised that if we decide to go His way — accept Him as Savior and want to help spread His gospel — He will make us members of a tight-knit community of like-minded believers: His body, the Church of God. He also made sure that this community of believers would never need to be without a goal (Matt. 28:19-20) or a system of government. Thus, it would never need to fall apart like many latter-day communes. And He promised that the people in this community would be given His own Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) to help them feel the love and forgiveness they would need in order to stick together.

Paul, one of Christ’s students, wrote to this group: “Just as there are many parts to our bodies, so it is with Christ’s body [this group or church]. We are all parts of it, and it takes every one of us to make it complete, for we each have different work to do. So we belong to each other, and *each needs all the others*.”

Paul went on to show these members of the Christian community how they should interact within their new group: “God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. . . . If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. . . . Don’t just pretend that you love others: really love them. . . . Love each other with brotherly affection and take delight in honoring each other. . . . When God’s children are in need, you be the one to help them out. And get into the habit of inviting guests home for dinner or, if

they need lodging, for the night. . . . When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. . . . Don’t try to get into the good graces of important people, but enjoy the company of ordinary folks. . . . Don’t quarrel with anyone. Be at peace with everyone, just as much as possible” (Rom. 12:4-18, *The Living Bible*).

The letter to the Hebrews warned these people not to “neglect . . . to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage . . . one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). There are still groups of people like this today who meet together regularly, who hold to the same system of basic beliefs. They have the same Spirit, the same goal of sharing their good news with others and warning the entire world of what is going to happen in this unstable end time.

God’s Church. If you are looking for community, if you want to go God’s way, His Church is the ideal place to find an “extended family.” Here is a ready-made group of people who think the way you think and are committed to the same goals you are committed to. This group is not some kind of exclusivist club or clique. Each and every member is trying his best to reach out and share what God has given him with whoever will listen, whoever wants to join in and help, whoever needs the love they have to pass on.

Meeting every weekend with a large group of people who want the same things you want — who observe the same customs you do every year, who are willing to dedicate their lives and their substance to the preaching of Christ’s message — can be an exhilarating experience.

Here is an enthusiastic reaction from someone who just discovered this community in his own neighborhood: “I must let you know how much I enjoyed Sabbath services. It was my first real contact with God’s people. As is my custom, I sat in the back, not knowing anyone. Then I got hit with some of that outgoing concern that I have been reading about. Within minutes people just started coming over and introducing themselves. One family, on finding this was my first service, temporarily

'adopted' me and had me sit right in their midst up front. The service was excellent, but it was the warmth, friendliness and sincerity that really impressed me" (man from Trenton, New Jersey).

Here is another: "We have just attended our first Sabbath meeting. Were we surprised! We never believed people would be so friendly and homey, even though we had not previously met. It is most definitely the environment we want to bring up our four-month-old daughter in, and to learn and grow in ourselves" (married couple, Greenfield, Massachusetts).

And another: "On that first week I went they greeted me, a total stranger. Now that gives you a

warm feeling that makes you want to return again, and again, and again" (man from New York, New York).

But belonging to God's Church isn't just a weekend thing. It gives you an unparalleled chance to develop a circle of close friends of like mind, people you will want to be with during a lot more than church services. These are the kind of people who really do what the apostle Paul said — who visit you when you are sick, listen to you when you need a sympathetic ear, and have a good time with you when you're feeling great. They have their flaws; none of them are perfect, but they're trying hard. If you feel like getting in touch with a

group like this, write to the address of our office nearest you for information on the Worldwide Church of God in your area.

It could be one of the most important steps you ever take — and you could be on the road to finding the missing community you want and need. □

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