

Strategies for Building Community

By Allen Ratta

Why do some churches enjoy a profound sense of community while others seem to lack coherence? What are the dynamics that lead to a deep sense of belonging and high congregational morale? How can a pastor intentionally lead a church into an increased sense of community? While there are no simple answers, I have come to believe in a *unified theory of community* based on 25 plus years of pastoring and dialoguing with thousands of pastors, through pastoral seminars over the years.

Consistency

A strong sense of church community, at its core, requires a very high degree of consistency between messages and actions throughout every aspect of an organization. This cohesive unity of thought and deed should permeate from big picture theorizing down to the details of daily functions. Many church leaders do a relatively good job of vision casting but the global message rapidly loses potency when it fails to translate into discernable real-world relevance. It is critical to draw clear intra-organizational linkages between vision, strategic planning and ministry execution.

Linkages

Wherever these linkages are masterfully communicated, congregants can *themselves* clearly articulate the corporate identity of their church. This is bedrock for the formation of community. When people know *what* they are a part of in inspiring and concise, terms, there is a far greater likelihood they will passionately identify with others who are also a part. This is a built-in competency that both the Purpose Driven Church model and the Seeker Driven, Willow Creek Church model give to churches. The Purpose Driven “Discovery CLASS” approach, “*Christian Life And Service Seminars*” has been widely adopted with the effect of bringing a much needed cohesion between purpose and ministry activities. Their use of slogans provides context and a framework for understanding the community.

Raving Fans

A corollary in the corporate world is the concept of branding. The process is simple. Know who you are or want to be, and then maintain an intentional and tenacious marketing focus that communicates it thoroughly through every means available as often as possible. In time people come to see the vision as an inseparable part of the organization. If companies can create raving fans with deep brand loyalty, surely the Church, with its transcendent purposes and opportunities for real-life service, can do even better.

Integration

The Community Building model below illustrates the stair-stepped and inter-related process of community building. Start at the top and work your way down, answering the questions as you go. The questions are meant to provide an aid in leadership brainstorming and retreat settings where definitions are codified, strategies are hammered out and ministries are envisioned. The first key is to understand the absolute necessity for linkages between abstract principles and concrete reality. The next key is to discover and successfully market those linkages which provide practical relevance to your vision.

The Community Building Strategic Process

1. Vision Casting
 - Purpose “**Why** we are here?”
 - Mission “**What** we are called to do?”

- Core Values “**Who** we are?”
- 2. Strategic Plan
 - Ministry Design “**How** will we do it?”
 - Sequencing “**When** will we do what?”
 - Resourcing “**Where** will it come from?”
- 3. Ministry Execution
 - Promoting “**Why** are we doing this?”
 - Training “**How** do we equip?”
 - Launching “**When** will it start?”
 - Supporting “**Where** do we need to strengthen it?”
 - Evaluating “**Who** needs help?”
 - Re-engineering “**What** needs to change?”

Stopping Too Soon

Much has been said and written about the need for churches to craft a mission statement, a purpose statement and, more recently, to identify their core values. These are good academic exercises but they will prove futile, in terms of value, without cementing them into a broader context of ministry. I know churches that have expended great energies to define their purpose and mission statements where it had zero impact on their actual behavior and congregational morale. Why? They stopped too soon. The process needs to go from the sublime, “Why are we here?” all the way down to the tedious, “Who can we get to do this?”

You are well on your way to a well defined sense of community when everyone knows *why* they are doing *what* they are doing and can clearly communicate it to others in lingo that everyone understands. This in turn creates a setting where people can passionately belong. Raving fans are the antidote for congregant attrition.