

COMMUNITY

O OF

CHRIST YOUR NAME GIVEN

My life was changed forever in 1980 during my first visit to French Polynesia as their new Apostle. I lived with five different families for two or three days each, one quite poor with no raised beds. My bed was specially made for me - literally a wooden plank supported by wooden end boards, with a sheet. Other homes had varying degrees of affluence and comfort. All had an abundance of love and generosity. All shared their life openly, with humility and joy. I discovered a culture and community that really practises welcome, inclusion, generosity and celebration. There are good reasons for this in their history and geography, but the point is that they have chosen to live this way.

Living in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, on tiny islands thousands of kilometres from continental land masses, surviving massively destructive storms, Polynesians have understood more than most the value of strong community. One scene is forever etched in my mind. It was a typical church conference held on one of the 'outer islands' or atolls. Most would arrive by small boat travelling many hours on the open ocean from the other islands in that district.

I was waiting at the edge of the village with the crowd of villagers and visitors for the arrival of a convoy of small boats from a very distant island. It was late afternoon and we knew they had been on the water for many hours. The first boat arrived. Palpable excitement and relief among the people on shore. It stopped in the deep ocean, short of the entrance to the safe harbour of the lagoon. Then the next boat. Then two more. Then we just waited.

After a long time, everyone waiting quietly, another small boat came into view. On board the boats were men and women, all ages. When all boats were together they quietly bowed while a prayer of gratitude for safe travel was offered. Then they entered the lagoon and the time of singing, celebration and conferring began.

Waiting for everyone. We all waited for everyone. They have long understood the importance of everyone. In their society they quietly make room for all, even those not typical or average. Every baby is highly sought after to adopt if the parents can't manage. There is a place for everyone. It's not that it's easier for them. People are people everywhere. They understand from their youngest years that community means everything, and community means everyone.

During my years of ministering with them they dealt with the introduction of birth control and priesthood for women. They knew that with better health systems in a modernising society, families no longer needed to have 10, 12 or even 20 children so that enough would survive to carry on the family and community. The women realised that very large families were impacting health and quality of life. I watched the way the women raised the subject and the extremes of consultation that occurred. Health, religious views, economic and family life considerations were all reviewed. Finally it was agreed that birth control instruction could be provided to church women through the congregations by two experienced, accredited church ladies. Women's ordination was handled similarly. To my western eyes it was slow, cumbersome and painful when the evidence was already clear. Later I realised their way was a process of inclusion of people and critical factors. They have reached the same destinations without anything like the ruptures and losses experienced in many western communities. They understand community.

I could continue describing experiences with the community of the church in many nations on all continents. I saw something of both the brilliance and the weakness of each culture in comprehending the earth and the human journey. In every church community the cultural strengths and weaknesses are expressed and subjected to the invitations and imperatives of the gospel. It has ever been thus. We might think that the gospel principles, taken to each culture, settle most matters. To the contrary the presentation of the gospel, and serious attempts to express its principles more often expose largely accepted systems of unfair, unequal but strongly held arrangements that do not uphold the worth of all, and do not seek peace for all. When the gospel is truly heard there is work to do. Such work is best accomplished and manifest in community.

Our church was given a new name right when individualism was soaring in western thought and life. Make no mistake. Our name was given to us. I was there. Our new Temple had been recently dedicated. World

Church leaders went on retreat in 1994 to the Colorado Mountains. As a leadership group we experienced together the emergence of an understanding and then the moment of clarity, realisation and stillness when we knew. President Wallace B Smith declared "That's it. Community of Christ will be our name." This had not been pre-planned. Within minutes a member of the Presidency left the group to call our legal officer in Independence to see if that name was already claimed, and if not then to claim it for us. It took the church at large another 6 to 8 years to fully accept such a massive change. Most were worried about the loss of our old name. Few understood the profound significance of the one new word to be added to our name..Community.

During those years of mighty struggle the leaders quietly persisted with the church because this was not simply a name that scored more votes than other names. It had been given to us! The First Presidency in their 1996 Report to World Conference quietly acknowledged that there was no consensus in the church but that they had no other name to offer. Those years of dialogue were a demonstration of community in action. Members from various positions honestly expressing their best perceptions. Leaders working, working, working with people to listen to each other. To listen to the Spirit. Each year the church remained divided 50-50 on the idea. The whole process was rewarded in the World Conference of 2000 when a peaceful spirit pervaded the discussion and the conference voted 78% in favour of the change to the new name. It was an extraordinary experience. The 2002 Conference theme was 'Celebrate Community'.

Community! Community! Strong, inspired and inclusive leadership working with all of their community. There is still so much to learn about being a community, about being in a community. Now in 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic is highlighting in a thousand ways, through every day's news, the critical nature of community – "we're all in this together"; "if each one will play his or her part we'll get through". People everywhere are wrestling with what it means for healthier persons to make sacrifices so that more at risk persons can be protected. Many struggle with the consequent hampering of individual success. Why do the fit and the speedy have to wait for those who need more time or more care? Understanding is slowly forming that everyone does matter, and inclusion can be tough and messy.

Community of Christ is our name.

KEN ROBINSON PERTH

1. D&C 163:1 "Community of Christ," your name, given as a divine blessing, is your identity and calling.