
Fractal Community

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I've been thinking a lot about the felt needs of many people in North America. At least in the circles I run in, deeper community is one of these felt needs. Another is more active engagement in the harvest of spiritual things. The two are deeply related.

There is no doubt that the need for deeper community is huge for many. The proliferation of small groups and cell churches and simple churches marks the need well. Unfortunately, sometimes these attempts at intimacy are marked by a decided lack of imagination. They can be plagued with a need to follow the only agenda we really know, and so our ideas about worship and true intimacy with God and each other go unchallenged and every iteration of community leaves us wanting -- because its just a newer model of the same old vehicle.

Some will say that the small group they are part of is fulfilling the felt need they have and it may be. I'm not suggesting that none of these groups are working, on the contrary, many of them are working splendidly. However, many of them are bound by a structure and an agenda that reflects a clergy-centered model of community.

What I am suggesting is that there is a far simpler way of being. Our model is God himself. He is, in himself, full community and it is community he's invited us to. Community with them (the community of the Father ~ Son ~ Spirit) and community as his Bride (the Church). What we have been experiencing with a few friends of ours is closer to what I think is reliably fulfilling and do-able than anything else I've experienced or heard about.

My wife Deanna and I and two other couples get together on Wednesdays. The guys get together on Wednesday morning and the families get together later that evening. We have only one agenda: to discern together what God wants to say to us.

We believe God speaks to all of us. Further, we believe, if we really listen to each other, together we are able to get a fuller and deeper picture of what God wants to communicate than any of us can get alone. But this is only possible when we are each living a life centered around God. My friend Kent Smith has been talking about being centered for some time and I believe he is on to something. He says nature is full of repeating patterns around a center, atoms to galaxies, paddle swirls to hurricanes. It is obvious to us that the Bride of Christ is another example of repeating patterns around a center.

But there have been problems with this. For a couple thousand years, we've been consistently plagued by two problems: one has been that we've had the wrong center…

Church isn't it.

The preacher or teacher isn't it.

The Bible isn't it.

Spiritual gifts aren't it.

The Blessed Virgin isn't it.

Capitalism and nationalism aren't it.

Only God is the appropriate center.

The other problem is that we've had too few of these repeating patterns. Our churches have consistently been too big. Our Sunday school classes have been too big. And even when we've been really sincere...we've mostly ignored at least half of the church just because they're the wrong gender.

Even when we claim to be listening, we don't really take them as seriously as we should. I know there are many places where women are being taken seriously but they are still far too far and few between. I've had to learn that my wife not only hears God, but she frequently hears him better than I do! Therefore, I should listen carefully to her!

What we need are millions upon millions of repeating patterns. Groups of six to twelve people who, in addition to their own centered days and nights, are spending a significant amount of time being centered together. And I'm not just

talking about praying! It's talking about a conversation in which God is the primary participant. We listen to him in our own hearts and in the hearts of those with us and discern together what he is saying.

This requires a new level of humility! Let me just say it again. This requires a new level of humility!

Invariably, there will be someone who is hearing something different than you are (and guys, when it's a woman it can be hard to be humble). However, if we are humble, we can listen to what God is saying to us... and come to the truth.

Let me tell you, it's worth it! It's frustrating, but it's worth it! What we've been finding is that God (apparently) is rarely concerned with our plans or programs or what all... He almost always seems far more concerned with community.

I think there are a couple of reasons for this:

The first is obvious -- he is community. The second is also obvious -- he doesn't need our programs. The church grows as each part does it's work. Jesus tells us our work is to love one another. I know that there has been much made of the Great Commission and the Great Command...but they aren't two things. They're one thing.

What if we don't get past community?

What if we can't get past community?

So some of you may be asking "If all we have to do is love each other, how do these little groups spread?" and it's a good question. The answer is they don't. They don't spread because they're already there. What we're talking about is the web of relationships that is already in place! Let me illustrate...

Fractals are perfect for illustrating one way I believe God wants to use these small, centered fellowships. Fractals have, among other things, repeating self similar (not exact) patterns. So in the fractal below the center represents God and the nodes represent three couples or individuals.

In the next we see the nodes are connected naturally to (in this case) three other nodes.

And those nine are naturally connected to three others.

And yet again…

It may seem that this is a simplistic way of seeing God and his people. However, the beauty of the fractal way of looking

at the Kingdom is that the structure is already in place and no single node is responsible to/for more than a few centered communities. The beauty of the resulting fractal image is that it is totally dependent upon God. Without the pattern he has created and invited us to there would be no structure.

Let me give you some eye candy. The following newton msets are beautiful examples of the very thing i'm talking about. The point of light in the middle represents God and each of the smaller points of light represent a small, Christ-centered community. No matter how much you zoom in on any point on the fractal, there are always connections to similar structures. In the following sequence each picture will have an area of the picture that is defined by a small black rectangle. The rectangle defines the area of the following picture such that we have a zoom sequence. (each of these thumbnails can be clicked for a closer look)

Now, consider that while the perimeter of a fractal image is a line of apparently infinite length, it defines a decidedly finite area. In our world, with a larger global population than at any time in history, we are more closely connected to one another than ever before. Stanley Milgram's "small world" experiments suggest that there are only six degrees of separation between any two humans on the earth. This means that you are only five relationships away from anyone else on the planet. only five of those little points of light in the msets…

Now, I don't claim to have stumbled onto the last model we'll ever need. but…

I have been coming to this conclusion for a very long time. and I am fully convinced that it is the only way (i’ve ever seen) to truly bring each member of the Bride to a place where they can serve the Bride and God in a way that is consistent with the image I see in scripture.

Nobody needs to have more than two of these centered groups. If each person who is invited to participate in a centered community will in turn invite a few others to a second centered community then the centered life of God will flow through a fractal structure giving life to all who choose to just breathe it.

Again, the really cool thing about this is that the structure is already in place. we already know the people we need to invite. We don't have to do traditional mission work or engage in pop-evangelism… you don't need to plant churches or discover new ways of communicating the message that are at once biblical and fresh, doctrinally sound and relevant. You don't need to have a big budget or insurance for the staff or a facility you have to maintain. You don't need a curriculum or good work books. You're already connected to the people who want a centered

life, you already know how to relate to them, and you already know how to listen to God (and if you don't, you'll learn; it's not rocket science, God wants to be heard!).

In the past, I've been ashamed: too ashamed to invite anyone to the church I've known. Most people have heard the schpeel. I've always felt a little like an Amway salesman when trying to talk to people about God. It isn't that I've been ashamed of God, but I'm ashamed of the way he and his Bride have been marketed and communicated. The good news for me is that this isn't an invitation to church, it isn't an invitation to another life commitment that just robs you of life;

its an invitation to friendship.