

Community Connectivity

Since the first was instituted on these shores churches have held a central role the community, developing what has been referred as social capital, and in the civic arena the church's 'people' (clergy and members), have been very much part of the wider networks in a locality, with involvement from such as volunteering to leadership at various levels and more. This is less so in many cases for many reasons, most of which we are aware of as they have been covered thoroughly in other places, so they won't be covered here. This said it is not the case in all contexts and in the past 18 months much work has been undertaken within the UCA WA to reinvigorate the connectivity of churches of the Presbytery, within and across their community networks, with some good outcomes.

Social capital has been defined in countless way by the experts in the field, two of the terms used are: 'bonding' and 'bridging.' Bonding social capital is the description given to the enduring relationships that are established between similar people within a group. The relationships that are developed within congregations are an example of bonding social capital. Bonding social capital creates a strong sense of belonging. Bridging social capital refers to the wider social bonds created across various networks, usually between people or organisations that share common interests, but this can be with diverse groups too. It is argued that bonding and bridging social capital are keys to building healthy communities, which as we know are sadly less healthy in contemporary society.

Despite what many of us have convinced ourselves, a key strength of churches lies in their connections to local communities, not least because as well as being church members, those who attend are also usually people who live in the area and are therefore community members, part of the local society and electorate. Churches and their members have an ability to mobilise and utilise local resources, adding value to their communities in countless ways and creating civic engagement, as well as support networks. The role of churches in building community, developing social capital and acting to empower individuals stems from our Christian theological worldview and in particular a desire to reflect the presence of God in the world.

As we are faced with not only countless issues from increased suicide rates, mounting unpayable debt levels, soaring homelessness and the 'loneliness epidemic' that has been the subject of much media coverage for some years, we are now faced by the coming aftermath of the global Corona Virus pandemic. As yet we have no real picture of the extent of the effect of this unprecedented time in our world's history but we do know it will be far reaching and had long term and most certainly detrimental effects, for large part of our society. This is a time when the church, whose history and expertise positions it to be an asset in such times, can, and must come into its own.

Within the concept of social capital, lies the importance of developing norms of reciprocity and relationships of trust and civic engagement, which sounds like a sizable task we might think is beyond our personal or local church ability, but experience over the past 30 years of my work in 4 continents, has confirmed that it is much easier that it sounds. To offer a phrase frequently parroted back at me, as it seems I use it a lot more than I thought: "It not rocket science!"

Building 'social capital' begins, in my experience, with 'being known.' This might sound a bit too simple but those 30 years of experience have shown me categorically, that it is the case.

This isn't the place for expounding the wealth of sociological and psychological research underpinning this assertion but we all know that when someone or something is 'unknown' assumptions are usually made, often wrong ones, and that when relationships are made and people are 'known,' any false assumptions can be rectified and correct ones enabled. 30 years of personal research has identified, and wider research now confirms, many local churches and their memberships, are 'unknown' and invisible' within their local communities, and so our engagement with local communities has decreased. One of our missional tasks of this time is become 'known' again and that is a central aspect of the work of my role as Mission Minister for UCA WA, and as already been stated this work is beginning to have outcomes in those places where I have been able to interact to date. Please do contact me if you would like to know more or to have me visit with you in your context.

Today I want to offer just one thing we can do to help being 'known,' that can be implemented even whilst we are still in shutdown: connecting and becoming 'known' online, which in many ways mirrors the ways this might happen IRL (the social media shorthand for 'in real life.')

Community connectivity can be developed online

You don't need to create a page or a group for people to connect online. The reality is that your neighbourhoods are already doing that. Most suburbs and towns already have a community Facebook Group. These are Groups where people ask questions, talk about community issues, advertise local businesses, and rant about the bins not being collected or the dog that leaves packages on their front lawn.

In addition, many suburbs or collection of suburbs, have Facebook pages dedicated to specific aspects of community life - things like "Buy, Swap and Sell" groups, or a specific sporting club or community group page. Connect with people where they naturally connect. We can't expect the people to do the "cross cultural" work and come to us - we are the sent ones. So, go to the places your neighbours and your community already congregate, and this includes where they gather online.

Missiologist Michael Frost (*an Australian*) encourages Christians to "listen deeply to the yearnings, desires, hopes and disappointments of their community."

As you listen, begin to ask yourself (and even write down).

Where is God in this?

Where is God at work?

Where can you see the Kingdom breaking in?

Where is injustice, things which do not reflect the goodness of God's Kingdom displayed?

What might be done to bring light, love, forgiveness, and grace in even deeper and meaningful ways?

In the New Parish, co-authors Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, & Dwight Friesen, speak about becoming a "known character" in the neighbourhood. This means becoming someone in your community who is recognisable, someone who plays a role in the neighbourhood, and someone whose presence would be missed if you were to leave. The question is, what will

you become known for? As followers of Jesus, we should become known characters in our communities, known for justice, for mercy, and for humility. We should be known as people of prayer and of integrity, as the ones who display what we call the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If you are doing this online, the more you choose to interact and post online, the greater your online presence and more you will become known by others in your online community. They will recognise your profile picture and depending on what you have said previously, they will very quickly choose to scroll on past, or stop and read what you have to say.

The reality about having an online presence is that it translates into the real world. As people “get to know you” online, they see what you post, they see how you interact with others, and they will make a judgement of what you’re like as a “real person”. The beauty, and terror, of Facebook is that your profile picture makes you recognisable elsewhere. The reputation you have built online will determine the level of relationship others are willing to develop with you offline. You can become a known character in your neighbourhood by virtue of your online presence.

These are indeed unprecedented times but they are also times when the richness of the church’s past and that which we have in the present in the area we now call social capital, can be the gift our communities are waiting for to be part of the solutions that will be needed, in the times that lie ahead after this pandemic. Whether it is physical, emotional or spiritual support that is needed, we have the capacity to consider what it is we have to hand in our context, to make that known and to be part of a brighter future wherever God has placed us in these days.

Stay safe and hopeful.

Alison

Presbytery Mission Minister