

COMMUNITY

WHY WE MATTER TO EACH OTHER



BY LINKS PLAYERS PRESIDENT **JEFFREY CRANFORD**

LIVE IN THE LAND OF COMMUNITIES. Here in the California desert region that includes about a dozen cities woven together, we have more than 100 golf courses. Many of them you have heard of, even if you have never been here: Bermuda Dunes, PGA West, Indian Wells, La Quinta. And lining just about every one of these courses are homes touted eagerly as “the community where you want to live.”

I’m not a real estate agent—which is probably a great fortune for me in these desperate times for those who are trying to sell houses. But I do know that it’s often not a house that sells a house. Rather, it is the environment around the house that matters most, especially here in the desert, where golf courses and clubhouses and spas and gated entries and those others who are members make for something bigger than a house. In a realtor’s vernacular, these things make for “a community.”

Most people really do seek something bigger than a house. They seek a community. They will buy the house if that is what it takes to be a part of the community that captures their attention.

This all makes sense to me. Everyone on the planet is actively pursuing contentment, and if they see a physical community as a ticket to this elusive happiness, they go after it with every resource they can muster.

But so many people I see here and in other places like Palm Springs are coming up woefully short in their pursuit of contentment! I think there is a simple reason for this. They don’t know what it means to live in a true community.

ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO, I BEGAN TEACHING (IF YOU CAN CALL IT THAT) MY FIRST SMALL GROUP. Though we started in a small diner and even a McDonald’s playground, we soon found ourselves in the locker room at La Quinta Country Club, a long-time host site for the Bob Hope Desert Classic. You could count us with ease in those early days, but we kept meeting for one reason: God had brought us together.

As a result of this humble launch, I have had the extreme privilege of baptizing hundreds of men and women through the years. With the luxury of retrospect, our little community has been witness to some radically transformed souls. I’ve seen folks give up lives that were centered around the pursuit of the next pleasure and wholly devote themselves to “Jesus pursuits”—prison ministry, feeding the hungry, reaching out to underprivileged children, caring for sex-traffic victims, counseling couples, building sheltering homes in Mexico, teaching the Bible, becoming servants in lowly endeavors by helping park cars, set up chairs, build web sites, and on and on and on. In short, I’ve watched people move from the pursuit of shallow pleasures to the pursuit of activities that impact others in rich ways. I’ve been a front-row spectator, watching people finally be able to take a deep breath and feel satisfied.

MORE THAN THAT, IN THE MIDST OF ALL THESE GOD-HONORING ENDEAVORS, THERE HAS EMERGED A SOMEWHAT UNFORESEEN RESIDUAL BENEFIT. To be honest, it caught me off guard. As people become more and more satisfied in God, they experience—many for the first time—a connection to others that they have never experienced before.

When people rightly connect with the Creator of the universe through the Messiah, Jesus Christ, they inevitably find themselves connecting with others around them in ways they never expected. The result? They begin to experience a liberation from the deafening roar of the performance treadmill.

That's right—deafening. In a culture that rewards us on the basis of our accomplishments, it is so easy to unwittingly jump onto the never-ending path of attempting to fulfill human expectations that we be “exceptional.” In the world, we rarely if ever experience acceptance apart from our excelling in some way. What a heavy load to bear!

But community that emerges from a shared focus on God's purpose for our lives offers something wonderfully different: unconditional acceptance.

Some people think that this kind of acceptance means that we let people get away with anything and casually forgive them. The Bible teaches that such an approach would be an affront to God's incredible grace. So those in God-honoring community do challenge one another to pursue qualities of humility, loyalty and responsibility. But they encourage one another with the understanding that one part of growth is mistake-making. We all have much left to learn, whether we have walked with Christ for years or only days! “Less experienced” travelers are covered with a God-inspired patience that creates an atmosphere of love and acceptance. The extension of this loving grace, of course, is merely a reflection of Jesus within the hearts of the community. It's beautiful to watch!

It is pure joy to be unconditionally accepted by those around you. It's a healing ointment applied to the wounds of rejection we have all experienced in this dog-eat-dog world we live in.

THOUGH I'M A CONSTANT WITNESS TO THIS TYPE OF COMMUNITY AND ITS MEDICINAL EFFECTS UPON THE HUMAN SOUL, I'M STILL AWESTRUCK WHEN IT HAPPENS. A recent trip to Israel with a very eclectic group of Links Players gave me another glimpse into the power of this “kingdom reality.”

On the trip, we had a wide age range among the 40 travelers in the group. And about 40 years spanned the youngest to oldest. As a result, some of the older folks found it difficult to keep up with the arduous schedule. As you might have experienced in your own group travel, this can be a recipe for disaster. And because people had paid “good money” to come on the trip, I was feeling the pressure as the group's leader to provide the experience of a lifetime.

Yet as the trip progressed, it became increasingly obvious that things were not always going to go as planned—luggage lost, purses left behind, people ill and exhausted, schedules delayed... you get the picture.

The result, however, was never mutiny. What developed was a community effort that defied logic. Folks sacrificed their own experience to stay behind with the less able bodies. Love and grace so permeated the community that not only did we survive, we flourished! Over and over again, the bond of community proved every bit as significant as the trip itself.

You see, people thrive both when they are loved and when they are able to extend love. It's simply the way of God's kingdom.

AS JESUS WAS PREPARING TO GO TO THE CROSS, HE OPENED UP HIS HEART TO THE FATHER AND PRAYED WHAT MANY REFER TO AS THE HIGH PRIESTLY PRAYER. In this prayer, He exposed a huge part of God's plans for restoring the earth and its inhabitants back to the health they once enjoyed in the Garden of Eden. He simply prayed that the disciples and all those who would hear the message of the kingdom would collectively become one. But He didn't stop there! The reason He gave for this request was clear and unambiguous: that the world would believe that the Father had indeed sent Him (Jesus).

You see, Jesus needs to become real to the world—not merely one component in a theological equation. He does this through the hands and feet and voices and hearts of those who choose to follow Him. When a community emerges that employs the various facets of “Jesus living within them,” this sends up a radical signal to a watching world that God both exists and that He is lovingly accessible. In other words, healthy community is a visible portrait of Jesus Himself. }