

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

1: Why Community Matters

It's great to have you with us as the rubber really hits the road with the CROWN rule of life. Over this series of short talks we're going to be looking at forming the COMMUNITY rhythm, though the different elements of CROWN don't need to be taken in any specific order.

So you could do WRONC, or RONWC it really doesn't matter. There is plenty of overlap and growth in one are will benefit the others.

In that respect you might want to start with where you feel weakest. That's easy if you're watching this online, for you guys here - well, you're here for the duration.

So, how many times have you checked in on email, facebook or instagram already today? What's the high score in the room? I guess if you're watching this on you-tube I can't complain too much. But are we too busy scrolling through the details of others lives to live our own? Apparently we're more connected, yet disconnected than ever...

Yet research shows that being actively part of a community increase well being, good relationships with others even helps you live longer, reducing the risks of dementia. No surprise then, that measures of isolation are used to help target social policy and interventions.

But perhaps we should not be surprised, it's how we're wired.

In the beginning, we read, "it is not good for the man [and by extension woman] to be alone." *Genesis 2:18*. Most interpreters agree, given Jesus' and St Paul's later affirmation of singleness, this is not an exaltation of marriage - but expresses the reality of our human need for companionship, for friendship and community.

C S Lewis, in the *Four Loves*, wrote, "To the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it."

Indeed, the church Fathers (such as John of Damascus) expressed this in theological terms. Pondering the perfect relationship and interactions / indwelling of *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, describing their relationship as fellowship, the doctrine of 'perichoresis' emerged.

This mutuality represented by perfect giving and receiving means that as well as one in being, the Trinity are also also one in the intimacy of their friendship.

Now as we've been learning CROWN reminds us that we are made in God's image, however marred that is by sin, and the Church Father's observed that the divine imprint we bear is reflected in the innate human need for relationship, fellowship and community.

Now we can push the analogy too far, I've heard it played out in different ways. Some argue that the relationships within the trinity provide a perfect model for human relationships - but different traditions reach very different conclusions.

I think this rather misses the point. The awesome truth is that we, ourselves, are invited into relationship not just with each other, but with most High God. We are invited into relationship and community with the the three members of the trinity, and everything else comes out from our intimacy with them.

Here, perhaps, that famous image of Rublev's icon helps we have copy at St Mike's).. In the depiction of the angels who visited Abraham & Sarah, interpreted as the presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we see an interconnection between those at the table and an open place for us, drawing and welcoming us in.

Christian community then, isn't just members of the church getting on, or deciding to stay for coffee after church... rather it is sharing life together in the presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We share life, share table with God and each other.

Now, if we can't perfectly replicate the interrelationships of the trinity we **do** have the gift of seeing how Jesus formed community. As his disciples we are serve one another in love, look out for the needs of others and urge each other on to growth in faith. We may have layers of relationship too, Jesus had his inner three, the disciples and a wider community of followers.

All of this then is useful foundational thinking - but what does this look like in practice?

We sum the Community rhythm as this: We value belonging to and worshiping with the church family.

We aspire to grow in our relationships with each other meeting for conversation, coffee or food. As God sets the lonely in families, so we aim to get to know others in our fellowship beyond our existing circle of relationships. We acknowledge the significance of gathered worship and prayer, glorifying God together and building one another up.

So let me ask you a question?

1. How do you respond to that image of Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the table, with the space left inviting you in?

Well think about that, talk to those around you, if you're watching online do leave a comment below and we'll continue to unpack the community rhythm in a few moments time.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

2: The First Christian Community

As we continue to explore this idea of COMMUNITY we begin to find ourselves in a place of tension. Our individualistic culture and the way technology can serve to isolate us is in tension with the innate need for meaningful community that is set deep with us. If we add into that our own hurts and disappointments we can begin to see this can be a bit of a battleground.

So it always helps to have a vision for something better. Unsurprisingly Christians have looked back to the early church time and again for inspiration - and it is a wonderful model of vibrant community. Shall we look at Acts 2:42-47 together:

The fellowship of the believers

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What stands out for you? Perhaps call that out now!

- *Devotion to the apostles teaching.*
- *That same commitment to fellowship - being together, the same word, koinonia describes the relationship between husband and wife.*
- *Delight in breaking bread together*
- *A passion for prayer*
- *Awe and reverence at what God is doing.*
- *Sharing things, meeting each others needs.*
- *Meeting daily for prayer in larger groups in the temple courts.*
- *Sharing food and life in each others homes.*
- *Filled with thanksgiving.*
- *Overflowing with praise, and being visible to those around.*
- *Growing day by day with people coming to faith in Jesus.*

Now, here we've had the privilege of seeing this glimpses of this over the years... A Community - debts have been paid off, needs met, God is moving in peoples lives,

But the big question is how can we experience more?

It might be easy to think, well, we'll never get there.... Maybe we won't - but let these verses stand as a beacon of what 'could be' and something to press on towards. What if get close?

So, how might we do that?

One of the great things about forming rhythms that build a Community element of a rule of life, is that we are making an intentional commitment to pursue church in all it's fullness.

And as we do this, we're positioning ourselves for encounter with God, because - as we've already seen - Jesus is at the table.

If we are looking for God as we meet, then the atmosphere will shift. If Jesus is at the table it has to. This was a church of celebration, of rejoicing in God's goodness - and enjoying his presence and favour.

Our passage was full of qualities.... Community isn't something that just happens to us, at its best it requires devotion - you can't be devoted to many things, togetherness, generosity to others, commitment to share our lives, (often wonderfully expressed by sharing food).

And as we do - God blesses our unity and lead us into deeper encounter together. Community is an investment and a commitment we make. It's not a case of picking just the best bits we like, like consumers, it's more the opposite, we choose give into it, and reap the rewards.

So as you form a Community rule you might be asking, how will this lead me deeper with God and with others?

If church doesn't look much like Acts 2, what are you going to do about it. Think of local churches as outposts of heaven. Shaping culture around the presence and worship of God - does that sound familiar? Are you willing to help build such a community?

I want to ask you:

- 1. Can you think of a time, something found in these verses in Acts 2 took place in your Church Community?**

Think about that, talk to those around you, or leave you comments below... and we'll continue in a moment.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

3: Presence in Community

So, have you ever had someone say to you, *I'm a Christian, but I don't go to church?* How do you go about answering that? Do you have sympathy?

Of course there's no "pat" answer, there's often a story behind it, sometimes tragic and in need of our love and compassion, sometimes pathetic and in need of a challenge out of complacency.

But mostly in my experience it's shared as a cop-out... Anyway, as I was thinking about this I got a bit distracted, as I am prone to do, and found myself on one of my regular websites, The Fishy, a fans page and forum for Grimsby Town Football Club. Yes, there is more than one of us....

And it struck amidst the banter and, let's face it, the general misery, is the high value that is placed on commitment. The fans whose opinion matters are those actually who go to the games. It's even questioned are you a real fan if you only turn up when there's a bit of glory - a big game in the cup, or the team are doing well - perhaps the church's equivalent of Easter and Christmas. But at least Easter and Christmas come once a year for the church!...

But do you get what I'm saying. It doesn't sit comfortably - when someone says I believe, I just do church.... You'll be pleased to hear there is more of a theological answer to this...

You see it's not a question the Scripture considers or entertains. There's little concept of individual spirituality - in the sense that faith is something purely personal that has nothing to do with anyone else. That is a very modern way of thinking. Even the thief on the cross, had a vision for Jesus' wider kingdom.

The pictures we get are corporate ones, of each person being part of the body, or of being a family together (children of Father God, co-heirs with Jesus), each depicting the church as a vibrant living organism.

As someone once put it - "to say that you love Jesus but hate religion or church is akin to saying you love your best friend but hate his wife. That relationship will not last."

At this point, the answer often given to those who ask if they can go it alone as a Christian, is you can't be a believer and not go to church, because you are the church!

And that is true... to a point, certainly, it is good to strip the church of its institutional baggage, or the idea it is a location and place - but you can't *be* the church on your own.

BUT Jesus also gives us some basic Kingdom maths:

Matthew 18:20 - *For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*

If we go back to the image of Rublev's icon, the invitation is for us to form community with fellowship with, and the worship of God at the centre. We can link that to worship in a number of ways, gathering at the Lord's table for communion, being fed by his word, hearing the prophetic voice of the Holy Spirit.

If we consistently miss God working like this as he presences himself in and through his gathered people, we will be diminished and not fulfil our full destiny in Christ....

Behind some of this is the squeeze of a consumer society which presents to us church as another lifestyle choice. Like anything else it's an activity that we can opt in to if we fancy it - some have drifted from church in frustration.

But that's not the right response, as David Watson used to say, if you feel your church doesn't pray enough, pray more. If you feel it's not reaching out - reach out.

But we may also have to put our hands up, when we've got into a rut. Maybe sometimes our meetings and services have focused on community but lost sight of the presence of God that should be at our heart.

2 or 3 have gathered - but forgotten about his name. Without God, we're just another 'a social club', maybe no more distinct than a walking group, or a book club - just another way that people gather.

*So Do our rhythms together seek and prioritise his presence in our midst?
Do our patterns see us coming hungry to seek him and meet with him?*

True community is built around the presence of God, just as the Jewish tribes were encamped around the tabernacle, the dwelling tent of God's presence in the wilderness. Theological bonus, I love the way that John's gospel describes Jesus coming into our world as tabernacling among us - his presence in our midst.

Any Community rule should be built around this premise and expectation of encounter with Jesus - it is quite clear that he is more committed to this than we are?!

So let me ask you a question?

1. How have you experienced the reality of God's presence as you've met with other Christians?

Think about that, talk to those around you, or leave your comments below... and we'll continue in a moment.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

4: Presence in Community continued

Now this idea that Christian community is distinct is further developed as an image of the church by both St Paul, and St Peter with the image of the temple...

Now have you ever seen the images of Jerusalem the Western (or wailing wall) we see images of jews coming to pray? Why is it so important? It's sacred because it is a remnant of the wall that once enclosed and supported Herod's Temple.

Now, what was the significance of the temple? Dwelling place of God..

So, what do you think it means when the gathered church is described as the temple? **We are the place where God dwells.**

Ephesians 2, 19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

1 Peter 2: 4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians Paul makes the argument that now, in Jesus, something much bigger unites us - than can ever divide us. We are formed into a new community - we have citizenship in heaven - Jesus trumps every argument, reason or pretension we might give that we don't fit in.

And as we come, **as we are being built up**, joined together rising into a holy temple a most amazing thing happens - we become a dwelling place in which God comes and lives by his Spirit. That's why worship matters - the more we let ourselves be built together, the more we experience the reality of God in our midst.

Peter echoes this, in those verses about living stones, our commitment is to come, and to then to let ourselves be built up into a spiritual house. The implication is that the natural or logical consequence of coming to Jesus, is that we are built up together.

Christian community then is made distinct, ultimately, because of Christ. The amazing truth is that when we gather, whether in 2s and 3s, Missional Communities or as the whole church, we enjoy the presence of God with us. In fact God purposes and chooses to gather with us. What an awesome privilege!

And we have a part to play, we choose to come, we choose to let ourselves to be built together, we help set the atmosphere by coming with intention and expectation.

This means though is that if we don't commit to community everyone misses out. The temple isn't built up quite as it could or should be, and gifts are left unused and I wonder if our experience of God's presence is somehow diminished. Worse still, isolation makes us increasingly vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one.

Building community with God reminds us both of who and whose we are. It reminds us that however different we might feel (and be) that there is no division in Christ and we are citizens of a bigger heavenly kingdom. Our identity is affirmed.

It's not enough then to build a rhythm of 'going to church', though that is a start, a community rhythm is a commitment, together to **be** the church, and to let ourselves be built into a dwelling place for the presence of God.

Surely the measure for our groups, churches and ministries too. Not how many are coming to church, how many are becoming the church?

So let me ask you a question?

1. How can you help build this temple when you gather with other Christians?

Think about that, talk to those around you, or leave you comments below... and we'll continue in a moment.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

5: Present in Community

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who just isn't engaged? Maybe they're watching TV, or looking at their phone... It's not great...

It can be easy to be there, but not fully present. The second fundamental of a Community rhythm is choosing to be present.

It was said of the early Christians, as Tertullian records, *See how they love each other*. This was Jesus' command (and prayer) for his church - John 13:35.

Whilst this sounds great, we are not going to experience that love with a superficial connection of our own. To keep a 'safe distance' may mean we don't make ourselves vulnerable; but it also means we don't form deep and precious relationships.

We've already seen in Acts 2 that the church met together in some form *every day*, sharing life with each other in a variety of settings, in public worship, in each others homes. That is quite a challenge - and a rhythm of community need not be quite so intense - let's start where we are, but its not a passive thing.

Being present demands commitment, consistency and contribution.

First, Commitment:

We can measure commitment in a number of ways, how we spend our time, our resources. However, if we sum these up as expressions of love - then Romans 12:9-18 helps us put some flesh on the bones of what this looks like in practice:

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.

11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.

12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

I wonder which aspect challenges you the most? Which do you think you do well? What about our church, or the church you are a part of?

The commitment to community isn't simply to turn-up, *Like hey, I made it!* It is to embody these values.

Maybe as you form a personal rule or rhythm in this area it would help to have this passage open. Because See how closeness with God and with each other is interwoven. I think it's fair to say that if our commitment to the Lord grows luke-warm our experience of community will falter too, and, dare I say, vice versa.

Commitment also means getting over the bumps. The New Testament is wonderfully realistic too - and speaks of commitment in another way. If we think this amazing community of Christians will be perfect we are soon disabused of that - so many of the letters are filled with wisdom about the skills needed to build community together.

There is no better summary of this, than listing the one anothers, there are 59 in all - so here's a few:

- Admonish one another (Rom. 15:14)
- Wait for one another (1 Cor. 11:33)
- Be servants of one another (Gal. 5:13)
- Bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
- Comfort one another (1 Thess. 5:11)
- Build one another up (1 Thess. 5:11)
- Be at peace with one another (1 Thess. 5:13)
- Do good to one another (1 Thess. 5:15)
- Put up with one another in love (Eph. 4:2)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph. 4:32)
- Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- Forgive one another (Col. 3:13)
- Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Love one another from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)

Clearly, without commitment to each other this list makes very little sense. You don't have to put up with someone who hasn't been close enough to rub you up the wrong way. We only have to forgive when someone has been close enough to let us down, and so on.

This choice to be present, takes us beyond church being one of our weeks options - it asks whether we are we willing to lay down our schedules and personal conveniences to make choices for deeper community.

I wonder when we talk about a commitment into community how high it might rank. For example, if taking a new job would have an extremely negative impact on our part in the church fellowship, would that become a factor in our decision making. Would we turn it down? Would it even enter our thinking?

But the great thing is that as we form rhythms that demonstrate our commitment into Jesus' community, others are forming patterns that demonstrate that same commitment towards us, we are growing closer and stronger together.

Now this may not be straightforward, we have to start where we are, we may need to unpick things we are busy with - but as form a rule of life, it's an important moment to take a step further in. And as we do, we'll begin to discover Jesus is already more committed to this than any of us could possibly imagine.

God does not have another plan for this broken world. It is his church.

So let me close with a question?

1. How “present” would you say you were in your church community?

Think about that, talk to those around you, or leave you comments below... and we'll continue in a moment.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

6: Present in Community continued

As a Church of England vicar I am aware that there can be a culture in Anglican parishes for some of coming to church, sitting as close to the back as possible, and hopefully slipping out with little reference to others - not so much here at St Mike's

So if this idea of commitment being important in a community rule of life is challenging, then maybe it helps to look at this way. We're family, brothers and sisters - you don't get to choose your relis! I won't say who the crazy uncle is....

Rosie and I had the verses we looked at last time from Romans 12 read at our wedding, the vicar noted the call to hospitality meant people could rock up at our house and expect to be welcomed and enjoy tea and scones!

At the time, we sensed those verses would be important for us, and experimented over many years with different ways of building community - sometimes exhausting ourselves in the process.

The breakthrough came when we stopped trying to share life with others by a series of extra meetings and special events, and instead, invited them to share what we were already doing.

In 1Thess 2:8 St Paul writes, Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

In practical terms this has meant not hosting 'dinner parties' or entertaining guests with food and special arrangements, but having people join us week by week to eat together when we normally would.

We owe much to the wisdom of the 3DM movement for this, but they themselves only draw from the witness of scripture, where the church is described as an extended family or household, an 'oikos' in which life, food and faith was shared. Consistency is key - as any parent knows, you get the good times without putting in the time. We are unlikely to go deep if we don't spend connected time together, though we may need to be creative about the form, a meal at 6 o'clock won't work for everyone.

?TIm keller - apartments / cafe's and walks.

This little and often approach has built community: in this environment we have seen people released from debt, others come to faith, God move in healing but above all deep love grow for each other. It has become a core building block of church, mission and discipleship for St Mike's. We have

learnt to hold onto our “stuff” a little more lightly - things get broken, but the benefits have far outweighed the occasional breakage!

Interestingly, the Greek Word, *To spend time, diatribo*, also has the image of *rubbing up against* - what an image of sharing life! In Christian community Jesus rubs off on us, and we rub that off on each other. In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters."

Consistency matters - but, of course, it is important what we are consistent with. So, I want to introduce a thought, we'll develop more fully in the OFFERING rhythm of CROWN, contribution.

As we serve each other and use our gifts, time and resources, we are making a positive and conscious contribution to the community - we are choosing to invest ourselves and our lives in our shared mission and each other.

By contributing, we deepen not only our connection with each other, but also our faith as we see and sense God use what we bring to bless his church and advance his kingdom.

If we are to be present in community, then it means commitment, consistency and contribution.

So, what might this look like in a personal rhythm? Of course, much depends on your circumstances and stage of life - and it might be useful to take a simple step at a time, but a pattern of commitment and involvement in Sunday worship and the life around that is a start.

It might mean joining one of our Missional Communities, to share life and food together. Perhaps it's finding one or two to pray with, to find patterns of meeting together that encourage your growth as disciples.

Ultimately, a rhythm of community is a choice. You can't be made to belong, but you can choose to. Have you chosen to? because that will change how you approach things.

That choice places you in a position of immense potential. That choice draws you into closer relationships with others - deepening connection in an increasingly disconnected world.

More amazing though, is the discovery, that with others, you find yourself at an open table, where God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit invite us into deeper community with him.

That is something even the greatest of human relationships cannot offer.

So let me ask you a question?

- 1. Which is the greatest challenge for you, commitment to, consistency with or contribution into the community of the church?**

Think about that, talk to those around you, or leave you comments below...
and we'll continue in a moment.

COMMUNITY RHYTHM

7: Summing Up

The Bible has many images for the church, body, temple, family, each make the point that we gain by coming together and forming community. Bill Hybels describes the local church as the hope of the world. Sharing life with others, receiving from them and contributing to a common goal and vision is a privilege.

We share in the greatest task of all - we are God's plan to reach a broken world - but we also bear his presence - we alone bear the power of the coming age. Christian Communities are outposts of heaven, we are no longer citizens of this world, but of heaven.

We were made for community, not just with each other, but with God, who invites us to share in his life. His PRESENCE is the fundamental distinctive of Christian Community. Our commitment is to play our part to build that human temple in which God's goodness and presence dwells.

At the same time, Scripture urges us to make ourselves PRESENT to build this Community, which will demand commitment, consistency and contribution.

So, the question to get to grips with, is how can we form this into a rule of life we can sustain. We'll each have different starting points, opportunities and obstacles to overcome, but a clear common vision we are heading towards.

I guess the fact we are engaging with CROWN means you have some commitment into this, but, particularly if you are a new Christian, this can be a real area of battle. The evil one wants to isolate us, because he's then he's better placed to take us out.

For others of us, the commitment may be to choose to be more PRESENT as we meet together, this may mean unpicking distractions and things that get in the way. Perhaps it may help to ask, if God really moved in your experience of Community, what would it look like?

We might also need to ask what may need to die if we're to grow?

In our increasingly isolated culture we are coming up against strongholds or societal "truths" which push against us - to form community with Jesus is to be counter-cultural:

To choose hospitality may mean acknowledging our home may not be our castle.

To choose vulnerability above self-sufficiency, may mean being willing to receive from others.

Perhaps it is just be a matter of priority, not seeing church as one of many options, but a foundation upon which other things are built...

But remember simple steps.

So, how might this feel like sailing, not striving?

Where we can, if we can invite others into our existing rhythms then we won't get burdened with more and more meetings.

If we are looking for what God may be doing whenever we meet then we will never be bored, especially as he uses us!

And as we have heard, as we come as living stones, we are built together. There is a sense that God is putting each of us into our right place, if we allow God to help us find our place, then we discover more of both his and our purpose.

As we close this input, then remember it isn't finished until we have formed the patterns that God is leading us into.

A Rule of Life for Community expresses us valuing belonging to and worshiping with the church family. It's an opportunity to position ourselves at a table with others, that we share with Jesus.

Will you choose to be present? Will you pursue his presence with others?

As we close, shall we pray.

Father God, as we come to you now, we say that we *will* let ourselves be built into a spiritual house, a place fit for your dwelling. Help us to form patterns that are life-giving, and give us courage to step beyond things that may hold us back. As we choose to be present in Community, we seek your presence with us - come and build your church we cry, In Jesus Name, Amen.