

**“Being Community”**

**Matthew 18.15–20**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 11 September 2005**

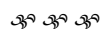
What do you think when you hear that familiar “where two or three are gathered” phrase? Do you instantly assume that it’s about Jesus being present in the congregation at worship? While I sense the presence of the risen Christ in our midst, that’s not the context of the sentence. It’s actually refers to conflict and communication within the congregation.

A papyrus fragment recently discovered in Egypt reads, “When two or three Congregationalists are gathered in the name of Christ, there will be at least six points of view.” That’s part of the genius and the curse of our particular strand of the United Church of Christ. We have opinions – lots of them – and we are welcome to bring those viewpoints into our faith and into our community.

It’s important in any healthy community to have open, honest communication. Churches in which people talk about one another behind each others’ backs can be really awful places to be! The type of communication that I’ve tried to foster at Plymouth over the last three years has been open and direct communication: among the staff, among the congregation, and between the two. That’s one of the reasons I started the sermon talk-back sessions on Monday mornings (which will commence again tomorrow at 7:30). People are welcome to come and disagree with me. That open style of communication is also why I asked the Personnel Committee to give every member the opportunity to review the clergy, and to sign their names to the review. It’s not just important to say what you mean, but to be accountable for what you say.

That open, direct communication flowing back and forth builds relationship, which is what keeps communities together. Matthew talks about the issues of conflict resolution and communication directly, which indicates that it was probably a thorny issue in the early church: “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” You’ll notice that Matthew does **not** advise us to be passive-aggressive or go and tell our friends and complain about it. (That’s probably what was actually happening.)

And I think we at Plymouth are doing a really good job with open communication, and it’s bearing fruit. We’re a pretty healthy church.



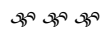
One of the amazing things about communities of faith like ours is that we are one of the few places in American society where there is intergenerational community. Fewer of us connect deeply with our neighbors, as was typical in previous generations. Fewer of us live with or even near our extended families, which also means we can’t rely on them in the same way. Our society is more mobile than ever. All of these add to a sense of disconnection in society.

We may make friends within our age group: whether it’s meeting other parents at a soccer game, attending an Aspen Club event, or hanging out with classmates at the mall. All of those relationships are important. But, who shows up when we need help? Time and again, I’ve seen it happen intergenerationally within our community at Plymouth. A few weeks ago, we asked for help with meals for Dorothy and Verlyn Richardson, and the first name on the list to help was a young man in his 20s, a CSU student, who himself delivers pizza, so he had a pizza delivered to the Richardsons. It was a beautiful thing. (They loved the pizza, by the way.) And it’s important to realize that younger people may not “do” community in exactly the same way our elders have.

One of the hungers of people in Generation X and the tail end of the Baby Boom is for *true community*. And in case you haven't noticed, there are a lot more people in the 20s and 30s at Plymouth than there used to be, which is great! So, if you know someone in that age group, they might just be wanting to find a progressive faith community, and it wouldn't hurt for you to give them an invitation to Plymouth.

One of the most important books of the last decade was written by Robert Putnam, called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.<sup>1</sup> In it, Putnam describes the decline of what he calls "social capital," which concerns our community and civic connections and the value they provide to society as a whole. The overall outlook isn't so rosy, but here is the good news: Putnam writes, "Faith-based communities remain such a crucial reservoir of social capital in America that is hard to see how we could redress the erosion of the last several decades without a major religious contribution."<sup>2</sup> And Plymouth is the type of socially and spiritually connected community that many of us have been looking for.

Plymouth is a powerful, positive force in this community, as it has been for over a hundred years. What will this community look like in its second century? How are we going to continue to meet the changing needs of our *internal* community and of the *wider* community? As UCC members in the Congregational tradition, that's up to you, with the guidance of the Spirit.



So, here we are at the start of the program year at Plymouth. There are lots of new programs (and plenty of old ones); new ways to become involved, new people to meet, new ways of engaging the Spirit in our midst. There is a lot going on here, and it's all great stuff. So, I invite you to get involved. Take some risks. Build up this community. Dream a new dream for Plymouth.

There are more than two or three of us gathered here in the name of the Christ, so we can be assured that Christ's spirit is here among us as we venture forward.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 408