

## 40 DAYS OF COMMUNITY- REACHING OUT TOGETHER

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The story is told of a young salesman who was disappointed at losing a big sale, and as he talked with his sales manager he lamented, "I guess it just proves you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." The manager replied, "Son, take my advice; your job is not to make him drink. Your job is to make him thirsty." That is the key to our **"Reaching out Together"**, the theme for this second week in our **40 Days of Community** program. Let me illustrate the point with a personal story. Speaking of drinking, 30 years ago, when I could still drink wine and eat cheese, Liz and I had numerous discussions over a good red with our neighbours, a GP and his wife. Occasionally we ended up talking about God because Greg knew I was a theological student. But really they were not too receptive to that God talk, till one day the Greg came round to our house and asked to talk to me. He had just found out that his sister had cancer and it didn't look good. He wanted to talk to me about God and life after death. Several times I had brought him to the (living) water, so to speak, but now he was ready to drink because he was thirsty. You get the point. Now what does the average person thirst for. A Gallop Poll done in the US some years ago found the needs of the average person were: "The need for shelter and food; the need to believe life is meaningful and has a purpose, the need for a sense of community and deeper relationships, the need to be appreciated and respected, the need to be listened to and be heard, the need to feel one is growing in faith." So summing it up, people have a deep need for community, a need to love and be loved as we said last Sunday, when we asked **"Why are we here?"** So what is going to make them thirsty? Seeing a community of people who genuinely love each other, unconditionally, who practically care for each other, who are gracious and accepting of each other, warts and all.

Now, we see in 1 Peter 3:15 that the apostle writes *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* You see how it's a case of the other person initiating the conversation with a question. You could say they are thirsty. They want to know why you seem to be different, why you live the way you do, why you have a sense of hope and purpose. But what is it that makes them ask? What makes them thirsty? Well if we look at the context we see that Peter writes in 2:9 *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"*. Note the repeated reference to community, being a people, a nation. That is the stress in the bible, that we are a community not a group of individuals. Notice verse 12, the apostle writes that as a community his readers are to: *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us"*. In other words, Peter says their lives together are saying something to those around them. Look at chapter 3:1 *"Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without talk by the behaviour of their wives."* Now when Peter writes *"in the same way"*, he is saying that the wives are to be like Jesus. In verses 21-25 he shows how Jesus was submissive and suffered for our sin. He says Jesus did that not just to bring forgiveness to those who believe. It's also an example to follow. Verse 21: *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."* It reminds us of our text last week: *"Love one another as I*

*have loved you. By this all men will know you are my disciples*". Now what is said here is all relational stuff, how we get on together. We see it some more in verse 7 where Peter says "*Husbands, in the same way, (that is as Jesus was) be considerate as you live with your wives.*" Then in verse 8 he says "*Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.*" So in other words, God's people are to be together a harmonious, loving community. As we said last week, that's why we are here. But being such a loving community is not just for our own benefit. It's what generates a thirst in the community. It is what attracts people. It's what creates the thirst, the thing that has people ask "What have you got, what is the reason for the way you are?" "*What is the reason for the hope you have*", as Peter says, coming back to verse 15. That's why we are to "***reach out together.***"

In a book by Bill Hybells he quotes a letter from a relatively new Christian to the person who had influenced her so greatly; listen to some of what she wrote: You know when we met; I began to discover a new vulnerability, a warmth and a lack of pretense that impressed me. I saw in you a thriving spirit- I could tell you were a growing person and I liked that. I saw you had strong self-esteem, not based on the fluff of self-help books, but on something a whole lot deeper. I saw you lived by convictions and priorities and not just by convenience, selfish pleasure or financial gain. I had never met any one like that before. I felt a depth of love and concern as you listened to me and didn't judge me. You tried to understand me, you sympathized and you celebrated with me, you demonstrated kindness and generosity, and not just to me but to others as well. And you stood for something. You were willing to go against the grain of society, and follow what you believed to be true, no matter what other people said, and no matter how much it cost you. And for these reasons and a whole host more, I found myself really wanting what you had. Now that I've become a Christian, I wanted to write to tell you I'm grateful beyond words for how you lived your Christian life in front of me." Doesn't that motivate you? How we live, and especially how we live together as a community is so important.

In fact we need to be quite intentional about it. It strikes me how Peter writes "*Always be prepared to give an answer ...*" Our lifestyles should be such that as we relate to folk, somewhere along the line some one will question us about our hope. We need to be intentional about our being a church community and we need to be intentional in being prepared to give an answer. Developing our sense of being together as a community is not just something warm and fuzzy, a nice program for six weeks and then we can forget it all. Nor is it something very good just for us as a church. We need to be intentional about it for the sake of the communities we live in. In Hobart, Tasmania, there is a major bridge across the Derwent River. The bridge spans an area wider than the Sydney Harbour Bridge, but it is not one span, but supported by several columns. One night a captain was drunk as he sailed his large cargo ship towards the bridge and hit one of the supports, causing a span to collapse and fall into the river. Several cars went down with it. When people realized what had happened, and the police were still to come, they desperately tried to stop cars going onto the bridge, almost throwing themselves in front of the oncoming cars. They were very intentional, very desperate to save lives! To just stand there and do nothing and let cars go on the bridge when they knew what had happened, would have been callous beyond words. How intentional, how desperate are we to save our friends and workmates etc. We know that without Christ, people will face eternal hell. Verse 12 says "*For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.*" God's face is turned from us, unless we have come to him in repentance and accepted Christ by faith. Now, saying that we should be prepared, being intentional does not mean I insist you all

go down the street and front up to people and 'bible bash' them. None of us likes being confronted in the street by a Mormon, or someone trying to sell something. John Dickson in his book "Promoting the Gospel" tells the story of him sitting at a café at the beach talking with a colleague about what his church was doing to promote the gospel, when a woman who was sitting close by, obviously had heard their conversation, got up and after paying her bill went straight to John and said "So, you want to convert the world. How dare you!" And off she went. Too much of what goes on for evangelism is intrusive and offensive. It sends shivers down our spines too if we think that's what we should be doing. No wonder so few want to go out and witness. Thing is, the apostle is not telling us that we need to collar and bible bash everyone. He tells us to be prepared to answer when asked. Part of being prepared is that we must be very intentional about our lives as community together: "*live in harmony, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble*". Be attractive in lifestyle.

Part of being quite intentional, being 'prepared' to ***reach out together*** can be seen in the devotions for this week in "Better Together". There we see things like: we should be hospitable. Peter writes in chapter 4:8&9 "*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*" Invite people to your homes, to your small groups. Let people see your lives, how you live together. We should use our small groups. With our church spread out all over the place it's hard to have a natural community so we need to focus on our small groups to show others how we live and care for each other. Have small group BBQs and outings. Invite non Christian friends. Show acceptance. Invite all kinds. Give practical help. There are community outreach projects that you can be involved in organized by the **40 Days of Community team**- like 20 people are needed for a garden project and another 12 to assist with street people in the city. It's the practical stuff that really speaks to our society. That's why the Salvation Army has such a good reception in our towns. When a group of Christians go out of their way to help a non Christian friend, it speaks volumes and generates a thirst.

Outreach is not an individual thing. It's communal. That's why we are encouraged to "***reach out together***". But outreach is not just about how we show love and care for each other. When a friend is touched by Christian compassion, then a time may well be created by the Spirit, where they ask us to "*give the reason for the hope that you have*". And when they do, we should be ready, we should '*be prepared*' because that's one of the reasons why we focus on community- to have the people get thirsty so questions are asked. Peter says "*Be prepared to give an answer.*" The Greek word for "answer" is '*apologia*', which meant to give an explanation, a defense of your faith, an apologetic of your belief. There is a sense in which you need to know what you believe and be able to explain it to another. Now I don't mean some great theological explanation. I mean in simple terms, that you can easily share. I mean sharing your own testimony on how God has been at work in your life. That's where our focus on community is so important. We are encouraged to share our stuff, in our small groups, to talk about our walk with the Lord. If we can't share our faith with each other how will we do it with a non Christian? It's all part of being "*prepared*" as the apostle Peter writes. It's about being intentional. Witnessing is not about winning an argument. Peter writes that giving an answer to the question must be with "*gentleness and respect*". Witnessing is quietly telling about our own story with Jesus and letting the Spirit change the heart of another as they warm to what they hear. In the book '*Becoming a Contagious Christian*' there is a formula that helps us remember the theme of today. It's this: HP+CP+CC=MI. High Potency + Close

Proximity + Clear Communication = Maximum Impact. High potency refers to how attracted people are to those who are authentic, it refers to the 'pull of compassion'. Close proximity refers of course to the opportunities we have when we have relationships with others, when we do things together. In other words HP+CP have to do with community, being together and CC has to do with being prepared to give an "answer". So it sums up what Peter is writing about. It's also the method Jesus used. He was always hanging out with the people, having meals with 'the sinners'. In the book "Contagious Christians" it talks of the "BBQ first principle". Have neighbours over for a BBQ first and truly appreciate the others first. One line in the book says "You can't be a contagious Christian without getting close enough to other people to let them catch the disease." So as we said "**Reach out together**". Be a community. Be hospitable. Give practical help. Genuinely care.

Let me close with the words of Jesus, speaking of the Spirit since today is Pentecost Sunday (John 7:37-38): *"If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."*