life without community can be bleak—loneliness, isolation, homelessness, oppression, and poverty are chilly realities for many. Offering a different reality was a major theme of Rosedale Bible College’s sixth annual Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium, “Finding Community in a World Torn Apart,” held November 10-12. Anabaptists from a wide range of backgrounds formed a temporary community on the campus, gathering around meals, Frisbee golf, speaking sessions and roundtable discussions.

A discussion of community could easily turn inward, with brainstorming of strategies on how to best serve and meet the needs of the members. But speakers at the symposium consistently emphasized that real Christian community is not only focused inward, but also on extending that community to those still left on the outside.

RBC Dean of Students Chris Jones led off the symposium on Thursday night with a look at why community is important. Kicking off his address with Simon and Garfunkel’s ballad of loneliness, “I AM a Rock,” he noted that community has been in crisis for decades, not only in the secular realm but in the church as well. “Many of us within the Anabaptist movement have been lamenting the decline of community,” he said, noting statistics on declines in church attendance, especially among young people who grew up active in the church. “This seems to indicate something about the church’s ability or concern about community,” he said.

Jones pointed to heavy influence from Western individualism as a major factor in this decline. While individualism has good aspects, it can negatively influence community, he said. One way this happens is through a privatization of faith. In the past, communities gathered to hear the Scriptures read in public and learn them together, because many were illiterate and did not own their own copies anyway. Individual study is fine, he said, but it does come with a cost to community in terms of shared understanding.

Another influence of individualism is in reframing or reducing the gospel to fit Western individual preferences, Jones said. Some reduce the gospel to social justice and some to justification by faith alone. These are both part of the good news, but not the good news itself. “Many of us in this room are guilty of reducing the gospel to justification by faith alone and thus making the emphasis of the good news the individual, when in fact the emphasis of the gospel is Jesus and his kingship over his people and the world,” he said.

Is this shift in values a concern? “Community, apart from being a point of debate for sociologists and social theorists, should be an important theological consideration for the church because community building is a major goal of the mission of God,” Jones said. We are created in the image of a God who exists in community—the Trinity—so without community we are not fully human. Jones also pointed to the importance of community in the life of Jesus and the early church, and to Paul’s focus on community-building in his letters.

“To be human means to be in community,” he said. “Without the presence of community, we experience the presence of Jesus and our salvation in an incomplete fashion.
come to nothing, he said, but with the presence of Christ and a consistent blending of godly values, the community will be a force that is hard to resist.

The importance of extending that community to those suffering in isolation and marginalization was addressed by Keith Wasserman, who heads up an intentional community and organization called Good Works, Inc. Good Works reaches out to those struggling with poverty in Appalachia. Punctuating his enthusiastic delivery with intermittent snatches of song, he pointed out that we think of loving God and loving our neighbors as separate and sequential, but they are “mystically inseparable.”

Wasserman maintained that we need to move beyond what he called the “meeting paradigm” of Christianity. “Did Jesus die so we could go to meetings?” he asked. Instead, we need to refocus on how to practically be the body of Christ in the world.

How is your community doing, he asked the audience, in relating to people who have been marginalized and exploited by the dominant culture? These are people the Scripture refers to as the widow, the fatherless, and the stranger—people suffering with mental illness, people who are disabled, poor, homeless, or immigrants. “The gospel is not just good news for the sinner,” he said. “The gospel must be good news for the sinned against.”

In recent decades, Wasserman said, the great principle of church growth has been homogeneity—gathering similar people into a big group. This works amazingly well, but is anti-biblical. Integration and assimilation of people who are not like us into our community is necessary, he insisted, if we want the kingdom of God to come “on earth as it is in heaven.” He reminded his listeners that in heaven, every tribe, kindred and tongue are represented.

We can extend this gospel of the kingdom, he said, by looking at people outside our social class not as projects, but as friends—people to serve, love, and know. This requires intentional effort and social sacrifice, giving up spending time exclusively with people of our class. “It’s all academic until it’s in the form of relationship,” he said.

Several speakers shared about how they are putting extending community into practice. Jay and Ann Martin* of Columbus, Ohio, shared about a community they have started in a large house in Columbus, Ohio, called “The Oikos” (Greek for “household”). After returning to the U.S. from years of missionary work in the Middle East, they struggled in finding community. Their goal in moving to Columbus was to establish a household of people around a center of vision, corralling its energy and synergy to have an impact on the neighborhood, Jay said. “What drives us is the incarnational model of Jesus,” he said. “When God sent Jesus, the Word became flesh; Jesus took on the culture of [the] first century…Jesus moved into our neighborhood.”

In the Oikos, about a dozen people share life—meals, cooking and cleaning duties, devotions, prayer, worship,
garding, and more. They also get to know their neighbors and try to become part of the fabric of the community, being “salt and light.” While Jay and Ann are the “founders” and are older than most of the other members of the household, they said they do not function as parents but simply as part of the group. Most people find out about the household by word of mouth and there are no strict requirements for entrance or participation, although the household has jointly established some principles of vision. It’s an experiment and they aren’t sure how it is going to work, Jay said, but so far it seems to be going well.

Dion and Naty Peachey, also from Columbus, shared how they are extending community in the immigrant community there, largely among Mexicans, through “simple church.” This model of church is simple in organization, without many of the programs, structures, and formal leadership of more traditional church models. The group does not have a building but meets in houses, organizing the meetings around meals, fellowship, and group discussion of scripture. Dion and Naty’s group relates to a larger network of similar groups in Columbus called the Columbus Network of Microchurches.

The goal, Dion said, is to be missional and keep expanding into more groups. The advantage of a simple church model is that it is easily reproducible and doesn’t require a lot of infrastructure. It also takes church to where people are, in an environment they feel comfortable in. The group originally met in the Peacheys’ home. Dion said; when they started meeting in other homes, more people came because they already knew and trusted their hosts.

Dion and Naty shared photos of their group enjoying life together through weddings, birthday celebrations, baptisms and more. They had invited some of the participants in their group to come to the symposium, and translated from Spanish as they explained how they were learning to live in community and serve each other.

Most of the speakers further explored ways to create and extend community through roundtable discussions with symposium attendees. Some who were not featured speakers at the symposium were also able to present ideas through these roundtables. Gary Miller, an assistant pastor at Maple City Chapel in Goshen, Indiana, talked about the church’s car repair service he helps with for those in need. He led discussion on some of the challenges and barriers to reaching out. Examples were new believers finding it hard to fit in at church, or people who simply try to freeload and take advantage of well-intentioned charity. He encouraged people to get involved in outreach even if they don’t get it perfectly right—Jesus is concerned with our hearts and why we are doing what we are doing, he said.

A few members of an Anabaptist-influenced communal group in Pennsylvania also shared. Mark and Rachel LeBlanc of Church Communities International (formerly The Bruderhof) led a discussion about the guiding principles of communal living, such as how to deal with conflict in love and avoid gossip. They also explained some of the rationale for communal living, which is inspired by the early church in Acts and the way its members lived out love for each other.

RBC President Dan Ziegler wrapped up the weekend with a discussion of how we see God’s mission in the world as it relates to community. To illustrate, he modified his usual low-key style by wearing 3D movie glasses. These glasses work, he explained, by using two different lenses, one that allows horizontal light waves into the viewer’s eyes and one that allows vertical light. Movie producers use this effect to make images pop out of the screen.

Ziegler explained to his bewildered audience how that relates to God’s mission and to community. “It’s a matter of…seeing horizontal and vertical planes,” he said. Our communion with God is the vertical plane. American evangelicalism, with its focus on individualism, tends to put the greatest emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ and on individual morality. “It’s important. It’s central…but it’s an incomplete image of the mission of God,” he said.

On the other hand, liberal Protestantism has tended to take a more “horizontal focus,” emphasizing the ministry of love through social justice, peace, human rights, the healing of societal ills, and corporate morality. “I think God cares deeply about those things…but they are not the whole mission,” Ziegler said.

He added that Anabaptists often do well in focusing on the internal group of fellow believers, which was a big part of what drew him to that faith tradition. “I am standing behind this podium because of the witness of…community,” he said. But sometimes “we end up with people that we’re comfortable with and a culture that we’re comfortable with…we end up spending an inordinate amount of time on our own house.” Ziegler likened this to only looking through one 3D lens.
Seeing the mission of God in 3D—both the horizontal and vertical—gives us “vision beyond anything we ever imagined,” Ziegler said. It is summed up by Jesus as loving God and loving others. We only make a temporary difference in people’s lives if we love them without also focusing on love for God. The two are inseparable. “That is the balance we are seeking to fight for, and it’s worth fighting for because it’s the mission of God,” Ziegler said.

But to apply that balance practically? The point of a symposium, of course, is not just to listen but to take away useful ideas to act on. Ziegler said in the first place, Anabaptists should not give any ground back—if they are doing something right, they should not just toss everything out and start over. He noted as an example that the evangelical focus on personal relationship with God is a strong one in some Mennonite circles. It is a good focus, he said, but “what I would hate to see, and I sometimes think I see, is that brotherhood side start to pull in. We’re not working at accountability like maybe we once did, we are not working at community and brotherhood…like we once did, and I’d hate to see us give ground in that regard.” On the other hand, he said, Anabaptists need to find ways to be effective in extending the good news of the kingdom. In addition to recognizing strengths, “We have to ask that question, what cultural or social structures in existence right now might hinder our ability to advance the gospel as a community of faith.”

Those in attendance also had a chance to weigh in on what they were taking away. For Marty Wenger of International Falls, Minnesota, it was “the idea that in reaching out and acting out the love of God, there is risk taking... we must take those risks of acting out love as a community, not as individuals.”

For Abraham Ndungu, adjunct faculty at RBC, it was the importance of balance. “If we’re reaching out it’s more than just accommodating [people] and making them comfortable, it’s making them know that they need to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

*Names changed for security
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