Emerging Definition of Community

Definition, Importance, Context

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Introduction

Underscoring Dr. HiRho's line on the need to have clear definitions of a community and the critical importance of the physical gathering of a community, she raised the following:

> What is the significance of a physical community in relation to Holy Communion? If the faith community is where the Word of God is preached, Sacraments are served and living faith are practiced according to John Wesley, and if bonding and reconciliation happens through a physical community does that mean that these characteristics cannot be shared by an online community?

I began by gaining a critical look on the **present context**:

> "We are living in a new economy—powered by technology, fueled by information, and driven by knowledge. The influence of technology will go beyond new equipment and faster communications, as work and skills will be redefined and reorganized." (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), U.S. Department of Labor)

Larry Downes said in the Law of Disruption: 'Social, political, and economic systems change incrementally, but technology changes exponentially." The Internet is growing at an exponential rate, so it makes sense to believe that **Internet communities** are increasing rapidly as well, "where digital communication has fractured the tyranny of distance and computers have become pervasive and ubiquitous, identification through digital mediation has become the new cultural capital". (Wheeler)

This power of technology has become the cultural capital. And this has become the ground of perceiving power - the power to surpass borders, transcend distance, and make things happen. "Increasing religious pluralism, social transformations brought by new technologies, changes in the role of religion in society," and other ramifications of the digital age shall be dealt with critical understanding.

Mander said, "the proliferation of materialism, technology, conceptuality, and abstraction – all various methods of distancing from direct experience – is undermining sacred perspectives worldwide. Further, as we lose genuine contact with each other – the direct, **unmediated physical experience** – the **intimacy** through which compassion is naturally engendered is quickly and easily lost."

The Context

Technology-propelled Environment: The Challenges of the 21st Century

Conole et al. (2008) investigated how learning patterns are influenced by the availability of technology-enhanced learning environment. They identified eight factors that

characterise the changing nature of learning: pervasive, personalised, niche, adaptive, organised, transferable, time and space boundaries, changing working patterns, and integrated. These require combining old and new methods, higher-level skills such as evaluation and synthesis are necessary to make sense of their complex technological-enriched learning environment. and proper use of tools in a combination of ways to suit individual needs, missing and matching and switching between media, sites, tools, content.

The study showed that the generation of new millennium learners displays complex learning styles that are shaped by the ubiquity, accessibility and ease of use of digital resources. Conole, et al (2008) emphasized that compared to prior generations of learners, they are digitally literate, they think more visually and in a nonlinear manner, they practise multitasking and give preference to multimedia environments. Thes is the emerging communities of the present times.

To cope with the demands of a digital society and to counterbalance the deficiencies of their natural learning styles, learners need additional skills to react to the challenges of the 21st century. Siemens (2006, cited in Brockbank and McGill, 2007) lists the following skills: (1) *Anchoring*: Staying focused on important tasks while undergoing a deluge of distractions; (2) *Filtering*: Managing knowledge flow and extracting important elements; (3) *Connecting with each other*: Building networks in order to continue to stay current and informed; (4) *Being Human Together*: Interacting at a human, not only utilitarian, level to form social spaces. (5) *Creating and Deriving Meaning*: Understanding

implications, comprehending meaning and impact; (6) *Evaluation and Authentication*: Determining the value of knowledge and ensuring authenticity; (7) *Altered Processes of Validation*: Validating people and ideas within appropriate context; (8) *Critical and Creative Thinking*; (9) *Pattern Recognition*; (10) *Navigate Knowledge Landscape*: Navigating between repositories, people, technology, and ideas while achieving intended purposes; (11) *Acceptance of Uncertainty*: Balancing what is known with the unknown to see how existing knowledge relates to what we do not know; (12) *Contextualizing*.

Mastery of the aforementioned skills, therefore, ensures the certainty and correctness of the individual's response to a given situation. Lacking of such skills therefore would mean otherwise.

Definition of Real and Virtual Communities

David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis came up with their proposed definition of community which has four elements. The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfilment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is **shared emotional connection**, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. Here it was

emphasized that the sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, <u>and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together</u> (McMillan, 1976).

On the other hand, definitions of virtual communities have emerged. In a literature review and synthesis made by Honglei Li in 2004, he embarked on studying virtual communities.

> Despite different opinions of the definitions of the first (academic) definition of virtual communities, most researchers agree that virtual communities can be traced back to the sociological definition of "community", which is also controversial in its definition (Coon, 1998; Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999; Rothaermel and Sugiyima, 2001). According to Tönnies (1912; 1967),who was one of the first to discuss the concept of community his definition (Coon, 1998; Rothaermel and Sugiyima, 2001),community, or Gemeinschaft, is different from society, or Gesellschaft, in that community (Gemeinschaft) is as intimate, private, and exclusive living together, whereas society (Gesellschaft) is the public life – that is, the world itself. Tönnies implicitly gave the concept of community a spatial form by contending that the prototypical community could be found in the rural agrarian village.

According to Li (2004) there are 3 types of communities: (1) community by kinship, (2) community of locality, and (3) community of mind. The third type of community resembles the communities that are shaped on the Internet.

Other researchers have offered similar definitions of virtual communities. Rothaermel and Sugiyima (2001) argued, "a virtual community is similar to a community of mind described by Tönnies (1967), except that it forms through an electronic communication medium and is not bound by space and time"(2001, p. 299). Bagozzi and Dholakia defined a virtual community as "mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through ongoing communication processes" (2002, p. 3). Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) defined a virtual community as one that has two essential elements, bonding and culture.

According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997), early virtual communities were started by enthusiasts who had certain interests, and were the results of spontaneous social events. Participation in virtual communities is often spontaneous and volitional.

Moreover, Li (2004) has clearly explicated that virtual community is usually open to any interested member. If one wants to join a certain community, they can **register without cost**. Dropping out of virtual communities is also at the **personal will** of the participants. If participants lose interests or have no intention to participate any further in a virtual community, they can choose not to log into or to quit the community. The participants in virtual communities could also choose the degree to which they participate in a virtual community. They can choose to be lurkers (whose appearance

online is totally unobserved by other members), choose not to speak, or choose to speak as actively as possible.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) further pointed out that virtual communities could satisfy four types of consumer needs: (1) interests, (2) relationship building, (3) transactions, and (4) fantasies.

Li gave emphasis on a more interesting and useful classification done by Kozinets (2000), who divides virtual communities into two dimensions: primary group focus and social structure. The higher end of group focus is social interaction, and the lower end of group focus is information exchange. The two ends of social structure are loose and high.

Anderson (2000) and Mowbray (2001), on the other hand, had different views on virtual community's functions. Mowbray (2001) stated that there were several limitations of freedom of speech even in well-run virtual communities. Anderson (2000) even argued further that <u>virtual communities decrease people's real social interactions and are detrimental to people's relationship building in real life</u>.

Conclusion

With the **critical understanding on emerging definitions of community**, one will be able to think, judge and act clearly why the **physical practice** offers an evangelical opportunity to bring people into a fuller relationship with the body of Christ… providing

physical access to the Communion Table as consumed in the context of the gathered congregation, growing together from the intimacy of experience.

With the emerging definitions of community in the present context, it is still significant to have a physical community in relation to Holy Communion. Faith community is where the Word of God is preached, Sacraments are served and living faith are practiced according to John Wesley, bonding and reconciliation happens through a physical community which is lacking in an online community.

References:

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