Building Community through Adult Learning Principles & Practices

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As I write this paper there are several current issues occurring that are making me think deeply about what it means to build community. Historical grievances and structures that have fostered racism and discrimination have exploded over in Baltimore as thousands of disenchanted youth are rioting on the streets and causing communities to have anxieties, pain, and fear. Many communities in Nepal have been devastated and thousands killed by a massive earthquake. Thousands who had very little to begin with, have now been left with nothing. Christian communities, who have resided in Iraq and Syria for centuries, have been displaced due to the persecution from ISIS. And daily, as I live and interact with the city of Toronto, I am identifying individuals after individuals who belong to different communities, yet they feel isolated and lonely. Good community is so vital to human flourishing, yet it seems so elusive. A fundamental question we have to ask is "What is a good community?" A community consists of a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. The adjective 'good' can be added when the people in the community have their various needs met, they have good relationships with one another, and they are holistically flourishing and growing.

Central to my understanding of a good community comes from what the Scriptures describe as *Shalom*. Robert Linthicum argues that Christian Community Developers (CCD) must work to bring about God's *Shalom*, which encompasses not only individual peace, but holistic well-being of the society. *Shalom* is a rich word that is translated in to a variety of English words: "welfare, completeness, security, prosperity, to be whole, to be perfect, at rest, as well at peace" (2000; p. 28). Where do we get our example of seeking *Shalom*? Linthicum takes the reader through the four Gospels and reveal that Jesus worked for both the transformation of

people and the transformation of their society so that people and their systems would both embrace authentic relationship with God, exercise a politics of justice, and practice a stewardship of their common wealth so that poverty would be eliminated from their society (2000; p. 62). Furthermore, Linthicum deeply explores selected scriptures that teach a salvation that is greater than just the conversion of individuals, but that is also social, corporate, and even cosmic (2000; p. 83). Pursuing and cultivating *Shalom*, thereby, is central to a good community.

Community development is the dynamic peacemaking process where community members, organizations, institutions, and outside benefactors come together to reclaim the original vision for the community, retake collective action, regain power, rebuild leaders, reconcile broken relationships, restore lost opportunities, and create holistic solutions to common problems in order to reconstruct a society of justice and mercy, liberty and equality, and peace and well-being. As CCDs we seek to assist, to inspire, and to mobilize the communities that we are called to serve. The key to building *Shalom* in a community is for CCDs to exert relational power by investing deeply into building and strengthening their relationships with the community. Relationship building and maintaining is fundamental to building a good community. And how do communities grow? Communities grow when people seek mutually beneficial choices, engage with one another, and learn from one another. Learning is not limited to children and youth, but it is a life-long process. For the community to grow and flourish, the adults, who often are the most influential and possess the most resources, must continue to learn, and apply their learning. Adult learning principles and practices, therefore, is a powerful technique that can empower community development.

One of the primary roles CCDs engage in is teaching, facilitating, and bringing groups together. Dealing with various stakeholders of the community, it can often be intimidating and

overwhelming. Yet, this is where Parker J. Palmer's counsel about teaching and knowing oneself must be deeply heeded, "Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and nor run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject" (1998; p. 2). For this reason, community development begins with CCD's knowing who they are first—the assumptions, weaknesses, strengths, experiences that they bring. As much as we seek to bring our expertise, techniques, and experience, we must commit to deepening our own sense of identity and integrity, and lifelong learning. At a conference, I once heard a speaker say this about identity, "When the spine of identity is well established, I can dialogue with anyone. When the spine of identity is weak, everything is a threat." Palmer further suggests, "The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more sure-footed our teaching—and living—become." By taking the inner journey of knowing who we are as God made us to be, alone and together, CCD's can contribute to the renewal of our ministries, to the reform of community development as a whole, and to the well-being of the people we serve.

Community development involves many different stakeholders coming together and seeking policies and programs that benefit the common good. Community, as Palmer (1998) suggests, is a dynamic state of affairs that is not anarchic but requires leadership at every turn. And the leaders that are needed are those who are able to create a teaching and learning space centred on sharing, facilitation, and teaching, and an environment that supports reflection and

renewal. For this to happen there must be mutually beneficial communication. Communication between different groups is vital, and the aim is to create dialogue. However, communication often breaks down between groups due to fear and misunderstandings. Palmer (1998) mentions that fear is a powerful feature of our inner landscape—the fear of having a live encounter with "otherness" in a student, a colleague, a subject, or the voice of the inner student. However, certain fears can be healthy for teachers and students by helping us survive, learn, and grow. For all those involved in community development, fear must be acknowledged, confronted, but we need not be our fears. Furthermore, we must understand that suffering the tension of opposites is neither to be avoided nor merely survived but must be actively embraced for the way it expand our hearts and experiences.

Applying principles of adult learning will greatly assist in community development. By centering development projects on the people who need it the most and doing thorough research on what their needs, assets, and capacity are will result in good programming. The authors of the book *How Learning Works* argue that learning should be based from what the students do to learn. For this reason, the focus should be on how students learn instead of how to teach. An effective CCD's will thereby invest in designing workshops, materials, and programs that are learner/participant centred to maximize their learning, information retention, and skills acquisition. Two principles of the seven that *How Learning Works* presents that are especially to be noted by CCD's are first, that to develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know how to apply what they have learned, and second, goal-directed practice coupled with targeted feedback enhances the quality of students' learning. For progress to be made, the community members have to gather together and engage is complex discussion of how they can improve their community. Therefore, CCD's have to design the

meetings and workshops they offer in a way that can profoundly change the participants' life. When CCD's shift the focus from themselves to those who they are serving and their needs, their impact can be greatly increased. When people have the power to be active decision-makers in their own learning, they are likely to experience real and lasting development. By adapting the principles of Dialogue Education (DE), leaders can create an atmosphere that is safe and respectful, a place where people are both challenged and supported to maximize learning.

The great advantage to the DE method is that it allows for deep relationship building, and having relational power is a significant asset for CCDs. We build relational power by intentionally building relationships that engage people in public life. Relationship building is at the heart of community and broad-based organizing. In the Old Testament, Nehemiah's strategy and ministry was a great example that shows how to build relational power. From my experience volunteering for my local Member of Parliament in his constituency office, we found that one of the keys for us holding our position was the relational power we had. Politicians know all too well how important it is to keep strengthening and growing their relational power. Our office invested heavily in building relationships with as many people and groups in our constituency, listening to their issues, concerns, and interests, and effectively communicating what our MP would do to improve and solve the problems in the community. I believe that the reason some CCD's have little influence in their communities is because they are too concerned with their own interests and have not invested enough into time and capital into building deep relationships with the community they are serving. The following words by Linthicum's should be heeded by CCD's, "Your organization's effectiveness in building the *Shalom* of your community will be directly proportional to the amount of time you and your organization's leaders invest in relationships" (2000; p. 112).

There are multiple ways that the DE method contributes to creating *Shalom* in a community. The DE principle of learning through dialogue communicates that each member, whether teacher or student, is valuable and has something to contribute to the group learning experience. The learning doesn't only occur between teacher and student, but also between student and student. A major sign of *Shalom* being manifested is when various groups can come together and dialogue with one another. The principle of making the learners the decision-makers is a deliberate act of empowerment. When students are invited to actively participate, they take more ownership over what they learn and do. By clearly identifying and offering achievement-based objectives, this helps all those involved to know the goal that they are pursuing and what constitutes as being successful. Basing learning tasks on open questions allows participants to go deeper and connect on a deeper basis with the facilitator and other participants. Additionally, the DE method is effective in that it allows CCDs to educate their participants so that they come to understand their plight and how important it is to organize. The famous educator Paulo Freire had this in mind when he talks about consciousness-raising. Moreover, DE is helpful in bringing people together to share their stories and encouraging them to image how they might plan, organize, and solve the problems they are facing.

The use of the learning needs and resources assessment to discover the present knowledge and skills of the community and help develop further goals communicates care and appreciation of the participants, and respect for the work that has already be done and ongoing. By conducting workshops and community meetings in the DE method, the possibility for meaningful learning, discussion, and application are quite high because impacting cognition, affection and psychomotor are all intentionally included. Furthermore, the needs of various

intelligences are incorporated, and the learning sequence (the 4A Model of Anchor, Add, Apply and Away) is designed to maximize learning and impact.

Jane Vella states that in DE, "The means is dialogue, the end is learning, the purpose is peace." I have mentioned in this paper that the goal of community development for CCD's is cultivating *Shalom*. In DE six core factors of learning are safety, inclusion, respect, relevance, engagement, and immediacy. These six factors are all something that are found in a community of *Shalom*. When there is safety people are able to engage with one another because of the promise of support, reinforcement, and help in undertaking challenged. Respect for one another and the community are fundamental to human flourishing because each member feels valued and acknowledged. When safety and respect are established, engagement between the members of community flourishes and more and more of the community is included. Finally, when the relevant interests of the community are pursued, there are immediate positive short-term and long-term implications. This reflection paper has demonstrated that adult learning principles and practices, especially DE, are powerful tools that can contribute to community development. Let us hope that these methods will continue to be widely adapted in community development circles around the world so that deeper understanding, human flourishing, and *Shalom* will increase.

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