



BUILDING COMMUNITY

Teacher Tips by Wendy Guthrie

WHEN WE CONSIDER the tasks a good teacher performs, factors such as lesson content, preparation, and delivery come to mind. However, there is another element of teaching that often goes unattended, although it is the glue that holds a class together. That element is *community*. The overview below begins a four-part series in this regard. (The remaining parts will address building community through classroom engagement, through shared responsibility, and through community service.)

What Community Is

For most of the twentieth century, the word *community* referred primarily to a group of houses. Today, this word is used more broadly to refer to people who share something in common—think of phrases such as *deaf community* and *retirement community*. The church itself is a community, a people united by shared commitment to the gospel. (Note the similarities between the words *community* and *communion*.) Your class is a community that meets for the common purpose of learning about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Why Community Is Important

Community fulfills a basic need within each person: the need to be a part of something, to be connected with others. Even those who are very introverted by nature can sense the need for close fellowship with one or two other people.

We recognize that this need is part of our nature as created by God. We see this as early as Genesis 2:18, where God declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” We see this need throughout the New Testament, which reminds us of the fellowship we do and should have with one another and with Christ (examples: Acts 2:42-47; 1 Corinthians 1:9; Galatians 2:9; and 1 John 1:3, 6, 7).

It is no secret why Christians come together each week: we do so to worship God together,

to interact with one another with regard to our shared convictions, to break bread together, etc. Community speaks to mutual support.

How Community Relates to Learning

From an educational perspective, community is the context in which learning takes place. Learning is, at its core, a very social endeavor. We can learn by studying God’s Word in private, of course, but the most valuable learning often occurs when we interact with one another (Proverbs 27:17). Each week when your class comes together, your students exchange thoughts and share ideas. They listen to each other (and to you) and respond. They study the Word together and, hopefully, learn something new along the way.

The nature of your class can determine the effectiveness of your teaching. Educational theorists tell us that the most important thing a teacher can do for students is to provide an environment where each feels valued. When they do, they will feel safe to express their flaws and challenges. As this kind of honest sharing takes place, the Word of God is better able to penetrate souls and discern “intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Creating an environment where your students feel valued can take time. Such an environment is nonthreatening in the sense that students know that their thoughts and concerns will not be treated dismissively. Students learn to trust you and one another as they share their deepest needs, concerns, and doubts.

The building of this kind of environment extends beyond the classroom walls as you and your students become involved in one another’s lives. The old adage “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one” applies. Extending class-as-community outside the classroom gives students the opportunity to not only sharpen each other’s minds but to challenge each other’s actions. Jesus did not have a Sunday-only community of students, and neither should we.