



Leadership Training Class

CLASS THREE: COMMUNITY VS. COMMUNITAS

From **Exiles** by Michael Frost

I've begun to wonder whether Christians don't do well to build community as an end in itself. We build community incidentally, when our imaginations and energies are captured by a higher, even nobler cause. Christian community results from the greater cause of Christian mission. What I yearn for is not a therapeutic community, but rather a missionary community.

I have come to realize that aiming for community is a bit like aiming for happiness. It's not a goal in itself. We find happiness as an incidental by-product of pursuing love, justice, hospitality, and generosity. When you aim for happiness, you are bound to miss it. Likewise with community. It's not our goal. It emerges as a by-product of pursuing something else. Those who love community destroy it, but those who love people build community.

So-called Christian community often is portrayed as an inwardly focused gathering of people committed to one another, to encouraging one another and building one another up. It is often referred to as a 'safe place,' a place where members can be open and vulnerable together and receive support, understanding, and mutual care. I have no objection to these things at all. In fact, I hunger for them. But I think that the church has made them an end in themselves. Community is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to an end.

We all know that when people are thrown into a challenge - an ordeal - they develop a much deeper sense of communion. Surely we can recall periods in our lives when this was true. Think of any group of people sharing a common mission, and in all likelihood they will have experienced a deeper sense of community. Have you ever been on a short term mission trip overseas and felt such a special, intimate, profound sense of connection with your fellow travelers? When building houses in Mexico or working in orphanages in Haiti, we connect with other Christians at a level entirely different from the one experienced each week in our local church. This isn't just because of the exotic location or the spicy food. It's because of mission. The experience of shared mission sweeps away our petty differences, bonding us strongly, because we are forced to rely on each other simply for survival. This is no longer community but 'communitas': community rooted in mission.

Many people undergo something of a communitas experience in their daily lives. Sporting teams, theater companies, orchestras, bands, dance troupes - these kinds of societies all know something, perhaps just a whiff, of the concept of communitas. Every member must play his or her part, not just individually, but in concert with the others. This sense of interdependence is very exciting. One young amateur actor once told me that he felt a greater sense of belonging and acceptance in his theater company than in his church. I suppose he thought that it had to do with the quality of the people in the theater as compared with those in the church. But the fact remains that churches are full of marvelous, kind, caring people, every bit as accepting as theater people. The fundamental difference is that churches are working on community, while an amateur theater group is a kind of communitas.



Building community for its own sake is like attending a cancer support group without having cancer. It's like asking soldiers you haven't fought with to imagine that you are their father. And it's like your church demanding allegiance and your weekly attendance without giving you a cause to work toward. It's no different to the church holding endless Bible study groups or hearing countless sermons for the purpose of learning information that will rarely be utilized.

Communitas in the way I want to define it is a community infused with a grand sense of purpose; a purpose that lies outside of its current internal reality and constitution. It's the kind of community that 'happens' to people in actual pursuit of a common vision of what could be. It involves movement and it describes the experience of togetherness that only really happens among a group of people actually engaging in a mission outside of itself.

For Christians, communitas emerges naturally when we commit ourselves to a mission beyond ourselves. It's as simple as that. This is why people often say they prefer, say, their amateur theater group to their church. The theater group has a defined mission. We have known all along that the *raison etre* of the church is mission - sharing the good news of Christ, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, working for justice. It is in the service of these goals that we will find communitas with our fellow workers.