

EXPLORE



HAPPINESS & IT'S CAUSES – COMMUNITY

When you take the time to listen to the Happiness experts, a repeated theme is the vital place of community. But if architecture can tell us something about the spirit of the times, we might pause to consider the significance of contemporary family homes increasingly taking on the look of a fortress. Built close to the street even on large suburban blocks, these modern edifices frequently have a closed double garage as their most prominent feature. Everything opens up once you cross the threshold, and all of the living takes place behind a bulwark to the outside world.

We have bunkered down in private castles and the refuge of a controlled environment untrammelled by the muddy shoes of neighbourhood children. Remote controlled garage doors mean we don't even have to risk a conversation with nearby residents before pulling down the shutters and retreating to our sanctuaries.



Turn back the clock thirty years, and the contrast is stark. Homes tended to be set back from the street with large, open front yards often without fences or walls, and with verandas facing the neighbourhood. More of life took place in the space that was open to the public gaze.

Not so any more. The landscape has changed and it appears that the way we build out homes reflects of a broader trend of intense individualism. There are complex reasons for all these changes, and many of them are understandable. Real community takes time and effort. It costs us something. These days we might be just too tired.

But there is lots of evidence that community is not only good for us, but we are longing for it. And you could feel this hunger at the Happiness and its causes conference. Being among like-minded people with a shared purpose can lift tired spirits and inspire us towards something better. Finding a connection in our modern disconnected lives has a powerful resonance.

Many speakers at the Happiness Conference highlighted the importance of a life lived with an outward focus, with time and energy given to the quality of our relationships producing more 'satisfaction capital' than self-serving and individualism. The message was very strong—truly living is living with others in mind and part of our lives. Harvard Professor of psychiatry George Vaillant, said 'Happiness is about drive reduction, but joy is about connection.'

It made me wonder about what the Christian community—the church—can offer in this regard, that other communities may not. Those of us who have spent considerable parts of our lives in church communities know that they can be uniquely frustrating at times.

But (hopefully) we have also experienced other more positive elements that, in their best moments, mark church communities as distinct. One of these distinguishing features can be at the same time a source of humour for those with a sense of the ridiculous but also of inspiring beauty. It is the way in which the church can bring together in close community a truly ragtag group of people who would never otherwise cross paths let alone share meals and lives and relationship.

I've been in churches where neurosurgeons and bricklayers serve morning tea side-by-side. Where unemployed alcoholics trying to get their lives together meet regularly in the home of young professional architects, stock-brokers and doctors. I've sat around Sunday lunch tables while the mentally ill and homeless are served by university lecturers and mums.

And Christian community, in its brightest moments, is able to draw on the radical and challenging gospel message to embody true forgiveness and compassion; fresh starts and the motivation for change.

When CPX interviewed Yale University Professor Miroslav Volf, we asked him what it was that marked the Christian community as different. He spoke

about God being a 'community'—the mysterious one but also three nature of the trinitarian God—where God is relational and the heart of his being is 'love'.

So, said Volf, identity in this case, is not self-defined, but is enmeshed with the identity of the community of God's people, which is itself a reflection of God's nature. Accordingly, the goal of the human being is to be in loving relationship with God as well as neighbours. [Professor Stanley Hauerwas](#) from Duke University speaks of the church as a community that takes the form of the worship of God, and has a specific task to perform. This is a people with 'work to do for the world in which the world [witnesses] through this people that God has not abandoned us', says Hauerwas.

When the church is able to communicate through word, but, vitally, also through deed, that 'God has not abandoned us', there is a poignancy and power to the message that meets a deep hunger and profound human need—communion with God and people. This still has the power to draw some of us out from under the doona on a Sunday morning, out of our private worlds, and into a community of eternal significance and possibility.

This article can be found online at –

https://www.publicchristianity.org/happiness-and-its-causes-community/?_sf_s=church&sf_paged=3