

## The Community of God

### *What Russia has done to my idea of Church*

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

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Where I come from, church is a part of life, but not the whole. In the evangelical, subculture that birthed me, we knew our Bible enough to know that the church is people and not a building. Yes, the church is the people of God, not the place of God, although we always went to a place to see these people.

While church was not a place, it certainly had its place and knew its place, within our lives. And that is the point – within our lives. Because our lives belonged to us, and church, like many other things enhanced and enriched and complemented our lives, but it never became our lives, it never took over.

We kept our lives, Christ's words to the contrary notwithstanding (Matthew 10:39). The matter was settled and unquestioned, more or less. Where I come from, that is.

Enter Russia, a land I was sent to six years ago, where life is cheap, and where the individual has never really come into the equation. Russia has always been a collective society, a land where community is understood and the common good – though often vicious and usually a defense against outsiders – takes precedence over all else.

In this century Russian Communism (as distinct from any other variant) with its collective consciousness and social experimentation and mass demonstrations was just one expression of the Russian soul – a soul that does things communally.

No tall poppies here. The Reformation never got a look in, so even salvation never got the chance to become as highly individualized, and ultimately privatized as we Protestants (not to mention we evangelicals) have made it.

The Communism of the past 70 years was built on the Russian mentality of the collective, on a strong sense of community, and as such it was understood.

Now those traditional communities, good and bad,

are shattered. Disillusionment, economic hardship, materialism, nationalism, and post-modern individualism have booted down the door, and I serve in a bomb site of broken relationships resulting in an increasing isolation of the individual.

In the vanguard of all that has come streaming in from the West since perestroika, came the church in its multi-hued splendor. Divided in doctrine and practice, a squabbling and catty hydra of churches, para-churches and evangelical scalp-hunters, proclaiming unity in nothing but its commitment to disunity. Yet finding agreement in one thing – an unquestioned allegiance to the ideal of individualism. This has permeated almost all that has been said and done in God's name by evangelicals since Mr. Gorbachev first let us all in. And so we have helped to hasten the demise of a society – inadvertently, but steadily.

I see in the Bible a glittering hope in the community of believers, the people of God, the church, where believers lived and died and fellowshiped and ate and traveled together. Church was community and not an adjunct to an otherwise full life.

But when I rustled around in the bag I brought with me from home and dug out my concept of church (I couldn't really find one of community) it seemed too amateurish, part-time, too safe - too inadequate. My church is stamped more with the radical individualism of Western thinkers like John Locke than the communal spirit of the first-century love feasts. What to say, what to do?

I need to rethink church and family and community here. The Scriptures, looked at through new eyes, seem to point the way as I examine a traditional God who spoke and acted in a traditional culture.

I said earlier that the church has its place within our lives. I have changed my mind on this, or Russia has changed it for me. The church must be our lives and our lives must have their place within the church, and not

vice versa.

As I open my home, my family, to our church here, previous concepts of the same become more fluid and are losing many of the sharp definitions that my Western upbringing has given them. I no longer know where family stops and church begins. But that's all right. This is what is needed. With community being eroded daily,

the church must stand in the gap and become family and life to the people who join.

Russia has taught me this: to follow Jesus who said: *'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!'*