



History: History and Communities

What if history were about campaigning communities?

Tony taught about abolition in high school history. He wanted to teach about abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, John Woolman, William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Finney, and Sojourner Truth—not as lone heroes, but as members of communities and networks.

“The American Anti-Slavery Society, organized in 1833, was a loose coalition of individuals who viewed slavery as immoral, ‘a sin, everywhere, and only, sin—sin, in itself.’ Harriet Beecher Stowe remarked that her anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, had been inspired by God, ‘and I was but the humblest of instruments in His hand.’ Over the years, members of the Society engaged in political agitation, held rallies, organized lecture tours, sent petitions to Congress, published newspapers, and helped runaway slaves escape to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Many Abolitionists championed other causes, women’s rights and the temperance movement being among the most prominent. In 1844, abolitionist James G. Birney ran for president on an abolitionist platform. Abolitionists were among the founders of the Republican Party in 1854. While people such as Douglass and Stowe captured headlines, thousands of other like-minded people were the subscribers, readers, donors, conductors, and voters who supported the cause.

“I wanted the students to understand the impact of community on historical events. I taught about abolition by starting with the grass-roots movement and what ordinary people did, and working toward the major figures. Each group of students had a different aspect of the grass-roots movement and a different individual abolitionist to explore. They worked together to create a short summary of their findings and a mini-biography of their person using material I supplied and some research they did. Only after we had done work on the grass-roots movement did we look at leading reformers. We put the work together at the end in a pyramid diagram. We discussed what it would have been like for the well-known reformers without this group and the grass-roots movement.”

What's going on here?

Jason saw his history as being about communities, not just influential individuals, and saw his lesson as a way of encouraging students that a wider circle of people can be involved in positive change.

He engaged learners in researching in directions that would broaden their focus beyond lone individuals to a relational emphasis. Then, he had them integrate and reflect on their findings in relation to a larger question about the role of communities.

Jason reshaped his practice by restructuring his lesson (studying the movement from the bottom up rather than from the top down) and providing research resources to support this focus. He also was intentional about the way the class interacted, so that learning about the importance of community was done through collaborative work as a community of researchers (using group work that contributed to a whole that would support deeper reflection).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Faith grows in community and is practiced in community. Faith is not about lone rangers trying to change the world on their own. The Bible calls Christians to serve the wider community and work for its well-being, fostering love, hope, and justice as a fellowship of people empowered by the Holy Spirit. This holds out hope, for on their own people easily burn out and become discouraged.

What difference does it make?

Tony's way of teaching history emphasized the role of community, which can reassure students that they don't have to do things on their own. Community life has been eroded in our culture, and giving it a higher profile in the curriculum can be a part of encouraging community once again.

Digging deeper

Western societies often stress the individual, but the Bible stresses the connection between people and our connection with God the father of all (Ephesians 4:6). There is a sense of mutual responsibility that is taken for granted in the Bible. When Cain asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” he already knew the answer was yes.

Christian fellowship is about a quality of community between Christians where all are interdependent. The Apostle Paul likened this to the way the parts of the body depend on each other and the head, Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12, 1 Corinthians 12:27). The Holy Spirit binds the community together. Christian community should be expressed in a compassionate lifestyle (Romans 12:9-10), in worship and in a shared meal (the Eucharist/the Lord’s Supper). It is lived in supporting each other, working together for others, and giving of one’s time, wealth, and self.

Christians are called to be good citizens, always ready to do good and living at peace with neighbors (Jeremiah 29:7; Titus 3:1). The wider Christian community worked to change the conditions in society, not just for slaves but for workers and children.

A man of a right spirit is not a man of narrow and private views, but is greatly interested and concerned for the good of the community to which he belongs, and particularly of the city or village in which he resides, and for the true welfare of the society of which he is a member. Jonathan Edwards



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