

Community and it's counterfeit
by Lloyd Robertson

"It takes a community to raise a child".

Let some stranger try disciplining my child and watch the fur fly.

I suspect most of the people who wear the slogan about communities raising children on their sweatshirts have some vague idea about everyone providing good "role models". Others may think that everyone can provide nurturing to children but in today's feminist climate it would be wise for male teachers to avoid hugging students. Still others may think that a "healthy community" somehow transmits healthy ways of raising children to the families in those communities. Fine, but what makes a community healthy? Don't we have to start with individuals and families to make communities healthier?

Before there were mental health professionals, teachers or governments, there were communities. Communities had to be self-reliant, there was no alternative. Now we have professionals.

Suppose a child dies in one of our communities and that a psychologist who knows about the grieving process is called in to assist the family. Now, suppose that the family's aunt Mary, who has always been a tower of strength, calls while the family is "in session". She wants to bring over some baking which is really an excuse to visit and lend comfort. But she is told "love to see you later but right now we have this specialist on grieving talking to us". Aunt Mary has just learned two things: first there is someone who knows more about grief than does she and second, the family is not as much in need of her as before. She becomes slower to offer her strength and her experience.

Over time the community can become more and more dependant on outside professionals. Heather Robertson, in her classic book Reservations are for Indians, described one northern Manitoba community that had become so emersed in a culture of dependency that when someone died "the health nurse was obviously not doing her job". People did not take responsibility for their own health. When something went wrong, outside professionals were always at fault.

La Ronge probably has more helping professionals, on a per capita basis, than any other community in Saskatchewan but I would not say we are more healthy. Even professionals who are committed to the idea of "community development" may do more harm than good.

Community development involves bringing together community members and facilitating them to define their problems, assess their needs, determine their solutions and take whatever resources they have at their disposal to implement those solutions. In short, it is to help communities of people re-learn the skills of self-reliance.

"Community development" was endorsed by the Saskatchewan Drug and Alcohol Commission before that agency was absorbed into the Department of Health. I talked to one such community development and addictions specialist who lamented that she brought people together in one

community and all they wanted to talk about is jobs. She said that this showed that they "were just not ready to deal with their drinking".

I pointed out that in community development the community must define its own issues. Further, the research supports the view that high unemployment and alcohol abuse are closely related. "Maybe so", she said, "but our mandate is to deal with addictions".

"That may be so", I said, "but then, you are not really doing community development".

The counterfeit to community is bureaucracy. The bureaucrat determines what is good for the community. Even when the bureaucrat is right the community loses something: its self-reliance. The community becomes less healthy and less able to teach its children self-reliance and responsibility.

The counterfeit to community development is bureaucratic development. Beware of the community developer who happens to have a plan in his or her hip pocket for the community to endorse.

Community development involves self education, research and skill development by the community. Most importantly, it involves the community taking back the power to make itself healthy by whatever definition of health it chooses to use. My next column will deal with how community development has been applied, and misapplied, to our community schools program.