

CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMITTEE

Our committee met by Zoom and in person once. As we worked on this year's report, it became clear we had already addressed the issues we identified in our report from 2021. Therefore, we respectfully resubmit our 2021 report for the 2022 Book of Reports.

BUILDING COMMUNITY WITH KOINONIA

As followers of Jesus, we are called by God to build community. Unfortunately, we find ourselves living in a time where the existence of community is being threatened. Whether it be community within the church, workplaces, education, civic or community organizations, one does not have to look far to see the increasing challenges and obstacles we are facing to building community.

- Declining participation in church membership and activity—We are often reminded that the numbers of people actively involved in the life and ministry of the church are shrinking steadily. Even before the quarantines and shutdowns occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people, especially those under the age of 40, was in decline.
- Declining participation in community organizations—Service organizations and fraternal groups involved in community building and community service have been in decline since the 1990's. A 2014 study from Marquette University revealed that in the previous 15 years, the membership of Rotary International had declined by 17%, with only 10% of their members under the age of 40. The membership of the Elks had declined by 50% in the same time period and the Shriners had a similar 50% decline in membership. One researcher anecdotally suggested that surveys revealed a desire for many younger adults to participate in onetime charitable events, like marathons and festivals rather than long-term memberships of the type that build community.
- The COVID-19 pandemic—With entire populations required to quarantine and houses of worship closed to gathering for an extended period, the building of community within the church family was challenged. The switch from in-person to virtual worship became the norm for many congregations that were not able to gather in person. Continuing a virtual connection rather than gathering in person has become normative for many and challenging to the maintenance of Christian community.
- Political, social and racial divisions—The rancor with which many differences are debated publicly today has a detrimental effect on the building of community, with neither relationships inside nor outside the church fellowship excepted. In communities, whether religious or not, where differences rather than similarities are magnified, it is a challenge to build or grow a sense of community. Even within the family of God, the temptation to exalt our distinctions and grievances above our oneness in Christ and our calling to be peacemakers make it difficult to achieve a spirit of healing and embark on the sometimes-painful pathway to healing and either building or rebuilding our sense of community.

These challenges, along with others, present the church with both the crisis of broken community and the opportunity to recommit ourselves to nurturing authentic Christian community.

We say our goal as the Church is to build and nurture a community of believers, but what does that mean? How can a group of broken, imperfect, divided and diverse people be one community? What binds them together? Community in the church is rooted in koinonia, a shared unifying fellowship among believers.

Beyond simply nurturing friendships, which is often the emphasis in cultural definitions of fellowship, koinonia is so much more. The New Testament emphasis of koinonia is rooted in believers gathering and participating in something beyond themselves. In Scripture, Paul defines koinonia as being a shared experience of salvation; and communion with God and one another. Followers of Jesus are responsible for making the effort to experience koinonia. The outcome is solely dependent upon the indwelling of the unifying spirit of God being made known in our midst.

We do not have to look far to find examples of koinonia in the scriptures. We can learn from our brothers and sisters in the faith who have gone before us. Jesus foretold the promise of the unifying Spirit in John 14:15-17. Beginning in the book of Acts during Pentecost, we see a gathering of people. There is wind, loud noise, and a bunch of people speaking in various languages. When people saw this, they accused those gathering of being drunk. Peter explains to the naysayers that the people are not drunk, but under the power and influence of the Holy Spirit in their midst; they were proclaiming the mighty works of God in the diverse languages of the hearers.

As a result of Pentecost, 3,000 people were saved and a fellowship of believers grew into a community in which everything was shared together, including property; and many more were drawn to the fellowship and also converted. The community grew in number day by day.

It wasn't the practices of benevolence and generosity we observe in the early church that created community. Instead, these practices were byproducts and evidence of a community bound together under the Lordship of Jesus. As Lesslie Newbigin once said, "The best evidence for the Gospel is a community that lives by it."

Conclusion:

There are a myriad of causes related to the breakdown and decline in Christian community we are experiencing today (ie. shutdowns, isolation, politics, online church and cultural/generational shifts), but it is the opinion of the Christian Life Committee that a breakdown in koinonia is the primary cause.

In a world where finding common ground on any matter is becoming more and more difficult, the Church must return to gathering around what we stand for, God's rule, the centrality of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than what we stand against. It is incumbent upon our communities of faith to call out and guard against perpetuating the "me-oriented" messages of our culture. Koinonia calls us out of our individualism and is about participation in the work of the Holy Spirit with other believers. Through this type of participation, we will find ourselves living in unity with God and others.

Koinonia is provisional--something we experience in the present while we await the fullness of Christian fellowship when Christ returns. We must return to and commit ourselves to nurturing koinonia within our communities of faith through continual devotion to:

- A. Worship
- B. Fellowship
- C. Scripture
- D. Prayer
- E. Caring for and meeting the needs of others

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Christian Life Committee,

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