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Pastoral Assistance from GLC
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THINKING THEOLOGICALLY: Church in the Post-COVID Era

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush (lthrush@bicus.org) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, Theologian in Residence (Great Lakes BIC) mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com (631) 871-8339

I. CHURCH IN THE POST-COVID ERA

As our churches begin to emerge from a multi-year period of socially distanced worship, the “new normal” is prompting much reflection over what it means to be the church. The challenges facing our congregations in this era are many: lapsed members, social polarization, the effects of “lost years” of discipleship, a shift towards consumer rather than participant views of church, etc. It would not be too outlandish to suggest that this time of pandemic (coupled with other strife-making social forces) has eroded what sense of a shared identity our communities and churches once held. And so we are now in a season of rediscovery and reconstruction. With this in mind, I ask the following question:

How can we recapture the importance of a shared identity for our church members as Jesus followers in the Brethren in Christ tradition?

The answer(s) will take much time for each of us to discern within the ministries to which the Lord has called us, and there will likely not be a “one size fits all” response to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Certainly it will require a healthy amount of pastoral discernment on how to best articulate a vision for church in the post-COVID era in our respective ministry contexts.

But as some food for thought, I believe it is worth asking how our churches can (re)center around the concept of a shared life of fellowship or *κοινωνία (koinonia)*. By *fellowship* I do not necessarily mean church programming, outreach ministry, and other efforts to fill important social needs, although it is worth noting that many of our churches excel at these efforts. Rather, I use fellowship to refer to our unique calling as the people of God to live in communion with God and with one another through Jesus Christ. Biblical contexts where *koinonia* language is used can provide us with an orientation to these important (and impactful) aspects of our Brethren in Christ community. Our BIC heritage and traditions offer guidance on how to move forward.

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II. ENJOYING FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

One of the most famous analogies in the Scriptures comes to us from Jesus, who compared himself to a vine that feeds many branches. I like to think of this analogy when addressing the topic of Christian fellowship, for the vine (or root, if you will) that provides nourishment for our fellowship with one another is the bedrock claim that we *together* now enjoy fellowship with God.

God in Christ has called us into direct relationship with him: **“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”** (1 John 3:1). To be heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, held firm by the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15-17). And we are summoned to *abide* in Christ, through loving one another, so that Father, Son, and Spirit will abide in our midst (John 14-15).

We can see this played out in some interesting ways in the New Testament. Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthian churches with the statement: **“God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”** (1 Cor. 1:9). As often in Paul, the “you” is plural. This statement of shared participation in the life of Christ through the Spirit serves as the background against which Paul goes on to make an appeal for unity in the church.

1 John links fellowship with God and with other believers in some additional unique ways. A declaration about the risen Jesus is offered **“so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ”** (1 John 1:3). And elsewhere: “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:6-7). In other words, the relational posture of our God towards his people and the relationships to be found within our church bodies cannot be firmly separated.

Word Study – *κοινωνία (koinonia)*

Greek (and Hebrew) terms enjoy what scholars refer to as a *semantic range*: the variety of potential meanings that the words can have that are then limited by their immediate context.

Broadly speaking, words in the **κοινος** word group carry the sense of a sharing or participation. Sometimes this occurs in a negative sense of common as “*defiled*” or “*ritually impure*” (Matt. 15:11; Acts 10:14-15; Heb. 10:29). Other times it refers to *participation in a group* via shared experiences (Luke 5:10; Acts 2:42-44; 1 Cor. 10:16-20; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 1:7). Still other times to *charity* (Acts 2:42-44; Rom. 12:13; 2 Cor. 9:13).

Here are some of the ways that such terms are described in prominent New Testament & Classical Greek lexicons:

“Close association involving mutual interests and sharing, *association, communion, fellowship*; attitude of good will that manifests an interest in close relationship, *generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism*; participation, sharing.” (BDAG, 552-553)

“An association involving close mutual relations and involvement— close association, fellowship.” “To share one’s possessions, with the implication of some kind of joint participation and mutual interest— to share.” (L&N, 445, 568)

“Communion, association, partnership; fellowship; charitable contribution, alms.” (LSJ, 970)

“Participation; company; relationship, affinity; union, association, society; agreement, concord; fellowship, brotherhood; sharing, generosity.” (BrillDAG)

BDAG = *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament & Early Christian Literature*. **L&N** = *Louw & Nida, Greek-English Lexicon on the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. **LSJ** = *Liddel, Scott, Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon*. **BrillDAG** = *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*.

III. KEEPING FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER

As the above Scriptures demonstrate, there is an innate connection between the fellowship that God extends to his people and the fellowship that ought to be brought about within Christian communities. Christ's shed blood and the outpouring of the Spirit into all his followers provide the opportunity (and call) for intimate fellowship with others who would normally be separated along the social, political, and economic lines of our day. In the cultures that produced the New Testament, this dynamic was most reflected in the call for and difficulty of fostering a mixed Jewish/Gentile community. And while today's divisions are quite distinct from that era, there are some key overlaps.

To these earliest communities, corporate fellowship with God offered through Christ prompted a reevaluation of various social divisions that limited fellowship with one another. *Koinonia* language and related concepts appear in several key texts about the early church's evolving sense of community. One of the more significant of these is found after the arrival of the Spirit on the first Pentecost:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things *in common*; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47).

In Paul's letters and elsewhere *koinonia* language is used to refer to *partnership* in the gospel (2 Cor. 8:23; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 1:3-7), sharing in the same Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1), and partaking in the sufferings of Jesus (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13; Rev. 1:9). It is also used to refer to physically sharing with others through acts of charity (2 Cor. 9:13; Heb. 13:16). An undercurrent in each of these varied uses is the sense of having something in *common*, whether corporate enjoyment of material goods, shared experiences, or greater intimacy with the Lord. Having a share and enjoying mutuality with others is assumed, with parallels to language elsewhere of the church as a “body” with many members and Christ at the head (1 Cor. 12).

This broad witness to the early church's developing understanding of “life together” shows the importance of shared meals, corporate prayer, generous use of resources, and other modes of expressing a common life in witness to the surrounding culture. The life of faith was primarily seen as one lived in community rather than isolation, as a participant rather than as a consumer. Or, as one fellow BIC pastor once put it: ***“It is precisely in this context of fellowship that the work of building relationships happens. This is why the New Testament speaks so often of the importance of one another. We are sustained on our journey with God in the fellowship of one another. ... On nearly every page of the New Testament, everything that we are and everything that we do happens in the context of intimate relationships”*** (Anderson, 95).

Committed fellowship is not guaranteed, of course. One need not even leave the New Testament before we start to see divisions, disunity, and favoritism creep in. And in our own church contexts many social pressures vie to pull apart our congregations. But the potential for renewed communities grounded in the work of Jesus Christ remains a gift to the world. To have a *share* in something beyond ourselves and beyond the materialistic pop

culture impulses that define so much of the modern American identity is something that the world cannot offer. Fellowship with God, with members of the local congregation, and with the global church community, these are provided through Christ alone. And this offer cannot be duplicated in after-school sports, political rallies, or streaming shows, nor can it be fully appreciated through a screen alone.

In reaching out to lapsed members, to those who are hesitant about Christianity, and others in our communities, we ought not to suggest that our local Brethren in Christ congregation is but the best of many social groups competing for their time. Rather, we would do well to stress the unique opportunity made available to us in Jesus Christ: a call to greater fellowship with God and with others which can transcend the social boundaries of our day if we are willing to cooperate with the Spirit's leading.

IV. FOSTERING COMMUNITY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The above was a lot of "theory", but what about practice? What are some practical ways that our churches can better facilitate a culture of *fellowship* in the aftermath of the pandemic? Here is an area where I think our Brethren in Christ heritage is uniquely equipped.

"For Brethren in Christ, spirituality requires community. Private devotional life is important, but never at the expense of gathering in homes or meeting houses for worship" (Yeatts, 121). Traditional BIC practices such as the sharing of meals, serving of communion one member to another, foot washings, and love feasts offer some prominent examples of how to center *fellowship* at the core of our church identity (for more on these practices, see Yeatts's excellent articles). The point, of course, is not that we need or ought to duplicate historic BIC practices in the post-COVID era, but rather that we might consider modern parallels for building a fresh vision of a community focused Christian faith.

Shared meals (with sensitivity to how our members view public gatherings in the post-COVID era) are, I think, an especially important tool for fostering fellowship in our churches. Hosting such gatherings need and indeed ought not be the task of the pastor alone. The sharing of "life together" is a task for the entire body of Christ. Opening our homes for shared meals with those outside our normal circles, walking through life's daily challenges together as a Christ-seeking people, and sharing our gifts and giftings with one another beyond the usual Sunday morning service are expressions of Christian community that can be offered by any member of our congregations, even those least involved in formal services, staff positions, or volunteer teams.

The task for us in ministry may not lie in adding additional responsibilities to our work, but instead fostering an environment in which *κοινωνία* can flourish - both through our preaching/teaching and through a willingness to ourselves to be recipients of this mode of discipleship. May our lives as pastors, teachers, and followers of Jesus be marked by close fellowship connection with our flock.

V. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Brethren in Christ Perspectives

- “Stories and Lessons from the Pandemic” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 42.1 (Winter 2022).
- BIC U.S. Communications, *Open Doors in the Time of COVID* (January 2021). Brethren in Christ Blog.
- Micah Brickner, *Pandemic Lessons from My Grandmother* (September 2020). Brethren in Christ Blog.
- Chuck Anderson, “Belonging to the Community of Faith,” pages 75-91 in *Focusing Our Faith: Brethren in Christ Core Values* (Terry L. Brensinger, editor).
- John R. Yeatts, “The Quest for Obedience,” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.1 (April 2022): pages 116-148.
- John R. Yeatts, “Can a Congregation Be the Church? The Brethren in Christ in a Postmodern Age” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 39.1 (April 2016): pages 75-83.

Other Resources

- Cheree Hayes, “What Does the Bible Actually Say About Church Fellowship?” *The Bible Project*. <https://bibleproject.com/blog/fellowship-of-the-church-in-the-bible>
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*
- Various Authors, *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* (Charles E. Moore, editor). See especially: Part 3: Life in Community
- P.T. O’Brien, “Fellowship, Communion, Sharing” pages 293-295 in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.
- A. Casarella, “Fellowship” pages 373-374 in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Development*.