



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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*LET ME SAY THAT AGAIN. . .*

WE REALLY DO NEED EACH OTHER

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

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### INTRODUCTION

The Church God had in mind is a church:

- That celebrates (in worship) the greatness & goodness of God
- Made up of people who worship and connect with God privately
- That cares about how people are treated on the corporate and the personal level (and reaches out to serve them with acts of MERCY)
- That is fully engaged in prayer (does not rely on it's own energy or understanding)
- **Where there is a feeling of closeness & intimacy among its members (so that no matter how large, no one feels left out)**

Last year, Matt said it this way:

*“Most of us need a small support group of Christians who will meet with us regularly... A Christian can survive without a small group, but in order to thrive, a small group is essential.”*

He used an engaging Scriptural image to get the point across. The Israelites were in battle against their enemies, the Amalekites. As long as Moses held up the “banner of YAHWEH”, the Israelites prevailed. Aaron & Hur came around Moses as a small support group; they prayed for him and literally held up his arms when they got tired.

This year, I want to say it again, this time using Acts 2:42-47. . .

*<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup>Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup>Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. <sup>46</sup>Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

**Verse 41** tells us that about 3000 people became new believers when Peter preached the Good News about Christ on the Day of Pentecost. What do you think happened to these Christians?

- They were united with other believers.
- They were taught by the Apostles.
- And they were included in the prayer meetings & fellowship.

New believers (and long-time as well) need to be in groups where they can learn God's Word, pray, and mature in the faith.

What were the elements of their fellowship?

1. *"Breaking of Bread"* (v. 42). Communion celebrations patterned after the Last Supper in remembrance of Jesus.
2. *"Signs & Wonders"*(v. 43). God was doing marvelous things in their midst.
3. *"Believers were together and had everything in common"* (v. 44). Though probably not communism, a lot of sharing was going on. Being part of God's spiritual family, it is our responsibility and privilege to help one another in every way possible. Working together as we did on the ROOFING PROJECT brings us closer together and accomplishes much!
4. *"Giving"*(v. 45). They even went to the point of selling possessions to make sure no one was in need. There were some serious *"acts of mercy"* going on here.
5. *"Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts"* (v. 46). That verse also says: *"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad & sincere hearts"*. There was corporate worship AND small group fellowship. The latter perhaps out of necessity—for while the early church began as a movement within Judaism, there were those who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah and did not accept His message & resurrection as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This led to their eventual excommunication and persecution.
6. Yet at this time they *"enjoyed the favor of all the people"* (v. 47a).
7. Get this: *"The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"* (v. 47b).

A healthy Christian Community will attract people to Christ! Their zeal and their love for one another is contagious. I believe ours is that kind of church!

Jesus placed Christian community at the very heart of the church's life & ministry. There's a great New Testament word for it: KOINONIA (Greek). It means fellowship OR sharing something with someone.

Now when we think of fellowship, we mostly think of informal, social times together. . .getting together for refreshments or a potluck. It is that. But it is much, much more. . .

*Koinonia* is the sharing of our lives at a deep, personal, intimate level with one another and with the Lord.

*Koinonia* is "being together as Christians", not just "Christians being together". Catch the difference?!

*Koinonia* says that whether or not we have anything else in common, we do have this one thing: CHRIST JESUS. Our life in Him is linked to our life with our brothers & sisters.

You see, we were made for relationship with God. But God has also made us in such a way that *we really do need each other*. If you've ever had the experience of relating with someone at the "gut" level, beyond all phoniness and superficiality, you know how good that feels. When there is *openness / acceptance / warmth / growth*, we are experiencing the reality of Christian community that Christ had in mind when He established the Church.

## THE PARADOX OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Now here's a paradox: The experience of Christian community is something we all desire and crave, but it is also something we are desperately afraid of and run from. It's one of the greatest and simplest of all tenets to understand, but one of the hardest to experience.

- We know the vertical line of Godward relationship and the horizontal line of human relationship are not two lines but one line in a continuum.
- We know how important it is to take time to share at a deeper, more personal level when we get together, and not just sit around chitchatting and socializing (although that is important too!).
- We know the value of taking time in a small gathering to listen & care & pray about the things that matter the most to one another (e.g.: dreams & hopes / failures & joys).

But it's so hard! WHY?

For one thing, we are so driven by the need to succeed "on our own", there's a streak of SELF-SUFFICIENCY that runs through us. We do—and yet we don't—need each other.

Another reason we are so cut off from one another is because we are so busy taking care of our own interests (e.g.: providing for career, housing, kids' college educations, retirement). We want to "belong", but the reality is we DON'T HAVE THE TIME. We barely know our neighbors.

We long to know and be known as our families were in previous generations when things like the *extended family*, the *parish*, the *village* were everyday realities. Here in Dexter, we still retain that "*village*" feel, but there's a constant flux of people moving in and out. Many of you here are transplanted from some other part of the country, separated from the familiar and from loved ones. Little wonder that you FEEL ISOLATED AND ALONE.

And all of us are AFRAID OF GETTING TOO CLOSE and bonded—for fear of being transferred, betrayed, let down. We are so scared of intimacy. The prospect of finding a place where it is safe to be known, comfortable, "at home" seems like the impossible dream.

M. Scott Peck in his book *The Different Drum* tells about his own search for genuine community. Along the way he makes a very disturbing observation:

*"On my lecture tours across the country the one constant I have found wherever I go. . . is the lack—and the thirst for—community. This lack and thirst is particularly heartbreaking in those places where one might expect to find real community: IN CHURCHES..."*

So, the PARADOX: We want it. We desire it. But we're frightened to death of it; and run from it. We don't want to face life alone. . .but we resist it with all our might.

Beyond this paradox is. . . . .

## THE PROMISE OF XN. COMMUNITY

That means Dexter UMC is aiming at being:

- A truly **safe** place, where masks (that show us being so composed and “together”) can be shed. . .and where we are not so worried about being “less than perfect”.
- A fellowship in which we speak to one another honestly. . .admonish one another to go the way that Christ bids us to go. . .warn one another against the disobedience that is our common destruction. . .hold one another accountable (i.e.: sometimes we are gentle, at times severe with one another). [cf. Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, p. 106]
- A fellowship in which we “rejoice together and mourn together”, “delight in each other”, “care for each other and take care of each other”.

How will this promise be carried out? I believe our best experience of Christian community will occur in SMALL GROUPS. Here’s a **PARABLE**. . . . .

*There was a chaplain in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War who developed an unusually close rapport with the men he served. One night seven men from his company were selected to infiltrate the enemy lines, make observations, and feel out enemy strength. They were to leave one hour before midnight, stay until almost daybreak, and return if possible. In all likelihood only three—or two or one—would make it back. But such a mission would provide valuable information for the activities of the whole regiment the following day.*

*In the “terribly long and terribly short” hours before eleven, most of the men came to talk with their young chaplain. They brought pictures of the babies they had never seen and of their wives and mothers. They left with him trinkets and valuables to send home “in case. And always they put into his hands the address of someone, along with a scribbled note. One man came to make his commitment to Jesus. He had put it off long enough.*

*When 11:00 came they slipped off into the darkness.*

*Through the night, the chaplain waited and prayed and thought about all that might be taking place. As he listened to the sporadic barking of machine gunfire in the distance, he pondered the pictures of their families at home and hoped that God would comfort them when they got the news. He wondered if one or two would get back, and which ones they would be. And what of those who would die? Would the words that he had said to them have any meaning? Would the men be hindered or helped by those words when they stood in the presence of God?*

*It was almost dawn when a lone figure came through the morning mist. The chaplain thanked God. And then came another, and yet another—until all seven were back. Such a reunion he had never seen. Their words tumbled over each other:*

*“This is what happened to me”*

*“Remember the first heavy exchange”*

*“How did you get by that sentry?”*

*“This is the way it was. . .”*

*Seven dead men were alive—together again. There were new possibilities—things could be and could happen once more.*

*What a parable of the church when she authentically gathers: “A group of people who have known that they were bound over to the power of death, stumble on a treasure and that treasure is Christ; miracle of miracles, doors that were closed open, gates of bronze are broken down. The words spill out as they try to tell one another what happened, and how it happened, and of a **Presence** that was there.” [Gordon Cosby: Handbook for Mission Groups, p. 15]*

That’s what a CONGREGATION is: A Community of God’s People!

- *It is a Worshipping Community* (i.e.: where words & expressions of joy “spill out as we try to tell one another what happened, how it happened, and of a Presence that was—and continues to be—there”)
- *It is a Messianic Community*—called by the Messiah to be a covenant people (i.e.: people with a covenant, a message, a mission).

Being a congregation is to live together in true Christian community. It doesn’t mean having the same address. But it does mean binding our lives together with the life of Christ.

## PRACTICAL APPLICATION

I believe life transformation happens best in small groups. [*That’s our **core value**.*] Yet for the size church we are, we have only a handful of small groups.

We have a great opportunity to apply this sermon, to put this message into practice. One of the goals of the *40 Days of Purpose* is **40 small groups**. I want you to begin now to consider hosting or participating in one.

I believe our church is poised for significant growth. But one thing that could hold us back is the fear that if we become a church of 1000, it will be too impersonal. But, no one need be left behind if we remember one thing: **THE ONLY WAY A CHURCH CAN TRULY BECOME LARGE IS TO BECOME SMALL.**

Last Christmas Eve our sanctuary was filled—twice. Many commented on how nice it would be to see that happen during the year. One of the best ways to do that is by creating small “*spheres of intimacy*” where newcomers—of which we have many—feel a sense of belonging and welcome, intimacy and friendship. In other words, the way to grow big is to act small!

I envision all kinds of groups. We have some in place already:

Growth Groups (e.g.: to strengthen our walk with God, to encourage and care for each other)

Support Groups (e.g.: to foster healing & restoration)

Ministry Teams (e.g.: responsible for some form of ministry or service within the church)

Mission Teams (e.g.: commissioned for outreach beyond the local church)

Beyond the *paradox* of forming Christian community is the *promise* that it can happen through small groups. But we must be intentional about it; it won’t just happen. The early Christians were. . .and we must be, too.