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In Search of Koinonia

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In Search of *Koinonia*

This writer has long searched for a place of belonging, a community where he would feel at home, what is referred to by the Greek word, Κοινότητα (*koinonia*). One author explains the derivation of the word: “*Community*, *communication*, and *communicate* all come from the same Greek root word, *koinonia*,meaning to ‘hold things in common,’ or ‘joint participation,’ most commonly translated as ‘fellowship’” (Van Yperen, 2002, p. 203, italics his). This quest led this student to the parish ministry, which will be discussed in Part 1 of this paper; to a teaching ministry, which will be considered in Part 2; and ultimately to an addiction ministry, which will be explained in Part 3.

**Part 1. Describe Church or Ministry**

Since this student is now retired, we will briefly describe the two churches where he has been in parish ministry in the past.

This writer graduated from seminary, was ordained, and called to the Unitarian Universalist church in Utica, New York in 1961. This was a divided church with older, more conservative members in the tradition of Christian Universalism in conflict with younger, humanist Unitarians who had migrated to the area to work in industries such as General Electric. Added to the mix was a middle-aged, controlling woman who was the self-appointed spokesman and “gatekeeper” (Ammerman et al., 1998, p.189) for the liberal Unitarians. Just when things would begin to settle and heal between the two groups, she had a knack for creating discontent and stirring them up again.

The struggle expressed itself over limited resources, manifested in an annual budget of only $15,000. The younger, liberal members wanted Church School and social action to have priority; the older, liturgical members wanted funds to be earmarked for a paid quartet that would provide music for Sunday morning worship. Interestingly, these are two of the main church “practices” or “pathways” identified by Ammerman et al*.* as “patterns of worship,” and “educational curricula” (Ammerman et al., 1998, pp. 34-35). Least the role of music be minimized, we must acknowledge worship music is universally recognized as a non-verbal experience that touches people on a deep spiritual level.

Older, more conservative members reminisced about happier days when the Men’s Group would gather in the church’s basement to play shuffleboard all evening with their former pastor. “Help us to learn to love each other,” was the plea to the recently educated and newly ordained minister. However, the new pastor lacked a “process frame,” that offered “tools to manage interpersonal divisions, heal fractured relations after a fight, or aid individuals in better understanding of one another” (Ammerman et al., 1998, p.105). This novice minister inherited a mess, and even if he couldn’t solve the problem, the expectation was that he would at least manage the mess.

This relatively advanced level of conflict was what is referred to as “contest,” in which “issues are clouded by distrust, and there are strong factions divided by clear barriers” (Ammerman et al., 1998, p.123). Viewed in retrospect, the inexperienced minister’s conflict style ranged somewhere between “passive” and “evasive” (Van Ypersen, 2002, pp. 111-134). Try as he could to be all things to all people, it was an impossible expectation and a setup for failure. When his love was not enough—and where God’s love was not acknowledged—the new minister concluded that the dissonance was his fault, that he had failed. After hours on a psychiatrist’s couch, he came to realize it was not the pastor but the church that was sick.

The second pastorate, which was part-time, was with the First Universalist Church of Central Square, New York (1966-1992). This was a small rural church composed of life time members from several extended families who loved God and trusted each other. The patriarch of the congregation was a second-generation German American, who owned the local lumber mill and feed store. His father had literally built the church in the early 1900’s, and he would proudly recount the story of how he had helped his father raise the bell to the steeple, representing a “significant symbol” of the church and one of the “grand stories” by one of its “heroes” (Ammerman et al., 1998, p.94).

Members of the congregation had common goals and shared Christian values. In terms of its “congregational life cycle,” the church had reached the level of “maturity,” characterized by “well-established staff, program, and procedures” (Ammerman et al., 1998, p.118). The previous church in Utica proved to be a learning experience, and the result was a more confident and self-possessed minister.

This second church was a close-knit family, a place of *koinonia.* Even though this church required a 50-mile commute several times a week, the new pastor deeply loved them; they appreciated him and his young family, resulting in many life-long friends.

**Part 2. Evaluate Current Practice of Ministry**

Current practice of ministry for this student includes a teaching ministry which began at SUNY, Cortland in 1966, while serving as part-time minister in Central Square, New York. Marshall and Payne anticipate the role of this kind of ministry: “It is also essential that some have the ability to teach…” (Marshall & Payne, 2009, p.77). The role of teacher and professor was familiar from graduate school and in some ways was more compatible than parish ministry. The association with countless students and other faculty has been a blessing, and this writer found a second calling. A drawback of teaching at a public college, however, was the restraint upon Christian expression and witness.

After a divorce and early retirement in 1994, the teaching ministry continued as an adjunct professor at Trinity International University in South Florida. In teaching at a Christian college, the satisfactions of the professorship are combined with the joy of Christian testimony and ministry. Prayer and brief devotionals are merged with the requirements of the classroom. The requirements of the classroom, however, are significant, and this writer would like to offer a guarded and critical evaluation of his teaching ministry. The classroom is an artificial model of the real world, and both student and professor get drawn into role expectations that limit spontaneity, self-disclosure and intimacy. It may be the best paradigm we have for imparting knowledge and certain skills, but it leaves much to be desired in learning how to live life and love God.

The classroom seriously structures and limits mentoring, and one might wonder what kind of relationship Paul and Timothy would have had if limited to professor and student in a postmodern college. Academia permits mentoring, but usually in a restrained, insulated way. True mentoring, however, is “deeply and inescapably relational. Paul repeatedly describes Timothy with great warmth as his son and beloved child….Training is parenting.” (Marshall & Payne, 2009, pp.71-75). In formal education boundaries are clearly set, and at Trinity International University in Davie counseling by professors of students’ personal issues is discouraged and troubled students are referred either to a campus Spiritual Director or to outside help. This has a limiting effect on personal relationships.

All too often relationships between professor and student are based on authority and compliance, subliminally enforced by the awarding of grades and the anticipation of letters of recommendation. Course evaluations by the student providing “feedback” to the professor are inevitably anonymous and frequently delayed for months; an occasional negative response can be easily discounted as the venting of a disgruntled student. “A bit of messiness is inevitable in people ministry” (Marshall & Payne, 2009, p.183), and academia, as well as the pastoral ministry, is sometimes concerned with avoiding messiness. On the occasions when dissatisfaction or conflict occurs, the focus seems to be on damage control and a quick clean up.

Henri Nouwen indicts contemporary teaching as sometimes being a “violent process” based on “competition,” and is often “unilateral” (Nouwen, 1991, pp.5-8). “In this context the teacher is strong,” says Nouwen, “He knows and should know. The student, however, is weak. He does not know and should want to know. The whole movement, therefore, is from teacher to student, from the strong to the weak….” (Nouwen, 1991, p.9). For Nouwen the alternative is to strive for “teaching as a redemptive process,” which is “evocative” and “bilateral” (Nouwen, 1991, pp.10-13). Learning occurs more from dialogue than from monologue, try as we will to dress up monologue with PowerPoint. We are reminded that “Jesus taught primarily through dialogue, sayings, and stories….more often he taught in homes, along the road, and in open air” (Chester & Timmis, 2008, p.114).

Nouwen concludes that schools can and should become “places where community can be experienced” (Nouwen, 1991, p.14). Even our Christian colleges, however, often miss the mark by being abjectly faithful to the gods of the ivory tower. We forgo partnership or *koinonia*, which one commentary emphasizes was the “object of Paul’s joy and the source of his thanksgiving” (Thompson, 2006, p.36). Teaching ministry all too easily lapses into what Marshall and Payne refer to as “trellis work…[tending] to take over from vine work” (Marshall & Payne, 2009, p.9).

Jesus said to his disciples, “Henceforth I call you not servants, for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you” (John 15:15, KJV). When we have made all things known to our students, perhaps there is a time and place when we can also call them friends. Morna Hooker’s concept of “interchange,” proposes that Christ “became what we are in order that we might become what he is” (Thompson, 2006, p.25). Among other things, Christ became a teacher—perhaps in part to show us how to be better teachers.

**Part 3. Theology and Philosophy of Church Life and Practice**

In addition to presenting a theology and philosophy, the third part of this paper affords the opportunity to review a final aspect of this writer’s ministry, an addiction ministry carried on for over 40 years through parachurch groups, namely Twelve Step programs. This writer has sponsored, studied with and taught, counseled and prayed with many hundreds of men, helping them recover from alcoholism and other addictions. Remarkably, this ministry has provided more opportunity for true mentoring and learning through dialogue than the teaching ministry previously discussed.

Our postmodern culture populated by Boomers, Gen. Xers, and now joined by Gen. Yers, has been variously described as relativistic and narcisstic (Ryken, 2003, p.18). “Superficiality is the curse of our age,” observes Foster, “The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem” (Foster, 2008, p.1). This has provided fertile ground for what is arguably the chief social problem of our time, addiction—including alcoholism and drug abuse, in particular opiate dependency.

Up to the mid-1900s, “scores of mission societies in Europe and parachurch structures in North America were formed….The theology that usually guided their work was rooted in an evangelical movement known as pietism” (Van Gelder, 2000, p.61). Personal experience with God became the emphasis, and the church was reduced to a secondary role.

Beginning with Alcoholics Anonymous, Twelve Step groups were a “spin-off” of an evangelical movement called the Oxford Group (also known as Moral Re-Armament) led by Lutheran pietist, Frank Buchman. A.A. historian, Ernest Kurtz, notes: “The Oxford Group, out of which Alcoholics Anonymous sprang, shared deeply in the Evangelical Pietist insight” (Kurtz, 1991, p.179). The principles or “practices” of the Oxford Group were:

1. Admission of personal defeat….
2. Taking of personal inventory….
3. Confession of one’s sins to another person.
4. Making restitution to those one has harmed.
5. Helping others selflessly.
6. Praying to God for Guidance. (Orange 2013)

These were expanded into the Twelve Steps by Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA, who had previously undergone a “Road to Damascus” experience:

Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy—I was conscious of nothing else for a time. Then, seen in the mind’s eye, there was a mountain. I stood upon its summit, where a great wind blew. A wind, not of air, but of spirit. In great, clean strength, it blew right through me. Then came the blazing thought, “You are a free man.” (Anonymous, 1984, p.121)

In 1940, New York philanthropist Albert Scott was introduced to AA’s practices of abstinence and fasting from alcohol, daily meetings for prayer and edification, earnestly seeking God’s will, breaking bread together, mutual encouragement and fellowship. He declared flatly, “Why, this is first century Christianity!” (Anonymous, 1984, p.184).

From this writer’s theological perspective, Jesus is God becoming vulnerable. God not only became human, but Jesus went further and identified himself with the marginalized, the sick and the suffering, the “little people.” In Matthew 25 he says that if we want to be close to him and love him, we must befriend and meet the needs of the sick and outcast. He says that if we do it *to* *them*, paradoxically we do it *for* *him*:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Matt 25:35-40, NIV)

Chester and Timmis emphasize how central this teaching was for Jesus:

Jesus has come for outsiders. He has not come for the sorted-out people but for the broken people (“the poor in spirit”) and the messed up people….The marginalized are excluded from the blessings of this life, but the kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace, and so their lack of status, wealth, or power does not exclude them. (Chester & Timmis, 2008, pp.71-72)

This priority may be traced to Isaiah 58: “…to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him….” (Isa 58:6-7, RSV). Piper writes, “The burden of Isaiah 58 pervades the ministry of Jesus—and more and more it should pervade our ministry as well” (Piper, 1997, p.131). Thus, Twelve Step programs working with those suffering from the sickness of addiction can be seen as Biblical and deeply Christ-like.

Another aspect of the theology of this student, as suggested earlier in this paper, is that God is present in our experience of community and fellowship. Presumably churches excel in modeling such community, but they don’t have an exclusive claim to it. When asked when the Kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answered, “…behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21, RSV). For this writer, God is a God of relationship: he is in relationship; he is relationship.

Recalling how significant fellowship was to the apostle Paul, one source talks about Paul’s “band of brothers:” Prisca and Aquila, Urbanus, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, Epaphras, Tychicus, Archippus, and Phoebe (Marshall & Payne, 2009, pp.112-115). God, it seems, is in community; he is in fellowship. In words that are as visionary for Twelve Step groups as for churches, Thompson concludes: “Our pastoral ambition is to build the community in the context of the threats posed by the gods of our own age” (Thompson, 2006, p.148).

After creating man, God observed, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18, RSV). Significantly, “the only thing in all creation that is not good is the man on his own….” (Chester & Timmis, 2008, p.40). Addiction is a frighteningly lonely existence, and as a result Twelve Step groups intuitively emphasize fellowship. As is stated in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous:*

Life will take on new meaning. To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends—this is an experience you must not miss. We know you will not want to miss it. Frequent contact with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot of our lives. (Anonymous, 2001, p.89)

This writer has sometimes found addiction ministry closer to the essence of *koinonia* than parish ministry or teaching ministry.

Unfortunately, the reaction of the Christian Church toward Twelve Step groups is mixed. There are those who would disown recovery programs and cut them loose:

Some churches offer solutions that only compound the problem. The answer, they believe, is targeting ministries and services to specific demographic or life interest groups who have the same concerns, desires, or needs. This keeps people happy for a time but further fragments the body….Or we separate people by having special services and support groups for the divorced, for singles and single moms, or for people with addictive behaviors. Christianity is not a “self-help” religion. (Van Yperen, 2002, pp.30-31)

Sam Shoemaker, rector of the Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City and Twelve Step advocate, would have taken issue. In 1955, he made this statement about the nature and purpose of the church:

From the first, Christ drew about Him a company. To join him, you had also to join that company. The church has always been a scratch company of sinners. It is not the best people in the community gathered together for self-congratulation; it is the people who know they have a great need gathered to find its answer in worship toward God and fellowship with one another. The church is not a museum; it is a hospital. (Anonymous, 1957, p.268)

Cousins also affirms: “Recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous provide the guidance and support that are necessary for changing addictive behavior” (Cousins, 2008, p.252).

This student believes that it is supernaturally natural for the Christian to have passion for the lost. In writing about redemptive suffering Foster prophetically declares, “We come to recognize the sufferings of our time in our own hearts, and that becomes the starting point for ministry” (Foster, 1992, 220). Cousins speaks directly to me when he says, “*God has given each of us a different piece of His heart for His world*….’What piece of God’s heart do you carry?’” (Cousins, 2008, p.240, italics his). Addiction ministry is the part of God’s heart that I carry, and is therefore forever mine.

**Conclusion**

This paper has described church and ministry by reflecting on ­­­­past parish ministries, evaluated current practice of ministry by considering teaching ministry, and discussed theology and philosophy of church while reviewing an on-going addiction ministry. The search has been for meaning, for belonging. The search has been for God as He reveals himself in community and fellowship, as he is inca­­­rnated in *koinonia.*

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