

Foundational Essay

LIVE IN COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of living in community is not particular to Christians. It seems part of our human nature to live in community with others. Unless we are ascetics living alone in seclusion, we are all part of various communities. Brain research studies have clearly shown that being in community is hard-wired into our brains as part of our genetic makeup. What is distinctly Christian about this practice?

The Scriptures testify to the importance of community, from God's admonition in Genesis 2:18—that it is not good for humans to be alone—to Revelation 21—where the vision of a new heaven and new earth is a city where God dwells with mortals. Between these first and final books in the Bible, Scripture is filled with stories and teachings about life in community with God and our neighbors. What are churches but a community of believers all worshipping God and learning to live together with gospel values?

In this essay, we will look at four aspects of living in community as Christians who follow Jesus. They are:

- Gather across Differences
- Feast and Listen
- Uplift Those in Need
- Support Those Who Depart

For each aspect, we will explore three biblical texts to illustrate it: the Hebrew people of the exodus, the disciples of Jesus, and the early church mentioned in the book of Acts and the epistles. Much could be said individually about each of these communities, but here we will simply use them to illustrate the aspect of the faith practice under discussion.

GATHER ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Faith communities include people who are very different from one another. Gathering others is easier said than done. It is not as simple as standing outside your house or church and yelling, "Y'all come!" There needs to be some binding element or common goal that brings people together. In

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this dimension of living in community we will look at the biblical, ecclesial, and practical elements of building community.

Biblical Models. The Hebrew people were a collection of tribes that grew out of the descendants of the sons of Jacob. What bound them together in the land of Egypt, where we see them at the beginning of Exodus, was their miserable lives as slaves, suffering under Egyptian rule. The exodus, or escape, from Egypt landed them in the wilderness. In Egypt and in the wilderness, they had no choice but to be community. But what kept them together, beyond Moses' assurances of God's promise of land, were the commandments for living with God and in community, given on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1–20) while they were still wandering in the wilderness. These rules for daily life gave them a common vision of who they were as a people: chosen by God, preparing for a new life together in a new land.

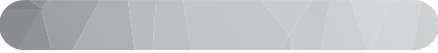
When Jesus began his ministry after his baptism, one of his first acts was to create a community of disciples, calling them from their vocations as fishermen, tax collectors, political activists, and homemakers to be a learning community in his leadership academy. In Mark 1:16–20, he invited those whom he called to a new vocation of fishing for people. He cast a vision for those dissatisfied with the status quo. It was a new community with God at the center, where the poor were lifted up, where those unlikely to be invited were called to the table, and where love was the dominant feature. His called community followed him together to learn more about this new vision for community and to learn more from him about God.

The early church, born at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), was bound together because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ through the coming of the Holy Spirit. This common creed and the blowing of the Spirit among the people brought them together and sent them out into the world to share the good news of Christ's love for all. Peter stepped forward as the spokesperson for the group (Acts 2:22–24), proclaiming this creed and inviting those assembled from throughout the world to become a part of this new community of believers.


In each of these moments, a group of people were brought together through a common affirmation of belief that transcended previous boundaries of tribe, vocation, race, or nationality. This call to community brings people together today under a common belief or mission. Each time, it is an individual calling the community together, but with an assurance of the triune God's presence in the gathering.

Within Worshiping Communities. *Ecclesiology* refers to the study of the church. When we talk about the faith community, there are many metaphors that we use: the body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, the temple made of living stones. All of these have their roots in the Bible, but they take on new life in the hands of theologians. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote much about the nature of the church. His first published work, his dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, looked at the church as "Christ existing as community." In each of these metaphors, it is Christ that unites the community in all its differences. So, any Christian community will have Christ at its center.

We affirm this in our creeds and confessions as a church. We sing about it in hymns such as "In Christ There Is No East or West" or "Here, O Lord, Your Servants Gather" or "Gather Us In." Nowhere is it more evident than in Holy Communion. This is something we share in community with Christ as our host at the table. Each service of communion includes an invitation in



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which we are reminded of why we are gathered and asked to commit anew to being a part of this faith community.

Beyond the Walls of the Church. With Christ at the center, the faith community is not confined to a church building, but can stride as the body of Christ into the world. Many people first join a church or worshiping community today through caring for others in mission. Someone may first gather with Christ's body in building a house or serving in a soup kitchen or joining a protest before ever gathering with the community in worship. Families within a church community may make a commitment to serve in their community apart from an organized program of the church. What makes this a Christian practice is that they are doing the work as part of their faith.

The Christian church community is far from perfect, and it has a history of excluding some because of their race, sexuality, or mental condition, among other factors. We have to be honest about this history while gathering all who want to claim Christ. Every congregation should claim their history—good and bad—be honest about it, and move forward in humility and desire for truthful relationships with all who wish to profess faith in Christ.

FEAST AND LISTEN

Once the community has gathered, one of the most frequent activities done together is sharing a meal. There is something about eating together that binds the community and offers space to share stories from our lives and histories. In a time when walls are being built between peoples and nations, there is a counter-narrative going on that says we should build tables for meal-sharing rather than walls that divide. Throughout the biblical texts, there are many examples of these meals where deep connections are forged.

Biblical Models. When the Hebrew people first sat around tables sharing their unleavened bread and lamb, as the angel of death circulated among the Egyptians during the final plague that signaled their impending freedom, they probably had no notion that their descendants would still be replicating this meal and telling this story of salvation thousands of years later. Yet Scripture sets out the requirements for continuing this Feast of Unleavened Bread into the future (Exodus 13:3–10). The Passover Haggadah of today combines food symbols with the telling of this story, using the five senses to create durable memories of this time of God's intervening love.

There are many feasting stories connected with Jesus and the disciples as well. We mentioned the Lord's Supper as a time of mixing food with the telling of Jesus' story of salvation, but there are many other stories in the Gospels. The story of Mary and Martha serving Jesus in their home highlights two activities of feasting and listening. Martha attends to the food and Mary to inspiring the storytelling (Luke 10:38–42). The Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6) tells of Jesus using a boy's lunch to feed thousands before talking to his disciples about the bread from heaven that never gets moldy. This story is in all four Gospels, but only in John is the story set during the Passover celebration.

Finally, after the events of Pentecost, one of the earliest descriptions of the new community describes it as those who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early church community gathered around meals as

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they learned more about the God they served and compared stories about their efforts in baptism and spreading the gospel (Acts 2:41–47).

Within Worshiping Communities. We have discussed communion as an act that brings the community together. It is also a time of eating together and listening to the acts of God through creation, redemption, and sustained community. The stories that are told in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving remind us of who we are as Christians, and God’s steadfast care for us and believers of the past.

On a more mundane level, the church also gathers around food and storytelling on many occasions through community meals. This often happens in a space called the “fellowship hall,” which inspires visions of people gathering in groups and sharing one another’s lives. Deep conversation can happen around a meal, and this can often be a place where cross-generational learning occurs.

Beyond the Walls of the Church. Probably one of the first places we practice eating and listening is around the family dining room table or wherever one normally shares a meal together in the home. Here we share stories of our day while eating a meal together. This was becoming less frequent before we faced the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 together but has made a resurgence that hopefully will continue into the future. There is much that can be shared during these times together where the link can be made between the family meal and the communion meal in church to continue to build the link between both communities.

It isn’t enough, though, to keep this practice within the family. If we only ever dine with people who live in the same household, we miss the opportunity to expand our world by listening to and sharing meals with those who are different from us politically, racially, or religiously or a host of other things that may separate us. Think about all the boundaries that Jesus crossed in his lifetime. When we follow him, we are open to share meals with those who differ from us. We will all likely grow in our own faith as we eat together.

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UPLIFT THOSE IN NEED

As indicated at the end of the previous aspect, Christian community is not insular when it follows the way of Jesus Christ. It reaches beyond itself to aid those in need. We are often at our best as a community when the focus is directed outward to others. Think of responses to natural disasters or individual loss. Think of the outpouring when someone is ill in the hospital or when a family has lost a loved one.

Let’s consider how the biblical communities we have been exploring in this essay attended to the needs of others.

Biblical Models. The Hebrew people had many opportunities to serve one another as they wandered in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. Later in their journey, the original wanderers began to die, and new decisions related to justice had to be made as they continued their trek to the land promised them. In Numbers 27, we meet the daughters of Zelophehad, who came from the tribe of Manasseh, son of Joseph. Their father had died, and ordinarily his possessions would go to the nearest male relative, but these five sisters had the audacity and good sense to ask that the property be given to them. Moses brought their case before the Lord, who vindicated the sisters and suggested a new law where daughters could

inherit property in the absence of a son. It was a small step, which showed that communities can change to create more just practices in their life together.

Jesus was also about making wise and just decisions and had no problem breaking social taboos—listening and responding to Gentiles and social outcasts who would not have been considered part of the Jewish community in his time. He spoke to Samaritan women (John 4), Roman soldiers (Matthew 8), and many times to those considered unclean, whom he restored to the community whole (Luke 8:26–39, as one example). Jesus was attentive to both the community of disciples that he gathered and those on the margins of other communities.

The early Christians continued these practices of reaching out to others. As their numbers grew, so did the needs within their community and with those nearby. Those within the community shared their possessions and sold off property to ensure that there was no one in need within the community (Acts 4:32–36). As the movement grew and other cultural and language groups joined, additional leaders were sought who could best serve widows, orphans, and others in need. The office of deacon was created (Acts 6:1–7). The community chose these leaders, much as some churches elect deacons today.

Within Worshiping Communities. These practices of making just decisions, crossing boundaries, and serving those in need should be modeled by the leadership of the congregation. Pastors and church officers model these practices and lead the congregation to speak boldly and serve gladly within and outside of the church community. The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ is helpful here as the members attune themselves to where the body is in pain and seek to put their energies there.

Bonhoeffer, in his best-known work on community, *Life Together*, indicates that the community is dependent on the weaker members to reveal God to all. He states, “The exclusion of the weak and insignificant, the seemingly useless people, from everyday Christian life in community may actually mean the exclusion of Christ, for in the poor sister or brother, Christ is knocking on the door.”¹

It is not only the leaders who should practice just decisions, cross boundaries, and serve those in need, but rather all who claim Christ. And it is not something done only within the church community, but something we should all strive for in our daily lives.

Beyond the Walls of the Church. At the end of his short life, as he sat in a Nazi prison, deprived of face-to-face community, Bonhoeffer wrote his thinking about Christian community, the body of Christ, striding into the “world come of age” and not confined to a building, as it strives to combine prayer and action to those beyond its walls. His writing is found in the book *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

This is a bold image of the church using its prophetic voice to address the ills of the world, kneeling to care for the lost and the least, and striving to live a life worthy of the gospel. It is not the picture of a community torn apart by petty bickering or division into factions. It is a picture of a faith community that unites across difference to focus on the hurts of the world.



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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Prayerbook of the Bible in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, English Edition, Volume 5. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, 45–46.

SUPPORT THOSE WHO DEPART

There comes a time in the life of every community when members leave the community for one reason or another. It could be a move to a new location, a change of vocation that necessitates the member to travel extensively, or a more permanent departure through broken relationships and death. How the community handles these departures is critical to its health and longevity.

In this final aspect of living in community, we explore how leave-taking occurs as a spiritual practice with rituals and services that mark these transitions and help the congregation grieve and celebrate these departures.

Biblical Models. The Hebrew people followed the leadership of Moses for many years, but before they could accept the promise of land in their new home, they had to take leave of his leadership and transition to their new leader, Joshua. In Deuteronomy 33–34, we see the means by which the community accomplished this transition. Moses blessed each tribe within the community, lifting up their gifts and making sure they knew that they were still in God’s care. He then departed the community to rest on Mount Nebo before making his final journey to God’s realm. We see in these chapters a ritual of departure before he left the community.

Jesus did something similar for his followers in both his resurrection appearances and his lengthy conversation with the disciples in John, particularly in 14:15–23, where he spoke about the coming of the Holy Spirit as he prepared to depart. Unlike Moses, Jesus’ followers had already experienced his painful, sudden departure in the crucifixion before they were able to take leave of him between his resurrection and ascension.

Finally, there were many transitions within the early Christian communities, because of the persecutions that these new believers faced. Surely there were those who left the community out of fear, as well as those who gave their lives for their beliefs. Paul took leave of the many communities he touched through his letters, particularly those written from his prison cell. Philippians 4:2–9 is an example of this leave-taking as he closed this letter to the community in Philippi that was particularly close to him. In his leave-taking, he named leaders within the community (Euodia, Syntyche, Clement) and gave them particular instructions. He exhorted the community to rejoice and reminded them that the Lord was always near.

Within Worshiping Communities. There are many instances when the church community says goodbye to individuals and groups of people. There are times of commissioning, when someone leaves to do ministry in another location. These may be short-term leave-takings, such as when a group leaves to do a mission project, or longer leave-takings when a community member moves. One of the most difficult types of leave-takings for a congregation is when a pastor leaves to take another call in another location or to retire. Making this a smooth transition for both the one taking leave and the new leadership emerging is an important time in the life of any community.

Another type of leave-taking is either explicitly or implicitly in the background of all three of the biblical examples above: that of death. Dorothy C. Bass termed the spiritual practice around this type of leave-taking as “dying well.”² How does the community help the one dying to make peace with those around them? How do we make sure that the rituals and

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2. Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), chap. 2.

blessings surrounding this time are both what the person wants, and what the community needs in order to make this transition well? How do we celebrate the promise of the resurrection in the funeral service at the same time that we are grieving for the loss of this member of the community? There are many things to consider in this leave-taking practice.

Beyond the Walls of the Church. Sometimes, whole church communities need to take leave of their buildings, when membership drops too low or the building is destroyed through a disaster. All churches experienced this displacement in the recent pandemic when church buildings were no longer safe to inhabit and new ways of being community needed to be created. How does community change when it is virtual rather than face-to-face? Marking these transitions of leaving buildings and perhaps returning to them in a different way should also be noted and ritualized. The church community is more than a building. How does the community cohere without one place of worship and gathering?


When we think about this practice in the public sphere, we may also think about particular issues that may involve leave-taking of those who may not belong to our particular community, but yet are our neighbors. Incidences of gun violence, racism, sexual crimes, and drug abuse are but a few of the ills that separate neighbor from neighbor and cause leave-taking within the larger community. How does the faith community respond to these issues? Do they see them as being outside of the community or as part of their mission? As you can see, leave-taking stands alongside almost everything the church community does. Marking these occasions will lead to greater healing within the body of Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have only scratched the surface of this practice of *koinonia* or living in community. We have explored four aspects of this practice: gathering across differences, feasting and listening, uplifting those in need, and supporting those who depart. Of course, there are many other dimensions we could consider. Living in community is at the heart of who we are as humans and Christians. May we continue to learn and grow in how to do this more faithfully, as we follow Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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