

APPENDIX 3: WHY WE BELIEVE IN TEAM

“For we are God’s servants, working together...” (1 Corinthians 3:9 NRSV)

Christianity is a communal faith through and through. While our relationship with God is very personal, it can only be lived out in the context of interdependent relationships with other followers. In fact, as Athol Gill notes: “There is no such thing as a solitary Christian.” We are called to live interconnected lives – with each other, in dependence upon God. Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 12 says it well:

“By means of his one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which *he* has the final say in everything.” (*The Message*)

A theology of “we”

It’s not surprising then, that everywhere we look in the New Testament there is, what Brian Dodd calls, “a theology of ‘we’”. Following Jesus means not only being joined to his other disciples, but seeking to work in partnership with each other, and of course with God.

In the gospels this expresses itself in the fact that Jesus forms a team (made up of a diverse and disparate group) and pours his life into these men and women, eventually entrusting them with the responsibility of his ongoing mission.

Team is also particularly evident in the writings of Paul. We could easily think of this great missionary leader of the early church as being a solo operator or lone ranger. But if we read carefully through the New Testament we see that the way Paul operated couldn’t be further from the strong, independent archetypal leader. Paul is a team leader and team player through and through. He regularly refers to his “co-workers” in the mission he is involved in. In fact, in the thirteen letters Paul writes, he refers to nearly one hundred co-workers or partners in person. That’s quite a large team!

So why does the New Testament have such an emphasis on working in partnership with others?

God’s nature – the partnership of the Trinity

Primarily, the prominence of working together so evident in the early church is built around the very nature of God. At the core of God’s nature is the ultimate team. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit relate and work in complete harmony with one another. They are a perfect community. The way they relate models for us what it means to be in relationship with one another.

The theological term that is often used to describe this is “*perichoresis*” – a Greek word meaning “mutual interpenetration”. This refers to the Trinity as being not three independent agents doing quite different things, but rather three co-equal persons within the Godhead who all have unique identities and roles, but who, in the same breath, cannot be separated from one another. This is because *who* they are and the work they do is inseparable from their relationship with the other members of the Trinity. For example, while the Father is primarily responsible for creation, he does not act independently. The Son and the Spirit are also intimately involved. So too, with the lead

the Son takes in the work of redemption and the initiative the Spirit takes in the work of sanctification.

As Alistair McGrath writes: “The concept of *perichoresis* allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two.”

This is the God we worship and serve – a community of three whose very nature and identity is so interconnected that operating ‘solo’ is unthinkable.

At the core of our faith is a God of “we”. The Trinitarian God invites us to join this team – serving as co-workers and partners with God, and with each other.

Co-workers

The Apostle Paul uses several words to refer to the people he works with, but the most frequent one is *synergos* – meaning co-workers. These people are both “co-workers” *with God* (see for example, 1 Cor 3:9 and 1 Thess 3:2) and co-workers *with Paul* (eg Romans 16:3 and Phil 2:25).

Synergos simply means “working together”. (‘*Syn*’ being a prefix meaning ‘with’, ‘united’ or ‘together’). This is the source of our word *synergy*, which according to the Oxford Concise Dictionary means the “interaction or co-operation of two or more organizations, substances or other agents, to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.”

As Brian Dodd notes:

“A famous illustration of this is the study done on two horses. The first one could pull ten thousand pounds on a sled behind. The second could pull fourteen thousand pounds. What would you think they could pull harnessed together in the same direction? Most people would guess something like twenty-four thousand pounds, but the answer is forty-nine thousand pounds! The sum is greater than a combination of the parts. Of course, there is a negative implication too. If the horses were allowed to pull in different directions, the total amount they could pull is less than what they could pull individually.”

This is God’s intention for us in church life. The Trinity is the ultimate in synergism. But we too can experience something of the fruit of this working together when we discover ways of valuing and channeling the various contributions of team members. The result is awe-inspiring. God takes the contributions of all the individual parts and weaves them into something much greater than the sum of each person’s individual work.

Partners

Another term the New Testament uses, - one which we are more familiar with – is the word *koinonia*. Often we translate this word “community” or “fellowship”.

Koinonia was a well used word in the Greek world. It referred to “having something in common with someone”.

However, the New Testament use of *koinonia* has an emphasis on **active participation** (having a share in something) rather than just being associated with someone or something.

Implicit in this ‘sharing in’ is the concept of partnership. Paul writes about various ways this active participation occurs – such as the sharing (*koinonia*) of Christ’s sufferings, the financial contribution (*koinonia*) of the churches to the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem, and the Philippians’ partnership (*koinonia*) in the gospel. In all of these cases, Paul challenges and affirms his churches to be **working** partners with himself, each other and, of course, God.

The building of such a shared community is clearly not insular. Nor is it an end in itself. Engaging in *koinonia* is sharing in the **mission** of the Church. It is outward-focused.

With this in mind, it’s intriguing to reflect briefly on our church family name - Christian Fellowship in Upper Hutt. We are a *koinonia* (fellowship) of Jesus followers in Upper Hutt. To be in ‘fellowship’ with one another is to be actively participating as partners in the life and mission of Jesus. Each of us is called to be a partner or co-worker in this mission. Our very name then, calls us to work together for a common cause – the kingdom of God.

Cultural challenges

Learning to work in team is a challenge for many of us. It doesn’t come naturally. This is particularly so because we live in such an individualistic culture and we often just carry this individualism over into our church experience.

Often the role models of “great Christian leaders” and “effective pastors” are of “strong” charismatic types who by the very force of their leadership, forge a path ahead for everyone else to follow. However, this is not the only way to ‘lead’ (nor necessarily the best way). Leaders who effectively build and coach teams can ultimately be more effective (and our wider culture is beginning to also recognize this).

In CFUH we are committed to growing and developing ways where ‘team’ is the normal experience of service and ministry. Leadership is responsible for harnessing and empowering individual contributions and ensuring that we are all pulling in the same direction.

In order to build (and value) team, “success” needs to be defined as much by **how** we get there, as by actually getting there. In this sense, “getting things done” in community is not as efficient as in more top-down, chain-of-command type organizations.

However, we believe working in team is ultimately more fruitful – both for what it produces in us and what we are able to achieve in partnership with God.

This does not minimize the value of individual giftings or initiatives; it’s just that when we exercise our God-given abilities in reference to (rather than independent of) others, our unique insights and enterprise can be maximized.

How might this call to partnership and team be expressed in CFUH?

Traditionally, many churches identify the committed among them by a formal membership. This generally involves some public declaration where the new members express their commitment to the church.

In principle, membership is a biblical concept. According to Paul, we are all ‘members’ of the Body of Christ. Just as a physical body has ‘members’ (hands, feet, organs, legs, eyes etc), so too as a metaphorical body, we are ‘members’, intimately knitted in to each other, in order to be the body of Christ.

This is a powerful and well-used metaphor. It not only describes the level of connectedness that should exist in a local expression of the body of Christ, but also points to all ‘members’ of the body working together, under the direction of the head (which is Christ).

Working together, then, is a natural implication of the way Paul uses the body metaphor.

However, sociologically when we think of ‘members’ these days (and ‘membership’) it generally refers to ‘membership of a club or society’. For example, “The ‘members’ of the golf club decided/voted to install a new sprinkler system.”

Frequently, being a ‘member’ infers:

- Paying dues/subs/fees in return for services (like using the club’s facilities)
- Voting rights regarding how the money gets spent, the club gets run etc, usually exercised in a thoroughly democratic fashion (i.e. a majority of the members voting to do something)
- A low or minimal level of commitment required in order to be one (evidenced by the fact that in most clubs or organizations, including many churches, you can be a member without committing much of your resources and energy to the mission of the club).
- Easy capacity to stop being a ‘member’ when you feel that it is no longer what you want to do/no longer have the time/become disenchanted with the running of the club etc.

The ‘club’ mentality has deeply impacted and influenced our understanding of ‘church’ in our culture.

Furthermore, it’s even more unhelpful because most ‘clubs’ exist for the primary benefit of their ‘members’. However, the church, to paraphrase a twentieth century theologian, “is one of the few organizations that exist primarily for the benefit of its non-members”. We belong to the Body, in order to serve the mandate or mission of the Body – which is to partner God in bringing about his kingdom.

Historically, CFUH has been very intentional in resisting the call to create a ‘membership’. Among other things, this has been fuelled by:

- A rejection of making the church a democracy
- A desire to avoid some of the problems noted above regarding what ‘membership’ often means
- A commitment to relational and covenantal, rather than institutional and ‘as-I-feel-like-it’ connectedness and involvement.

This intentionality paid huge dividends in the early years of CFUH. Overall, people expressed and lived out a higher level of commitment than most churches with formal memberships.

However, in more recent years, the strong culture of connectedness and ownership has been eroded. Some of this change has been due to the numerical growth of the fellowship.

Building ownership and commitment

Nevertheless, the eldership of CFUH are thoroughly committed to building a faith community where there is a strong sense of ownership from as many of those involved as possible.

We want CFUH to be a family where:

- The measure of a person's commitment to CFUH is viewed by how well they are knitted in relationally to others in the church, and the degree to which they are seeking to contribute to its life and mission (rather than how regularly they attend Sunday morning meetings).
- People are reluctant to leave CFUH because they are so much a part of the place relationally and because they know they play a real role in the life and mission of the church and would be sorely missed.
- People automatically take the initiative to welcome and extend hospitality to visitors and newcomers at our programmes (Sunday meetings, men's and women's events, etc).
- Areas of service are undertaken by teams of people, with leaders playing more of a facilitating and mentoring role.

Thinking of ourselves as partners and co-workers – with God and with each other, can assist us in building such ownership and commitment.

Partners make an investment and share in determining the particular shape and expression of God's call to us as a church. They use their time, gifts and energy for the good of the Body.

Co-workers actively participate in the life of the community. They work in team with each other to fulfil the mission of the church.

As a family, then, this is what we aspire to – a fellowship (*koinonia*), partnering each other and God, in His mission to the Upper Hutt community and beyond.