

Zionsville Fellowship

**Statement of
Belief and Practice**

**Membership at
Zionsville Fellowship**

**The Church
As a Community**

Mission Statement

Zionsville Fellowship is a non-denominational, evangelical church dedicated to fulfilling the two great scriptural mandates:

- The salvational mandate: by expanding the global church through preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and making disciples;
- The creational mandate: by transforming culture through educating, developing and equipping Christians to think, act and lead at all points where they engage the world.

(Eph. 4:3-6; Matt. 28:19-20; Gen. 1:26-28; Rom. 12:1-2)

Vision

The vision of Zionsville Fellowship involves commitment to the following:

Maintain our distinctives. Practice worship, body-building and outreach.

Authority of scripture. Teach the Bible for its application, encouraging the obedience of each follower of Christ in all areas of life.

Pastoral care. Shepherd each member of the church and assimilate new members by caring for them as they make their way into the body.

Discipleship. Continued commitment to our discipleship ministry for men, women and young people.

Christian worldview. Promote, teach and practice a Christian perspective and engagement with culture.

Missions. Impact the world through missions and help individuals within our church see their role in world discipleship.

Service. Provide diverse opportunities for service and volunteerism.

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STATEMENT OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE

The Church as a Community

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church; therefore, we depend upon Him for our life and direction. We believe the church is God's holy, indwelt people, and as such the church is:

- to worship Him,
- to be in community with one another,
- to extend His redemptive message to the world.

Therefore, Zionsville Fellowship is structured to promote these priorities. We emphasize the priesthood of the believer and encourage all members to a life of worship and service. This calls for a high degree of involvement of all the people in the church. We are committed to healthy relationships and see people as a priority. We believe in actively loving and caring for one another and, as a church, we seek to channel our time, money, personal resources, and energy into people. Consequently, before programs and facilities, we are interested in a substantial ministry to people. In order to accomplish this, our church life is simple and not highly structured. The Sunday morning meeting is informal with emphasis on worship,

teaching, and fellowship. House groups meet during the week to promote care, encouragement, and growth among believers (Acts 2:41-47, 4:32-35; Rom. 12:9-17; Gal. 6:2; Eph. 1:7-12, 22-23, 2:19-22, 3:20-21, 4:1-2, 32, 5:23; Col. 1:18, 3:12-17; Heb. 12:1-17; I Pet. 2:5-12).

Non-Denominational

Our church did not originate from any particular denomination, does not belong to any conference or denomination, and does not prescribe to any one denomination's doctrinal statement, covenant, or constitution.

Seeking the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, we wish to have association or fellowship with other groups of Christians or churches. We are open to opportunities for expressing our unity with the worldwide Body of Christ and working for His Kingdom (Eph. 4:3-6).

Evangelical

Webster's Dictionary defines an evangelical as one "emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual." At Zionsville Fellowship, we stand in this evangelical tradition.

The Scriptures

We believe the Bible is God's authoritative and inspired Word. It is without error in all its teaching, including creation, history, its own origins, and salvation. Christians are to submit to its divine authority, both individually and corporately, in all matters of belief and conduct (John 5:39; II Tim. 3:16-17; I Pet. 1:23-25; II Pet. 1:20-21).

The Trinity

We believe in the Trinity: that God is three Divine persons in One Nature, co-equal and co-existent. The Trinity is the basis of all reality and exists as infinite and personal. Because He is infinite, God is limitless in power, in presence, and in knowledge. He exists above and apart from all that He created. Because He is personal, He may be known by man (Matt. 3:16-17, 28:19-20; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:18, 14:8-20; II Cor. 13:14; I Pet. 1:1-2; Jude 21).

Jesus Christ

In lieu of the misunderstandings about the person of Jesus Christ, we would like to state clearly what we do believe regarding Him. To that end, we believe the following doctrines, which have their basis in the Bible, are essential:

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- (1) That Jesus Christ is the second Person of the Trinity; therefore, He has always been God.
 - (2) That He became a man through the virgin birth and yet did not cease to be fully God.
 - (3) That He led a perfectly sinless life, even while He was tempted in all respects like we are.
 - (4) That He performed supernatural miracles as acts of compassion and proofs of His deity.
 - (5) That He gave up His life as a sacrifice to God the Father in order to redeem man from sin and its consequences.
 - (6) That He rose again from the dead in order to show His victory over death.
 - (7) That He ascended into Heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God the Father.
 - (8) That he will come again at the end of the age to judge all mankind; to the righteous He will give eternal life with Him; to those who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be eternal separation from Him.

Personal Salvation

We believe that the salvation of an individual is a free gift of God received through repentance from sin and faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This salvation is expressed in a public confession

through baptism and participation in the church, the Body of Christ (John 1:12, 3:16-18, 10:28; Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 2:41; Eph. 1:13-14; I Pet. 1:3-5).

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

We believe baptism and the Lord's Supper were initiated by Christ and are intended for our participation in this age. They are, however, not to be regarded as means of salvation. We encourage all members to participate regularly at the Lord's Table (Matt. 1:16-17, 26:26-30, 28:19-20; Acts 2:37-41; I Cor. 11:23-34).

Government

We believe the government of the local church is carried out by a plural eldership which is committed to serving the congregation. These elders have authority under God; the people are devoted to their serving leadership. The elders meet regularly to study, pray, and administer the Word of God. Their primary function is the ministry of the Word and prayer. The deacons have a spiritual ministry to physical needs. They oversee the building and its use, and administer the church finances - including care of the poor, missionary giving, and the general finances of the church (I Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; Acts 6:1-7; I Pet. 5:1-3).

Spiritual Gifts

We believe each member of the body of Christ has at least one spiritual gift. Not all members have the same gifts, or the same ministries, or the same effects; but these gifts are given for the common good of the body. All members and gifts should work together. Spiritual gifts should be used to serve others and glorify God (Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12:1-11, 28-31; Eph. 4:7-13; I Pet. 4:10-11).

Hope

We believe in the hope that has always characterized the church of Jesus Christ. We look forward to the second coming of Christ in bodily form and our participation with Him in the Kingdom which He will fully establish (John 14:1-3; Acts 1:11; I Cor. 15:51-58; I Thess. 4:13-18; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 9:27-28; I Pet. 5:4).

Summary

We teach and hold to those doctrines which have their basis in the Scriptures, are in keeping with the creeds of the early church councils, and have been held in common by all communions of orthodox believers. We desire to be in the “mainstream” of what the church has always taught, both in doctrine and in practice. We are not interested in new or novel doctrines. Therefore, as concise statements of

our belief, we have chosen three creeds which are universally accepted by all orthodox churches. These are the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Creed.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Maker of Heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord;
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
Born of the virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried.
The third day He rose from the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost,
The holy catholic Church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting,
Amen.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign,
Maker of Heaven and earth,
And of all things visible and invisible;
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
The only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of the Father before all the ages,
Light of Light, true God of true God, Begotten,
not made, of one substance with the Father,
Through Whom all things were made;
Who for us men and for our salvation
Came down from the heavens,
And was made flesh of the Holy Spirit
in the virgin Mary, and became man,
And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
And suffered and was buried,
And rose again on the third day
According to the Scriptures,
And ascended into the heavens,
And sits on the right hand of the Father;
And comes again with glory
to judge the living and dead;
Of Whose kingdom there shall be no end;
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the life-giver
That proceeds from the Father
Who with the Father and the Son is
Worshipped together and glorified together,
Who spoke through the prophets:
In one holy, catholic and apostolic church;
We acknowledge one baptism unto remission of sins.
We look for a resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the age to come.
Amen.

THE CHALCEDONIAN CREED

Therefore, following the holy Fathers we all,
with one accord
teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
at once complete in Godhead and complete
in manhood, truly God and truly man,
consisting also of a reasonable soul and body;
of one essence with us as regards His manhood;
like us in all respects, apart from sin;
as regards His Godhead,
begotten of the Father before the ages,
for us men and for our salvation,
of Mary the virgin, the God-bearer;
one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten,
recognized in two natures,
without confusion, without change,
without division, without separation;
the distinction of natures
being in no way annulled by the union,
but rather the characteristics of each nature
being preserved
and coming together to form one person
and subsistence,
not as parted or separated into two persons,
but one and the same Son and
Only-begotten God the Word,
Lord Jesus Christ;
even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of Him,
and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us,
and the creed of the Fathers had handed down to us.

Our Response to the Current Social Issues and Moral Trends

Due to the erosion of morality in our culture, we affirm our commitment to Biblical morality as set forth specifically in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. We maintain the following:

- (1) The integrity of marriage and the family. We are dedicated to preserving the sanctity of the marriage covenant and we call for the care of the church, not divorce, as the solution to marriage difficulties.
- (2) The right to life for all human beings from conception until natural death. We believe abortion either for convenience or for birth control is murderous and sinful.
- (3) The unique creation of mankind as male and female. We believe homosexual practice is sin.

MEMBERSHIP AT ZIONSVILLE FELLOWSHIP

As a church we treat the idea of “membership” somewhat differently than most people do. The word has a different flavor for us, and our membership in Zionsville Fellowship is qualitatively different in our

minds from the memberships we hold in various organizations outside the church. The purpose of this brief explanation is to clarify the way we understand membership and to point out some of its implications.

What Membership Means

The common idea of the term membership in our society – the one we all begin with – has mostly to do with organizations or clubs. It seems to mean essentially that as a member, you pay your dues, receive certain benefits or services, vote in meetings, and have your name on a list somewhere.

That description of membership can be thought of as having two parts: *substantive* and *formal*. The substantive part of membership is the “stuff” that an organization is and deals with: its focus, meetings, activities, direction, and so on. The formal part is a list of names on a sheet of paper with “dues paid” scribbled or stamped next to them.

You become a member of a club with other like-minded individuals, and thus the substantive aspect of membership is crucial in your choice to join. Your tie-in might be a *common interest* (computers, horses, or ski trips) or a *social need* (as in “service clubs”). So to be a member, in our ordinary sense, means simply to have a formal tie to an organization.

One can be an official member without functioning as one. As a result, organizations generally distinguish between “active” and “inactive” members. People’s interests and involvements change, and often this results in them becoming disenchanted with, or less interested in, some of the organizations they once supported. Often they remain on the membership list, maintaining all the privileges of membership but not doing any of the work.

Unfortunately, American Christianity shares in this general idea of membership. It is not uncommon to find churches with membership lists running into the hundreds of names, which cannot fill three rows on a Sunday morning or come up with a quorum for a business meeting. They have large numbers of “inactive” members and, in reality, are merely religious-oriented social clubs. In short, because we have uncritically accepted the cultural idea that being a member can be merely a formal matter, we have fallen prey to the problems this idea brings with it. In this society you can hold memberships in organizations of like-minded individuals, and if your interests change you can become apathetic and still be a member.

This attitude seems to square poorly with the way the church is portrayed in the New Testament. If we, as a body, want to take seriously what “being membered” means, avoiding both the way our culture as a whole trivializes the idea and the way

the church has culturalized its membership, we need to work under a different understanding of what membership means.

The New Testament Church

Though the term membership has been used in this paper, it is important to point out that it is not used in the New Testament. Christians are called “members of the body of Christ.” They are “members of one another.” There is the idea of “membering,” but not of membership. When Paul speaks of this “membering,” his idea is not one of being part of an organization, but rather of being part of a body.

“God has combined the *members* of the body...so that there should be no divisions in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Cor. 12:24-26)

To be a member in the body of Christ is to be concretely involved in a common life with the other members of the body; it is to hurt when another

hurts and to be glad when another is blessed. It is to work together with the other members of the body in response to the desires of Christ the Head. Properly understood, the church does not have—cannot have—an “inactive members” list. One’s participation is not based upon common interests, but upon a common and shared life.

Everyone who has accepted Christ is a member of the universal body of Christ and acts out this commitment in the local church. God calls His people to be concretely membered in a local expression of the spiritual body of Christ. The local body seeks to be *a community* where the mutual ministry and common mission, which belong to the church, can take place practically. Being membered in a local body is rooted in being membered in the universal body of Christ; but the full experience in that universal body is impossible without participation in a local body. These two should never be separated, for each requires the other.

Oddly enough, we try to separate these two memberships. We become members of the universal body of Christ by faith alone, so our argument goes, which means that this membering cannot be contingent on membership in a concrete local body of Christ. Indeed, the argument is correct—as far as it goes. For our salvation rests solely on God’s gracious acceptance, and not on any work of ours including membership in a church. But the argument plays in the other meaning of “membership.” One can be

technically a member of a club without being a member functionally. What we generally mean by “church membership” can have this mere technical meaning. However, to be a member in a body means to be a vital part; in a body there are no parts which are members only technically, precisely because they would not be vitally involved with other members, and hence, not members at all.

That being a member in the body of Christ involves concrete relationships is illustrated in the church’s two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. One acts out his “membering” in the universal body of Christ by being baptized and eating from the common loaf of the supper. But these very actions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper assume that the universal participation we have in Christ is made concrete with some very specific people in a very specific place. You cannot baptize yourself, nor can you eat the supper of Christ alone. Thus, to be a member of the body of Christ means, at the same time, to be a member of a local body of people who call on Christ as their Lord and Head.

So, the universal church and the local church are not divided. They are seen as the same. There is one church which is expressed locally and universally. The universal church and local church are not two churches, but are one and the same. A high view of the church is to be maintained. Christians in **the** church are known by “local-ness.” Their fellow members and leaders are real, visible people.

Being a member in the New Testament Church was clear. Because there was one church—practicing the same doctrines, government, and sacraments—the requirements were the same in every place. The essentials for “being membered” in the church were **faith**, accompanied by **repentance**, resulting in public **confession** through **baptism** where one was “joined” to Christ and His body, the church. This “marriage” between the convert and the church was seen as a radical transfer from the “kingdom of darkness” to the “kingdom of light,” from the rule of Satan and the world to the kingship of Jesus Christ.

To take seriously being members of one another in the local church means to live out the calling God has on us as his people—to intertwine our lives: comforting, encouraging, and holding each other accountable so that we can grow up in Christ and fulfill our purpose in the world (Eph. 4:15-16). This is the way a body functions. This vision of being members of each other is very different from being members of a club or organization. Although a club might easily have an inactive member, a body cannot; in a body an inactive member is either dead or atrophied.

Celebrating Our Differences

Although membership in the various clubs and organizations of our society means being like-

mind with others, this cannot be simplistically true in the church. Although all believers are called to “be like-minded” in the sense that we all recognize Christ as Lord and seek to work out a common vision which God gives each local body (I Cor. 1:10), we do so in significantly diverse ways. Paul points out in I Corinthians 12:14-26 that the basis of our need for each other is not simply our similarities (which he emphasized in verses 4 through 13), but also our differences. It is precisely **because** the eye is not the ear that each needs the other. Rather than seeing ourselves as a collection of like-minded individuals, we need to see ourselves as unique parts of the body of Christ, where the function of each is important for the health of the body. In the church, our commonality is growing into Christ, maturing in the Christian faith, hope, and love; yet this common goal is supported by many different parts, making us the eyes, ears, legs, hands, etc., of the body of Christ.

When Paul speaks of the unity of the body, he does so in the context of the many gifts, kinds of service, and kinds of effects which that unity includes (I Cor. 12:4-6). Being membered in the body – in contrast to membership in an organization – emphasizes just this unique contribution by every member. Rather than making any specific issue or activity its principle of unity, the body glories in the variety of God’s work in his people and expects each to act in Christ’s special, personal calling for the good of the whole body. It is common sense to know that “if all were one part, where would the body be?” (I Cor.

12:12)

Summary: Membership in a church differs from club membership in two important ways. First, although you can be a member of a club purely in a formal way, this cannot be true in a body. Being a member of a body requires vital functioning in its common life. Second, membership in a club is focused on similarities (common interests and so forth), while membership in a body emphasizes diversities as well. In a body, it is important to be linked together in common, as different parts.

Our Modern Understanding Of Church Membership

How did our modern concept of church membership develop? The idea of formal membership is not taught in the New Testament. It is a form that developed through history.

Initially, rather than joining an organization, believers saw themselves entering a “new community,” the church. Baptism was the sign of this, and those who were baptized were recognized as members of this new society.

With the continued development of the institutional church, several things happened. During the time of the Emperor Constantine, there was the “marriage” of the church and state, in which church membership

elevated one's stature in the state. This church-state problem has continued into our present time.

Also, the development of creeds, councils, and catechisms added to the requirements for membership. With the advent of the Reformation and the development of different religious groups (i.e. Anabaptist, Lutheran, Calvinist, as well as Catholic), membership became necessary to define to which group a person belonged. Germany provided a model for determining a person's membership. The agreement reached in the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 provided that each German prince would determine the religious affiliation (Roman Catholic or Lutheran) for the territory he ruled. Actually, at this time and before, people were normally referred to as "adherents" rather than "members" of a particular church.

In the early 1600's congregational forms of government began to emerge, showing themselves mainly in New England. With this development, it was necessary to define who were the voting members—hence, formal membership.

Much of our understanding of being members in the church is colored by present cultural influences, but there is also a long history of development. These are powerful influences which impact both our understanding and behavior.

What Being Membered Implies

The implications of being a member, in our different sense of the word, are at the same time easy and

difficult to discuss. They are difficult because they cannot be summarized in a list of rules or obligations. Although the description in our STATEMENT OF BELIEF AND PRACTICE section talks about our expectations of each other in general terms, the specific form a person's function takes depends on his or her giftings and maturity. Remember, participation in a body emphasizes both the unique contribution of each member and the common goals and desires they share.

The difficulty of speaking about the implications of being members of one another is further complicated in our case by the fact that we encourage non-members (peripheral people and/or people with a cultural understanding of the church) to attend and become actively involved in almost all the meetings we have as a church. Our worship times are open, and we invite everyone present, as priests of the Lord, to participate. Nearly all our other activities (special meetings, family meetings, and small groups) are open as well.

But if the implications of being a member are difficult to specify, they are fairly easy to describe. To put it in a sentence: "If you are a member, *you* are responsible." When you are a member, the church is not something "out there" – something you "go to" and "come home from" – which can be spoken of in the abstract or criticized as if you were not involved. The members *are* the church because the church is a body, not a club. What it means to be a member is to be responsible for the life and health of the other members and to contribute to the growth of the body as a whole. To be blunt, if the church has a problem, and since you are

membered, it is *your* problem.

In brief, then, to be a member is to be responsible. Concretely, this means several things in our case.

First, it means to live as a “covenant person” in community with the other members of the local church. We have tried to express what it means to love and care for one another in the next section, THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY. The practice of community brings reality into the concepts that have been spoken of thus far in this paper. When people understand the provisions of the New Covenant they realize the significance of their relationships with others who are also recipients in this covenant. The New Covenant is a way of saying that we are Christians together and that we are members of one another in suffering and joy, and in worship and service.

Second, to be a member means to be concerned for and involved in the direction of the body as a whole. A body, after all, moves as a whole. The legs may do the actual locomotion, but the shoulder does not stay put because it has something else to do. It moves with the body. As a body, we seek to be responsive to God’s voice and to listen for it through every member, not just through a few leaders. Though the eldership is the form of government we believe the Lord has given, we try to hear God’s direction in prayer, His Word, in a message brought from a member or members of the congregation, and in our consensus process. All the members are responsible for taking serious, active roles

in these processes and living out the decisions arrived at by the elders.

Third, to be a member means to put your resources (spiritual and material) at the disposal of the Lord in the body. Because we are “committed to people as a priority,” we work at keeping our facilities overhead to a minimum. We keep our overhead low not so we can give less, but so we can give more to mission work and to human needs. Being a member means sharing in these things by committing time, effort, and money.

Fourth, to be a member means a willingness to be accountable about the important aspects of life. God calls us to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), and to “accept and obey the leaders who watch over our souls,” (Heb. 13:17). Being membered in the body means we have become interdependent. My life and my decisions affect you, and your life and decisions affect me. None of us “lives to himself.” We should be willing to care for and hold one another accountable in terms of service, moral behavior, and the effects our choices bring upon the body. It is difficult to give hard and fast rules about this process which is of critical importance to our life together as members of one body.

Fifth, to be a member means to be involved in the concrete activities of the body. We have defined the priorities of our church as **worship, body-building, and outreach**. Our church-life is structured to

support these priorities, and the Sunday morning meeting is informal with emphases on worship, teaching, and fellowship. House groups meet during the week to promote care, encouragement, and growth among their members. These times of **congregating** are important but we must not be known only for our meetings. There must also be **community**. Out of our “lives together” comes outreach, evangelism, discipleship, and the overall building of the body.

Becoming A Member

Churches like ours have what has been called an “informal” or “open” membership. This means one does not join in the customary way. This is because we believe New Testament church membership was more *functional, organic, and dynamic* rather than formal.

Rather than taking people through a series of classes or meetings to become members, we would rather ensure that people gain an understanding of what it means to be “members of one another” and enter the life of the church. One way to begin this process is through our Discovery Group which is repeated each spring and fall.

Our informal process is difficult to describe, for it basically amounts to “hanging out.” It is involving oneself in the lives of people in the church, sharing meals, projects, and all kinds of activities and discussions with them. In this process, the Spirit of God

works to intertwine lives, and makes our being “members of one another” come to life.

How You Fit In

This organic process of membering involves getting to know others in the body and opening yourself to be known by them. In order for people to make a significant commitment to you, and mean it, they need to have some personal sense that you are serious about wanting to be membered to them—and there is no other way to do this than by being together. There are all kinds of ways to do this: take the initiative and invite people for meals (and/or games), do things together, find or start a small group with which you can participate, and so on. The goal in spending time is not just to take part in activities, but to cultivate relationships with others that will produce understanding and trust.

A WARNING! You will not be able to do this with everyone—and you do not need to do so. You need to involve yourself with enough people so you become known in a general way to people in the church. The people you know more deeply will be able to communicate to others their confidence in you—and you will become a member without the “official” status ever taking place. (When a person understands this, he can begin to see how a formal or “official” membership actually takes away from truly becoming “membered,” because the membership list gives the illusion of being “membered.”)

Finally, expect this process to take about a year or so. It cannot and should not be rushed, because that is not the way relationships work. Time and nurture are needed to bring fullness into our lives together.

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY

The New Testament Concept

“The apostles conceived of the Christian life as a life that in its essence was community oriented. They understood God’s purpose in redemption to be the formation of a people, a corporate entity. They expected Christians to function as distinct communities in each geographical area, loving and caring for one another, united, able to live and act as a unit. To choose Christ was to choose to take up one’s place in the local community of Christians.

An individualistic, isolated Christian life was seen as an anomaly, abnormal. Normal Christian life expressed itself in concrete sharing of life and resources and collaboration in mission, under the authoritative guidance of the community’s elders.¹

Definition

Christian community may be defined as believers living together in the same locality with common goals, principles, and identity. A Christian community is a group of people who, corporately, are committed to becoming like Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). Operationally, community could be thought of as including those to whom we consider turning when we have personal needs or need assistance in ministry.

The Greek work, *Koinonia*, which gives some definition to the church, embodies concepts of partnership, sharing, fellowship, and communion. It is a wholistic concept, taking in all areas of one's life, and needs some structure in which to be expressed.

For the Christian, the church is the structure for experiencing community and calls the believer to a committed participation in its worship, instruction, mission, and into submission to its government.

The following Scriptures speak of these community aspects of the church: Acts 2:42, 44; 4:32-35; Rom. 12:10-13; 15:25, 26; II Cor. 8:1-4; Gal. 2:9, 10; Phil. 2:1-4; Heb. 10:32-34; 13:16-17; I Thess. 5:12-13; I Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-22.

Present Position of Society and the Church

People in our American culture have a deep sense of rootlessness – a sense of not belonging. Such statements as television’s *Roots* provided a commentary on this problem and caused many people to become interested in their past—its beginning and history. The alienation that people feel causes them to care less and less about each other, resulting in the individualism that has become the trademark of modern man. Individualistic thinking which results in “doing my own thing” is a prevailing attitude. Dr. Francis Schaeffer has pointed out that the present “world spirit” has led 20th century people into a lifestyle of personal peace and affluence. These he describes as “horrendous values.” Even man’s living environments are physically constructed to sustain isolation.

“Ralph Keyes in his 1973 book, *We the Lonely People*, says that above all else we Americans value mobility, privacy, and convenience. And it is these very traits that are at the source of our lack of community. Of these three, privacy is our most cherished value. But it has not always been this way. Keyes reminds us, ‘Privacy as an ideal, even as a concept, is relatively modern. Marshall McLuhan says it took the invention of print to tear man from his tribes and plant the dream of isolation in his brain. Historian Jacob Burckhardt says that before the Renaissance, Western man was barely aware of himself as an individual. Mostly he drew identity from membership in groups—family, tribe, church, guild.’”²

Unfortunately, this spirit of the world has reached into

the church. Christians, as well as non-Christians, have been affected, which indicates that the culture has influenced the church. Too many times our churches have become museums for loners, where people are programmed to avoid love of each other. People become membered theologically or institutionally but not practically. The loss of community in the church has affected our definition of the church, with several consequences.

One consequence is that people have turned to other institutions for community. These institutions are usually centered on common interests, such as singles' bars, ski clubs, country clubs, etc.

Opportunity for the Church

The church now has an opportunity to provide the best alternative for people.

"The Word of God speaks to us, His people, in detail about the practice of community relationships and commitments. It is short on institutional motions and long on loving, committed relationships. It is long on supporting basic human relationships: spouse, children, Christian brothers and sisters, parents, and neighbors. It is long on caring. It is long on sharing our homes, resources, and time. It is long on our encouraging one another and thinking well of one another. The sphere of human relationships is the laboratory of God. It is where Christians express sanctification, Godly living, loving relationships, mental and emotional health, and

ministry in terms of care and witness.”³

Basis For Community

Our belief in community goes beyond the fact that it is needed or would be a “neat” thing to do.

Community is based upon our view of truth. We see the Trinity as our model. The Trinity consists of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in loving and caring relationship. Even before man was created and before the heavens and earth were created, there was community in the Trinity. One of the key elements in the Trinity was and is unity. John 17:21-26 records our Lord’s desire that the unity in the church be as the unity in the Godhead.

Community is also based upon a correct view of ourselves. We are God’s image-bearers who should reflect His character in all areas of life. The Scriptures teach us that we are worthy objects of His love; therefore, we can have a high regard and love for one another. Respect and care for human beings created in the image of God is a logical conclusion to knowing God and respecting His creation. Even though the image of God in man has been marred by sin, he is still created in the image of God with significant value. It is right, then to “do good to all men especially those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). The restoration of our spiritual, intellectual, physical, moral, and social capabilities begins with faith in Christ and continues with our

living the new life in the church.

Commitment is essential to community. God has expressed His commitment to us and we are to respond in commitment to Him and to one another. Commitment is a hard word in a rootless society, but a call for commitment must go forth. This call should include the following:

- (1) Individual commitment to the Lordship of Christ (Rom. 10:9-10).
- (2) Individual commitment to a body of believers (Acts 2:42-47).
- (3) Corporate commitment to Christ's Lordship (Rom. 15:5-6; I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2; Col. 2:19).
- (4) Corporate commitment to the individual (I Cor. 12:24-26; I Thess. 2:7-12).

The practice of community is not on the basis of convenience, but is a matter of priority. It will call for sacrifices. Natural and spiritual gifts should be dedicated for use in building the community. Making this kind of life in the church a priority will bring peace and comfort to the essential areas of life—such as relationships between friends, husbands and wives, and other family members. As a matter of fact, this will strengthen the family as each member learns his proper role and parents do not become bogged down in work. Mutual commitment to one another and “family ties” in the Spirit **will provide protection** for us (Matt. 18:15-17;

Gal. 6:1-2; II Thess. 3:15; I Tim. 5; James 5:19-20).

Francis Schaeffer has pointed out that there needs to be orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community. Biblically the two are inseparable. Culturally we have separated them. We seem to be able to live lives apart from what we say we believe. This we should not allow for ourselves or for those under our care. We must have the courage to bring them together for the glory of God.

Practicing Community

Community is not adequately expressed in large groups. Smallness is necessary so everyone is known and no one can hide. This provides the rationale for home-sized groups meeting regularly. In this setting, meetings should be simple so people do not feel that they have to be professionally trained church workers to have enough confidence to function. Out of this context ongoing relationships can be developed. We must repent of the “going to church” mentality and the idea that the church is a building or organization. The Scriptures make it clear that people indwelt by the Spirit of God are the church. The church happens 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Responsibilities should be distributed among all the members according to their gifts, abilities, and callings. The circle of the committed should be called

forth to function. Leaders, rather than qualifying on the basis of social, professional, and financial status, need to be mature, Spirit-filled people. Others, besides the professionally trained, must be depended upon to practice community. Sophisticated procedures and formalities may have to be sacrificed if the people are to function.

The community is the place where spiritual gifts can be expressed most properly. The gifts become meaningless and confusing with a “meeting mentality.” The gifts of the Spirit are for real living and not just for religious services. They are for counsel, direction, and service as well as for worship and praise. They are to function in beauty and order, reflecting God’s character, serving Him and His people. In order for this to occur, they need to operate in accountability to the community. Functioning individualistically and outside the church will usually cause confusion and disorder.

The church—God’s community—is where His government is found and experienced. His plan is not abstract and theoretical, but it is practical and real. In the church we talk “Kingdom talk” because we see His reign as real and actually present. His authority is to be translated into real life situations. Therefore, the community of believers has recognized leadership. Locally, the elders are God’s delegated authority. They manage, shepherd, and give guidance to the community. Their ministry is to be marked by service as they follow the example of Jesus’ servanthood (Mark 10:42-45). Without leaders

who serve, there can be no sustained community. With a “sharp leader” there can be good meetings, but it takes more than a sharp leader to have community. This is why an eldership—overseeing, modeling, coordinating, caring for, and stimulating community—is necessary among God’s people. The church needs to have a “community mentality” and this happens with leadership that understands and is committed to community.

Community, if it is practical, implies geographical closeness. But community is not synonymous with communes. Private ownership is not denied in the Bible. Some people hold back when they hear about community, thinking it means some kind of communal experience. The results are that they get cemented in their secularized forms and functions.

Community will call for one’s time, money, and energy. This kind of commitment cannot be based on convenience. We must see that all our possessions belong to the Lord and are used for His glory. This kind of thinking will challenge modern life and living standards. It will cut across the grain of those who work 60 or 70 hours a week (or more!). There may be some professions Christians should consider not going into because of time commitment or ethical questions. More hospitality and associations with the weak and poor will be required. We should feel the freedom to call each other for help as true brother and sister relationships are developed.

Moving Into Community

Pastoral goals should include the development of Christian community. A committed, serving leadership should be an example of community to the flock. Potential leaders should be developed to broaden the base of community.

Community should be developed around those who demonstrate commitment, and others will become committed as they see “life in action.” Community should not be reduced to the “lowest common denominator,” either in terms of standards or people. If we are always waiting to commit ourselves to one another because certain persons are not ready, community will not happen. Those who understand the church in terms of community should begin to practice it as best they can in obedience to Christ with the understanding that community cannot be legislated.

Deliberately schedule community activities and allow for spontaneity. There needs to be form and freedom in our life together. Tightly structured meetings or community activities will squeeze out life. Completely spontaneous events will lack order and result in confusion. The leadership will have to be sensitive and responsive at this point.

Start with those believers who understand and are

committed to community. Get to know your neighbors; they are potential new members for the Kingdom of God. Bringing them into the life of the Christian community can be the dynamic that could lead to their conversions. They could become your new brothers and sisters in the church.

Be careful about moving frequently. Mobility can be destructive to community. It has been easy for Christians to fall into the patterns of our secular world, which has little regard for community or continuity. Present relationships are often sacrificed for another job, house, or new pleasure.

As much as possible, develop a simple style of living. A life packed full will have difficulty making community practical. Obviously, there are circumstances beyond our control; but where we have opportunity, we ought to be sure we are in control and that we are not being controlled by our own busyness. Loving and caring take time, and we need to be sure our lifestyles allow for these essentials of Christian community.

Sometimes one needs to be alone, and this should be respected and encouraged. On the other hand, we need to consider what we can do with others. There are always opportunities for deepening relationships. Whether shopping, painting a house, helping someone move, working in a yard, or just sitting together talking, community can be experienced.

“These communities cannot be created by a document or administrative decision or by assigning a certain number of personnel. They also cannot be mass-produced. It takes time, deep dedication, the significant help of the Holy Spirit, and the right combination of gifts and abilities.”⁴

END NOTES

¹ Martin, Ralph C., quoted in Pastoral Renewal, May 1982, Vol. 6, No. 11, pp. 82, 83

² Smith, David W., The Friendless American Male, 1983, p. 143

³ Nethery, Ray, Grace Haven Farm newsletter

⁴ Pastoral Renewal, May 1982, p.85

