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(not used).

Community--A.F. Kreider

For the past several centuries, most of us in this country have been individualists. Of course, we have recognized that we were members of certain groups that were larger than ourselves. We have been Smiths, not Joneses; we have been Anglicans, not Methodists; we have been workers, not the management; we have been "us" rather than "them." But despite this, most of us have felt that we have achieved what we have in life, not because of our membership in a group, but because of our own efforts. We have known that we must "pull ourselves not our neighbours up by our own bootstraps." We have recognized that "God helps those who help themselves and not those who help their brothers and sisters ." And as a result, we have become hard. Our survival has depended upon our appearance of competence, adequacy, and self-sufficiency.

We have often not been free to be fully ourselves even when we are at home with our families. For it is ^{difficult} ~~hard~~ for us suddenly to cast off the larger patterns of our lives. How can we be lovingly vulnerable in our dealings with those who are closest to us when we are thrustingly self-protective all of the rest of the time. Thus our family life is often every bit as brittle and power-obsessed as our professional life is.

The same is true of our church life. If we are observant, we associate with other Christian believers for at least one hour per week. Yet in church we sit on pews, and scatter ourselves out at judicious intervals throughout the church building. We come to meet God, not eachother. Our contacts with eachother are correct and formal. Where in society do we use Christian names less than we do in church? And if we have problems, we want God to know about them, not our fellow worshippers who might doubt our respectability and even our faith if they knew what was troubling us.

The Bible is unsympathetic to this approach to life. To be sure, it does view each of us as persons of infinite individual worth. It emphasizes that each one of us is accountable to God for our own faith and behaviour. But the Bible then places us firmly in ~~community~~ company with other believers--in community. ~~The~~ Its concerns are thus not primarily with the problems of "individual Christians." It is concerned, rather, first with the way in which we Christians relate to eachother, and second with the relationships which we have with those who are not Christians.

Let us begin with the first of these concerns, with the relationships that we Christians have with one another. Let us begin with the Church. The Bible does not view the Church as a powerful hierarchy, or as collection of ecclesiastical buildings. The Church is people; it is us. We are knit

together into a new community which is larger than any of us.

The Bible has many evocative, collective words which describe what the Church is, what we are--race, nation, people, household, family, priesthood. But in many ways the richest word that the Bible uses for the Church is fellowship. This word (koinonia in Greek) meant many things to the Bible's first readers. It brought to mind common business enterprise, rich and intimate friendship, and a ~~complete~~ willingness to share lives and possessions with others. According to St. John (I Jn. 1:6-7), if we have fellowship ^(koinonia) with God that is real, we will have genuine fellowship with each other as well. For the early Christians, there was therefore no such thing as an individualistic faith. To confess that Jesus was Lord meant that one was entering into a new society, a new family, a new household. The result was fellowship, in which the early Christians discovered a new way of living.

What did--and does--this mean in practice? It means that the Church must be a community of honesty. This is not simply a matter of biting my tongue when I am tempted to tell a tall one. Instead, it means that all of us must "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). It requires that we behave towards each other in a way that is candid, open, and vulnerable. It demands that we allow others to see us as we really are. When our common life is genuinely based on transparent truthfulness, then we are able to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). This can happen in ways that are quite un-superficial, in the most basic areas of life. When I know that others are being truthful about their financial worries, I can feel free to seek counsel about my troubled marriage or about the discrimination that I am experiencing. And then I--the harried individual--can receive the help and healing which God wants to give me through the Church (Jas. 5:16).

Fellowship also means that the Church must be a community of economic sharing. The New Testament repeatedly speaks about the sharing of possessions (e.g., Acts 4:32-35; Heb. 13:16; I Jn. 3:16-18). In one passage (II Cor. 8:14), St. Paul even admonishes the Corinthian believers to a life of "equality." Why this emphasis? Because the biblical writers recognized that disparities of wealth not only reflect the misery of the poor; they also act as a barrier to fellowship (Jas. 2:1-7, 15-16). Our churches today are far more divided by property and possessions than those of the early Christians were. Community is impossible when my comfortable circumstances make others uncomfortable, or when my unwillingness to share

keeps other Christians poor. The early Christians knew the liberating unity which came when they "shared everything with their brother and called nothing their own" (Didache 4:8). Ex-individualists are finding this true today as well. Where Christians are struggling to find practical ways to redistribute their wealth, new spiritual life and true fellowship are appearing.

Such fellowship will do much to make the Church what God intends it to be--the working exhibit of his way on earth. But the Church dare not exist simply for the benefit of believers. The community of honesty and sharing must be the servant of all. Of whom? In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-36), Jesus refused to say precisely who our neighbour is. But his command to his followers was unmistakable: be a neighbour. Be a neighbour even when it is demanding or inconvenient to be one. Why? Because in being a neighbour we are imitating God, who loves us when we were in desperate need (Eph. 5:1). As one Church Father put it (Ep. Diogn. 10:6), "If a man takes his neighbour's burden on himself, and in whatever respect he is superior is willing to benefit the other, then this man is an imitator of God." Our loving service must therefore not only flow to our brothers and sisters within the Christian fellowship. It must also be at the disposal of "all men" (Gal. 6:10) throughout the larger communities of which we are a part. This service will lead us into political action. It will also require participation in the ~~welfare~~ agencies of the welfare state, which for all their achievements ignore many needs and rarely act with love. And it will require active advocacy of the causes of the disadvantaged and the oppressed, especially of "the aliens among you" for whom God has a particular concern (Deut. 10:18).

This is a strenuous assignment for us Christians. In response to it, increasing numbers of us are committing ourselves to alternative forms of life-style, especially to life in intentional communities. In order to conserve scarce resources of food and housing; in order to develop the close fellowship with others that we crave in a depersonalized world; in order to emulate the pattern of the apostolic church; in order to minister to the needy and express solidarity with the oppressed--for many reasons Christians today are selling their individual houses and are moving into shared accommodation. Many of these communities have been in existence for a number of years. No longer are they in any sense "experimental." From their substantial body of experience they are able to provide confirmation that this is a uniquely ~~fruitful~~ viable form of living for

Christians in the waning years of the Twentieth Century. Others of us are not quite ready to commit our lives and families to intentional community. But we also are discovering that the planned sharing among a number of individuals and households can be a fruitful step in the right direction. Why should utensils (e.g., cassette recorders), tools (e.g., lawnmowers), and cars serve one family only? We are also learning the value of regular meetings with friends and neighbours for prayer and action.

The only motive that can make any of this work, of course, is love. Love is the antithesis of fear (I Cor. 13:18). Fear breeds self-protectiveness; love enables self-sacrifice. Fear prevents fellowship; love creates community. Fear concentrates the attention of individuals upon themselves--it makes them individualists; love turns our gaze away from ourselves to others. "To crown all," says St. Paul (Col. 3:14), "there must be love, to bind all together and to complete the whole."

Let us rediscover the profound truth, that God helps those who help each other. Together let us affirm that community is the will of God, for us in our time. And let us seek the gift of his love, which alone can enable it.