

COME AND COMMIT TO THE BODY OF CHRIST
Ephesians 4:11-16
First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana
February 8, 2009
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My mother remarried after my father's death. Her second husband, John, was a long-time friend who had also lost his spouse. John had a very distinct personality. A gregarious sort, he filled the room with his laughter and loud, animated voice. After living most of his life in Chicago, John thrived in the small town of Paxton, where he quickly became known and eagerly joined in the social networks. John's wallet was a thing to behold. It was so thick that he had to loop several rubber bands around it so that it would close and he could shove it into his pocket. I'd say it was at least two inches thick. Now the thickness wasn't because John carried a lot of cash. No, John's wallet was crammed with membership cards and other pieces of identification. Unlike some of us, John was a joiner of organizations. He supported many causes and readily became affiliated with them. Historical societies, train museums, service clubs, veterans groups, the Shriners, the list could go on and on. Seeing his wallet, I wondered, how could he keep track of it all? What did some of those memberships mean beyond a piece of paper and discounted admission?

How different membership in the Body of Christ is meant to be! Yes, names are inscribed in a book (hold up the FMC ledger) and the formalities of membership play a role in our connections to the larger denominational and global church network. But what is truly important is how the covenant commitment crystallizes our discipleship and draws us closer to Christ through the gathered community.

Leaving aside the tradition of desert hermits, Christianity is not for solo believers. The Christian faith is experienced and expressed through relationships, through belonging, to God and to God's people.

We pledge our allegiance to Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. And we commit to being part of a community that strives to imitate Jesus and show the face of Christ to the world.

When a person presents themselves for baptism, the questions we ask address both dimensions of the commitment--to Christ and to the faith community. When already-baptized believers present themselves for membership, as today, the questions likewise acknowledge these two dimensions. We have the privilege of reaffirming our baptismal vows and then declaring our intention to be accountable to the community and support the church's mission. Sometimes, as when I joined FMC last May, the baptismal covenant renewal is more elaborate, or the person elects to be re-baptized.

Today, we celebrate 45 years of corporate life at First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana and today, we celebrate the public commitments of six new members. We *remember* the past with thanksgiving and we look to a vital future of *re-mem-bering*—welcoming new members and seeing our community continue to evolve as the Spirit works in and through us.

The word "member" comes from the Latin "membrum," which means "limb, member of the body, part." The apostle Paul was fond of using the image of the "body of Christ" to describe the church. He no doubt appropriated the image from ancient Greek rhetoric, which drew upon the human body to describe the ideal of societal unity. The early church congregations to which Paul was writing evidenced much diversity of background and lifestyle and approaches to worship. Certain that they were being

called to embody the “one new humanity” that Christ made possible by his proclamation of peace (Ephesians 2), Paul emphasized the inter-connectedness and mutual dependency of the church body:

Romans 12:4-5: For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

1 Cor 12:20 & 26-27:

²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

As we hear in today’s passage from Ephesians chapter 4, these relationships are organic; they change and grow as a living body does. Verse 13: “We, the saints, are to build up the body of Christ, until we become “a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ's full stature.”

Maturing in Christ is the project of the covenant community. Many diverse individuals, many gifts and talents, are needed if “we” are to become “a mature person.” Together, we discern and resist the false idols of the world. Together, we study and reject false teachings. Together, we offer encouragement and support for the countercultural path of peacemaking. Together, we learn unselfish love and practice peacemaking.

Today’s scripture passage concludes with this marvelous description (4:15-16):

¹⁵ practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. ¹⁶ From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love.

What a wonderful prospect! To grow closer to Christ. To experience Christ growing in us. To see love grow, as we observe Jesus’ command to love one another. For those of us who name Jesus Lord, there can be no affiliation more attractive, more meaningful, more vital!

Throughout its 500 year existence, the Anabaptist tradition has boldly said that Christians are to imitate Christ. *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 9: “The church, the body of Christ, is called to become ever more like Jesus Christ, its head, in its worship, ministry, witness, mutual love and care, and the ordering of its common life.”

No doubt some of you are thinking -- that all sounds good, Janet. And we heard compelling testimonies from our new members. But, face it. The church is flawed as the humans who populate it are flawed. The church is often slow to act and has left much hurt and lingering injustices in its wake. Don’t make the church better than it is.

Amen, I say back to you.

One reason people resist joining a church is because over the centuries “The Church” has performed outrageous, inhumane acts in the name of religion. Also, the contemporary church often seems hypocritical and too easily compromised by the powers that be. As a young adult, I myself turned skeptical for these and other reasons, including how the Gospel teachings were interpreted in the mainline traditions with which I was then familiar.

But like Kathleen Norris, I now see the church with more nuanced eyes. In her essay collection *Amazing Grace*, Norris writes:

“The church is still a sinful institution,’ a Benedictine monk wrote to me when I was struggling over whether or not to join a church. “How could it be otherwise?” he asked, and I was startled into a recognition of simple truth. The church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the body of Christ” (NY: Riverhead Books, 1998, p. 273).

The Mennonite Church acknowledges this inherent tension. Quoting again from article 9 of our confession of faith: “The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God, while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus is constant need of repentance.”

The Bible always brings us back to the *ekklesia*, the assembly of believers, and to the headship of Christ. With all of its human imperfections, this is the vehicle God has given us for growing in faith, equipping for discipleship and mission, and making Christ visible before the watching world until Christ comes again. God intends for us to love and care for the church, the collective body, as we love and care for her individual members. This I know with as much certainty as I know God’s Spirit at work in my life.

We are in an era where institutional thinking and practice have waned and the consequences are not pretty. As David Brooks points out in a recent *New York Times* column (“What Life Asks of Us,” January 27, 2009), “Lack of institutional awareness has bred cynicism and undermined habits of behavior. Bankers, for example, used to have a code that made them a bit stodgy and which held them up for ridicule in movies like ‘Mary Poppins.’ But the banker’s code has eroded, and the result was not liberation but self-destruction.” Everyone, but especially our children and youth, need to see us model serious commitments to the commonweal.

If you haven’t, for whatever reasons, yet made a commitment to the body of Christ that is FMC, please pray about it. Pull any membership card from *your* billfold or drawer and ask how its benefits compare with tending the most significant relationships of your life.

Our congregational mission says we are “becoming a community through which God’s healing and hope can flow to the world.” The phrase “*becoming* a community” signals that we are in process with an ambitious agenda only realizable with God’s grace. Like the church at Ephesus, we are to carry on – to develop and mature further, so all of us come to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God (v. 13), so we grow up in every way into Christ, the head (v. 15).

As we mark our 45th anniversary, we naturally look ahead to the milestone of half a century. No doubt a new congregational history will be commissioned. More scrapbooks will be compiled documenting people, events, and special memories (by the way, be sure to check out some great old pictures on the tables in the fellowship hall during coffee hour this morning).

And how we will *be* in five years? Let’s imagine the next five years as a time of deepening unity in Christ. We are a congregation that studies well together, shares well together, prays well together,

sings well together, practices generosity well together, does service projects well together, and laughs well together--I expect to find out more about that this Saturday at MennoNite!

Let's move forward by practicing truth in love at an even deeper level: Witnessing as a diverse body committed to agreeing and disagreeing in love. Making visible God's healing and hope. Seeing our shared bond of peace (Eph 4:3) grow into a strong beacon for those seeking the Gospel of Peace.

"Practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. ¹⁶ From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

Amen