QUADRENNIAL STUDY GUIDE

THE FREEDOM CHURCH: A MOVEMENT EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

STRENGTHENING OUR FELLOWSHIPS
SERVING OUR FLOCK
SHARING OUR FAITH
SECURING OUR FUTURE

ZION

THE AME ZION CHURCH
The Freedom Church
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The Foreword
It is without question that our churches, our congregations, are experiencing a decline in membership, a decline in revenue, a decline in committed disciples, and a decline in our mission and our ministry. The worst thing we can do is to act as if everything is fine and continue to do what we have always done. At this point, it is difficult to determine how we arrived in such a state. Nonetheless, the church is unhealthy, and it is imperative that we intentionally employ the necessary efforts to Strengthen Our Fellowships.

Is it possible that the church (the fellowship of believers) has experienced some kind of malady which has caused the church to appear to be paralyzed? The mission and the ministry of the church are still clear, but it seems difficult for many congregations to perform. Most of the efforts we make to fulfill the mission, to build the kingdom or to finance the various ministries are impeded with statements that say, “We are not able.” Such statements are made by people who have experienced some kind of paralysis or have been diagnosed with severe arthritis. If we continue to proclaim that we are unable to perform the mission and ministry for which we have been called to do, we will continue to decline; and eventually as a people of faith, have a faith that is without works. Of course, the scriptures tell us that such a faith is dead.

When most people experience a disabling condition such as paralysis or a heart attack, the first thing that is done to save them is to stabilize their condition. Efforts are made to discover the cause of the paralysis or the heart attack. The patient is informed of their condition and are treated for the malady immediately. The proper medication and therapy are scheduled to restore them to better health. Normally the patient is informed that they will have to change their diets and are encouraged to engage in certain new exercises. Everything that is done to restore the health of the patient is an intentional act. If we are to Strengthen Our Fellowships, our efforts in teaching, preaching and ministry must be intentional and not haphazardly done. We must help people understand that as the church of God, we have been chosen to connect to God. What we do is not about us. It is about a community of believers, a household of faith, a fellowship of believers moving together with God - changing people, changing places, changing conditions and circumstances for the good of the kingdom. Our efforts to stabilize our fellowships must be directed to the development of our faith in the God that has brought us through all of the difficulties of this life. No church, no congregation, no ministry can exist without faith in the God that has and will sustain us. As we seek to Strengthen Our Fellowship as leaders, pastors, preachers, and teachers, we must commit ourselves to a faith that will challenge our congregations to trust God and each other, review our practices, renew our approach to ministry and restore our commitment to win souls for Christ.

Board of Bishops
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Inc.
Part I: The Foundations of Fellowship

September 2020

Fellowship and the Experience of Pentecost

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

Introduction

There can be no discussion of the fellowship of the church without first having a discussion of Pentecost. It is unfortunate that most churches do not make more of the celebration of Pentecost since it is so vital in the history and life of the church. In this lesson, we will retell the story of Pentecost and explore its formation of the church as we know it.

The Promise of Pentecost

The day of Pentecost happened sometime after Jesus' ascension to heaven. The church as we know it did not yet exist. There were a collective of believers in Jerusalem and throughout the surrounding areas who were made up of the apostles, other disciples, and the people who had experienced Jesus' teachings, signs, and wonders. Although Jesus had become quite popular due to the miracles he performed and how he taught with authority, some of these same people went from crying "Hosanna, in the highest!" as he entered Jerusalem (Palm Sunday) to crying "Crucify Him!" just days later (Good Friday). But after his resurrection what would happen? What else was there to do?

The scripture says that Jesus showed himself to his disciples and true followers during the time between his resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:3). More importantly, during that time, he spoke again about the coming of the Holy Spirit, promising that they would be baptized by the Spirit in a short while (Acts 1:5). Even more, this coming was "a promise of the Father" that they should wait for (Acts 1:4). All of this really set the stage for the coming of the Spirit. It is important to note, though, that Pentecost does not represent the creation or birth of the Spirit. That would violate our beliefs about the Trinity and a host of other theological matters. Moreover, the scriptures (both Old Testament and the Gospels) speak to the presence and activeness of the Holy Spirit long before the moment of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has always been at work within people in the world. Pentecost is the moment when God’s Spirit finally comes to birth and activates the church to go forth and fulfill the mission of God. It is the birth of the church and the beginning of our fellowship. Before the believers could do anything or figure out how to move forward after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, they needed the power of the Spirit!
The Purpose and Power of Pentecost
They were all together, on one accord, waiting patiently for God’s promise of the gift of the Spirit. Then without notice, the Holy Spirit breaks into their space and manifests in an undeniable, unexpected, and life-changing way. This moment, this arrival of the Spirit initiates a powerful movement where the followers of Christ transform into a body, a movement, a fellowship. They were not just several people who sympathized with Jesus or even individually believed he was the Son of God, they were now endowed with God’s Spirit and empowered to fulfill the mission of God on Earth. They were now the church, a new being that had both purpose and power. Their speaking in foreign tongues was the outward manifestation and confirmation that God had made this happen because it was the fulfillment of the prophecy of the prophet Joel (Acts 2:14-21).

Now that the church had been baptized by the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised (Acts 1:5), they were ready and prepared to take Jesus’ message all around Jerusalem and ultimately around the world. They were a small group but began to grow by leaps and bounds as they preached, taught, and performed miracles and signs. Things had certainly changed. They were no longer just a group of random people following Jesus during their time in the incubator - time of learning, growing, and coming to believe. Seeing Jesus crucified, buried, and resurrected and then ascend to heaven, it was finally time for them to pick up the mantle and take his message to the ends of the Earth. And the fact that they were all together was symbolic of their being a unit, a body, a fellowship. Nothing happened until they were altogether and on one accord.

Pentecost in the Present
The Church of today has so much to gain from studying the Acts Chapter 2 Church and Pentecost. Just like them, we have stood through some very challenging and traumatic times, but we have also overcome a lot just as they did. We have seen the incredible power of God at work amongst us, and there is still an overwhelming amount of work for us ahead. The most important thing we have in common with the Acts Chapter 2 Church is we have received God’s Spirit as well, and we have been empowered through the Spirit to transform the world.

This begs the question, what does carrying out God’s mission on Earth look like today? We know that we are called to preach and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and make disciples, but what are the complexities and challenges of doing so in contemporary times? More importantly, are we willing to wait for the Spirit to move us into meaningful ministry and action? Certainly, we know the world is hurting and broken and in need of healing, justice, freedom, and salvation.

Practical Applications
1. Host a teaching series on Pentecost that will explain its theological foundations and liturgical applications. The purpose of this is to educate the congregation on the meaning of Pentecost and to get them excited about embracing the power of Pentecost today. Pentecost really is a significant day in the liturgical year, but we don’t really attend to it. Celebrating Pentecost can really make a difference in the energy of the people. Studying the book of Acts, while constantly tying its stories back to Pentecost, would be a great way to do this. Be sure that you really explain Easter Season (the 50 days between Easter and Pentecost) and Pentecost as the culmination of Easter Season.
2. Celebrate Pentecost more festively, especially in worship! It is essentially the church’s birthday, so make it a big deal! Shape a liturgy for Pentecost Sunday that really allows people to praise God for the gift of the Spirit and challenges and energizes them to really be the church in the world. Be as creative and innovative in that worship experience as you can! The purpose is to help the people believe that they can really do amazing things in the community as empowered by the Spirit, just like the early church did. Since Pentecost is the culmination of the Easter Season (Eastertide) it might be good to fully celebrate the season and slowly build toward Pentecost. Sermons can follow the texts of Easter Season and Pentecost accordingly.

3. Make time leading up to Pentecost Sunday for the church to go through an exercise of praying for the vision of the new church year. This would be symbolic of the period of time the early church waited on the arrival of the Spirit. This would be a period of discernment, waiting for clarity from God on how to approach ministry and what to do practically that year. Again, creativity here is encouraged. Make it intergenerational.

4. Brainstorm other creative ways to experience Pentecost. Whatever you do, get the people excited about it. An experience of Pentecost has so much potential to motivate us in new and refreshing ways.

Closing Prayer

Powerful God,

Thank you for choosing your church to go forth in the world and share the good news of Jesus Christ. And thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit to lead and guide us in that mission. Remove our fears and commitment to our comforts so that we may go boldly into our communities to share your message of peace, love, forgiveness, hope, justice, and salvation. Send your Pentecost on us today; may we be forever moved and empowered by your Spirit. Amen.
Achieving Unity in Our Fellowship

October 2020

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; He gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended[a] into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:1-16 (NRSV)

Introduction

Being unified through God’s Spirit during moments of radical worship and praise is one thing but staying unified in the process of actually doing the work of God is quite another. We know that unity is an area where we are often greatly challenged. How do we stay together and work and move as a body? How do we manage personality differences or philosophical disagreements? These kinds of things have the potential to greatly disrupt the fellowship of the church or to strengthen it. Let’s explore the scripture to find direction and tools for staying unified, even when it is difficult.

Embrace Divergent Perspectives and Expect Conflict

The scripture is very clear that there is great diversity in the body of Christ. Though primarily discussing spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12 gives us insight into the uniqueness of the members of the body. We are all quite different and bring different perspectives on just about any matter. This means we ought to expect differences and not be bothered when others do not agree with us. If you look closely at the text it shows that this great diversity we have is by God’s design. It is no accident that we sometimes strongly disagree. How can we not? Each of us have had different life experiences, backgrounds, and a unique life story carefully crafted by God. This will make for tremendous variety in our thinking and outlooks, though we may also share a lot in common.
The challenge, ultimately, is to embrace the places where we differ and figure out how to use them as strengths. If every member of the body is unique, has a unique role in the body, and has a unique life story (as we each do), then the goal must be how to bring all those pieces of ourselves together in ways that help us accomplish the mission or fulfill the vision set before us. It is not as if the same God who called us together as part of the fellowship, we call church, did not also create us with the differences we have. So just because we are different does not mean we cannot work together. God made us unique and different from one another and expects us, empowered through the Spirit, to go be the church in the world. Too often, we get so distracted and upset by our differences that we actually allow it to create division which undermines our progress. This should not be. There are ways to arrange our gifts, talents, ideas, and perspectives to make us more effective. The best part? There is someone in the midst that is gifted with figuring out how to do that. God has already given us what we need. We must welcome the presence of divergent perspectives. God made us this way. Diversity does not preclude unity, if embraced well, it can enhance it.

**Embrace Diverse Personalities and Anticipate Conflict**

The church is certainly a place where personalities clash and sometimes it happens often. Just like it is important to embrace the divergent perspectives, we can apply the same principle to the differences we experience between personalities. The challenge with personality is it can sometimes feel more personal and hurtful when things are not going so smoothly. And if not addressed, we might do lasting damage to the fellowship. Ephesians 4:2-3 tells us to live with “all humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” This is what it takes to live together in fellowship and do the work of the Lord in the power of the Spirit. We have to commit ourselves to allowing the Holy Spirit to develop those fruits in us (Galatians 5:22-23). This is a strong reminder that we cannot get along well with people in our own power. When we try to do God’s work in our own strength, we will fail every time. We must rely on God in everything, including learning how to work with people we just do not like. They are still our brothers and sisters in Christ; and for whatever reason, we have been placed alongside each other in the mission God has for the church. So working together is not optional. This is a team sport. As we allow the Spirit to work within us individually and collectively, we learn how to best work together.

**Committing to the Cause**

The scripture goes on to remind us that we were all called to one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God! The writer of Ephesians knew that unity was going to be challenging and made sure to remind us that ultimately this is a faith we share! Not one of us owns it exclusively. Though there are many of us with different perspectives and personalities, we are one in the Lord. And it will require a decision from each of us to grow and mature in faith to truly work well together across our differences, while maintaining unity. The only way we begin to use our differences as strengths is to first commit to the idea that no matter what we will stay unified because God requires it. But how is that possible? “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15) Everyone must commit to growing up in Christ, and as we are doing the work of God, always allow God to work in us, to mature us. As we do this—submit to the work of the Spirit in our lives—we can do our part within the body and each part will contribute to the growth of the other parts (Ephesians 4:16)! This is God’s genius design!
Please note the importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us. Too many times we are trying to do the work of the Lord without first allowing the Lord to work in us! That is not only arrogant and irresponsible but can lead to disaster. It cannot be overstated that without Pentecost (the manifestation of the Spirit in the church) there is no power! Pentecost is a launching pad into a perpetual process of being pruned, pushed, and propelled by the Spirit to become who God designed us to be and to go do what God has called us to do. But we will NEVER make it alone. Ever. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) This makes it clear that our fellowship is fruitless if it is not rooted in the partnership with God.

Practical Applications

1. Bring in an expert to do a workshop on conflict management, thereby giving members the opportunity to learn and practice with tools that will improve communication and help them work through conflict. This training should normalize having diverse perspectives.

2. In your teaching and preaching and other presentations, actively promote diversity of thought and personality as a good thing. Help people see our differences as essential to making us stronger. It may take a while, but it is possible to help people stop fearing difference.

3. Help people get to know each other. Part of why people do not like each other is they do not know each other. And if people who have strong personality differences can find common ground or common interests, it gives them a way to connect. This can help diffuse potential conflicts before they arise or allow people to approach conflicts with cooler heads and hearts. Here are few a program ideas:
   a. Christian Speed-faithing. Similar to speed dating events, bring people together where they prepare short blurbs about themselves that speak to who they are, their hobbies, passions, funny stories, and something meaningful about their faith journeys.
   b. Create a “Sharing My Story” series. This could be a monthly or quarterly gathering (online or in person) where members share their sacred story. This could be set up in a coffee house style where there are refreshments and a relaxed environment. But the idea is to have a person share with fellow members some defining moments of their life, important lessons, and stories from childhood and with important people in their lives. You could develop a series of questions to help guide the speaker. But what hopefully emerges is a beautiful moment in which the members validate someone’s story by listening, and everyone gets to know them better. Moreover, the person who shared feels loved and embraced by the community. If done well, this can connect people more deeply as they find commonalities in their stories.
c. **Have fun together.** Take a trip somewhere. Create an adult field day. Plan a city-wide scavenger hunt. You must find ways to loosen up and laugh and enjoy one another (more on this in a future lesson). Bonus points for creating activities that allow for intergenerational interaction or teamwork. This all makes for richer relationships and can help ease conflict before it happens.

**Closing Prayer**

*Almighty God,*

*Thank you for calling us to one faith and one baptism. We confess that we have not always lived in the unity you have designed for us. We ask your forgiveness and invite your Spirit to make us one in you and that today our unity would be restored. Fix our hearts so that we become one body, living in fellowship with you. In Jesus’ name we pray and give thanks. Amen.*
Engaging Our Spiritual Disciplines

November 2020

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:4-5 (NRSV)

Introduction

Last month, we emphasized the importance of allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us so that we can be mature in faith and maintain our unity. But how do we actually open ourselves and allow the Spirit in to work? Thankfully, there is a way that we can “show up” for spiritual growth and maturation: by practicing the spiritual disciplines. While we cannot control or manipulate the Spirit or even influence any outcomes, we can absolutely spend time with God and deepen our fellowship with God. This will always yield spiritual growth; and as each of us grows and matures, we contribute to the growth of the whole body. (Ephesians 4:16)

Defining the Disciplines

“Spiritual disciplines are practices that help us develop the spiritual dimension of our lives. In adopting them we recognize that our innate spiritual aptitude cannot develop fully without practice.” (Marjorie J. Thompson, Soul Feast, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). Generally, all Christians practice some form of spiritual discipline. For example, most Christians worship, pray, and read scripture, while some also fast. However, there is a long list of other disciplines that Christians have been practicing for centuries, and they all help us to get closer to God and naturally deepen our connections with Christian community. They enrich fellowship. Examples of other spiritual disciplines are sabbath, solitude, spiritual direction, spiritual reading, honoring the body, self-examination, and hospitality. This brief list is by no means exhaustive. (Resources for learning about the disciplines are listed in the Practical Applications section for this lesson.)

The reason these are usually called “disciplines” is because for them to be helpful to us, we must practice them regularly. It is not helpful if we try to begin keeping sabbath—taking one day out per week for refreshment, rest, recreation, and time in community—but we only do it sporadically. Then there is no way for our practice of sabbath to refresh and rejuvenate us as God designed it to do. Conversely, if we practice these with discipline it creates a rhythm for our life and naturally positions us to be present with God.

The Great Variety

It has been said that variety is the spice of life and it is possible that this also applies to our spirituality. Many scholars have noted the importance of engaging the spiritual disciplines for spiritual growth, and several have also pointed to their potential to inspire a certain liveliness and enthusiasm for faith. Our faith lives both peak and valley just like everything else in the world; and there are times when something that once worked extremely well, suddenly does not. This can be true of spiritual practices. If we have only ever practiced worship, prayer, and scripture reading and we encounter an extended lull in our spiritual walk, it might be time to switch it up and try a new practice. Or it could be that God is nudging us to try a new discipline for some reason. If we
are sensing a call to do so, we should trust that call and go for it. Moreover, as we move in and out of different life seasons, some disciplines may work better than others.

The spiritual disciplines really do expand our capacity for living the life of faith. They open new possibilities within our spirits - expanding our thinking, sensing, and listening abilities. And it is a great idea to give a variety of different disciplines a try before committing to a couple of them. While we will all probably always worship, pray, and read scripture, we might be tremendously blessed and energized by taking on a new spiritual discipline. You will be amazed how you grow in faith and in intimacy with God. If the church is the bride of Christ symbolically, then the spiritual disciplines are like date night. They give us uninterrupted, focused time with the one we love. Our relationship with God benefits greatly from that, and by extension so do our relationships with everyone around us—especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Practice Makes Perfect**

Ultimately, the more we engage in these spiritual practices, the better we position ourselves to experience God’s presence. We never have any idea how the Spirit of God will respond to our disciplined spiritual practices, but you can be sure God will respond—and it will be good for us. This is because choosing to engage in the spiritual disciplines invites God’s Spirit; it makes our hearts known as a place of welcome for God, and God loves to be welcomed by us. Moreover, they are the paths through which we can abide with God, and that is the only way we can grow (bear fruit). The disciplines help create and maintain our connection to the vine, our source, God, which makes growth possible.

If we choose to practice the spiritual disciplines, then they become a way for God to perfect us. By practicing our spiritual disciplines, we can more clearly discern God’s voice. The disciplines also help us prioritize our faith over things which could easily deter or distract us. In this way the disciplines help train our minds and hearts to focus on the things of God. They refresh our minds and spirits and keep us learning. They are the precursor to lying down in green pastures that restore our souls. They help develop an ongoing enthusiasm for life and faith, while also giving us peace and calm amid chaos, trials, and tribulations. The spiritual disciplines are an underutilized, but powerful weapon gifted to the believer that we should commit to practicing.

Ultimately, the spiritual disciplines cultivate a space within us for communion with God. When the church is serious about spiritual disciplines and really commit to them, then growth, healing, deliverance, empowerment, freedom, and blessing are inevitable. We learn to love better and deeper, we grow wiser, and our faith gets stronger. And that is always a win for everyone. One person changing and growing within the fellowship of the church automatically positively affects the rest of the body (Ephesians 4:16).
Practical Applications

1. *Learn about the disciplines.* Do a seven-to-eight-week series exploring a variety of spiritual disciplines, one per week. And be sure to include time in each class to actually practice a discipline. For local churches, depending on your congregation’s size, it might be good to offer this class twice a year so several people can go through it. Either way it would be best to use a book that guides your group through the various disciplines. Consider using *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton (InterVarsity Press Books, 2006) or *Soul Feast* by Marjorie J. Thompson. Please see the reference list below for additional resources:
   b. *Celebration of Discipline* with workbook, *Celebrating the Disciplines* (Richard J. Foster, Harper One, 2018.)
   c. *Spiritual Disciplines Devotional* (Valerie E. Hest, InterVarsity Press, 2007.)

2. *Learn about Sabbath.* Sabbath is one of those disciplines we pretend is not a command of God, and the one God modeled for us during creation. The concept seems foreign to most of us, and we cannot imagine what it means to truly rest for a day in this busy world. It might be interesting to consider the effect COVID-19 has had on our openness to this discipline. Also the idea of sitting still, resting, and waiting for God might be very much in line with waiting for the Holy Spirit — similar to our waiting for the Spirit to come at Pentecost and give power, purpose, and direction. To expand our knowledge on Sabbath here are some activities to consider:
   a. Challenge your congregation or group to spend some time both studying sabbath as a spiritual discipline and then take one month and consistently keep the Sabbath once a week. Then have a closing discussion about what they learned and experienced. Consider using the chapter on Sabbath in *Sacred Rhythms* by Ruth Haley Barton as your guide.
   b. Do an in-depth book study on Sabbath by reading *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to a Culture of Now* by Walter Bruegmann. Have discussions on what you read about Sabbath and how to practice it in modern times. Also view this series on Sabbath by Professor Bruegmann (The Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, Cincinnati, OH) which is posted on YouTube: *Part 1*, *Part 2*, and *Part 3*. You can find them in a google video search easily by searching for “Walter Bruegmann Sabbath.” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rtvnmjMcC](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rtvnmjMcC), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viS_mfw93nq](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viS_mfw93nq), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NESjkEnGGZE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NESjkEnGGZE))

3. *Expand ways of praying.* There are so many wonderful ways to pray. Have your group or congregation to explore solitude, guided meditation, centering prayer, breath prayer, journaling prayer, and other forms. (See Patricia D. Brown’s *Paths To Prayer: Finding Your Own Way To The Presence of God*, Jossey-Bass, 2003; or Dwight H. Jody’s *Christian Meditation and Inner Healing*, 1st Order of St. Luke, 2000.) Perhaps plan a day - long retreat or festival where members get to try out new forms of prayer, perhaps rotating throughout the day.
4. **Introduce Lectio Divina.** This is the ancient practice of reading scripture in a way that allows the text to speak to us without forcing our thoughts or ideas on the scripture. The benefits of even one time of doing lectio divina are so life-giving. One amazing resource that was actually designed for teens but works great for adults as well is, *Enjoy the Silence: A 30 Day Experiment in Listening to God* (Maggie Robbins and Duffy Robbins, 2005). Go through the 30 days of the book together, or just a week! Experience the riches of this beautiful and powerful practice.

**Closing Prayer**

*Loving Savior,*

We give you thanks for saving our lives and giving us hope for the future. Teach us to abide in you and give us hearts that long for you. Enrich us as we experience new ways of being with you. Give us courage to open our hearts to you and let you reshape and mold us in your image. In your name we pray and give thanks. Amen.
Part II: An Intimate Look at Fellowship

December 2020

Choosing Fellowship

“But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you.” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.” Ruth 1:16-18 (NRSV)

Introduction

In this month’s lesson we will explore what it takes to forge a fellowship. No one exemplifies this more than Ruth and Naomi. At the beginning of their story, we find three women facing the reality of the overwhelming loss of their husbands. In their world, men held the economic power and wealth was passed on patrilineally. Therefore, not only were these women faced with a horrible loss socially and emotionally, but also economically. They were now extremely vulnerable and poor. What’s worse? They were facing a famine in Moab where they lived. In response to all this, they decided to return to Naomi’s homeland in Bethlehem, hoping for a better life there. Somehow Naomi convinced herself that Ruth and Orpah would fare better back in their own homeland of Moab where they had support, but Ruth chose something other than this presumed “better life” she might discover back in Moab. She chose fellowship. In this lesson we will explore how that choice impacted both their present reality and their futures.

Fellowship Begins with Choice

What is clear in the text is that Ruth did have options. She could have returned with Orpah, but she chose to journey with Naomi instead. Though she never says why directly, her actions later in the story show why. While Naomi insisted that Ruth and Orpah return to look out for their own futures, Ruth was more concerned with Naomi’s future. It mattered to Ruth how Naomi was going to make it. Who was going to care for Naomi? Frankly, they were all destitute and would need support. And Ruth believed that she had the ability to provide the support Naomi needed, or at least she would do her best trying.

Ultimately, Ruth teaches us that being in fellowship begins with a choice to do so. It does not happen naturally because of our associations, positions, or connections. Just because Ruth was Naomi’s daughter-in-law did not mean she would or should automatically devote herself to Naomi the way she did. In fact, Naomi did not expect that of her. True fellowship is about choosing to share life’s journey together, come what may. It means choosing to “cast our lots” alongside one another when we could easily look out for our own individual needs much more easily.
Fellowship Defined
It is important to define more clearly what we mean by “fellowship.” The Greek word “ekklesia” is sometimes interpreted in the biblical text as “fellowship,” and other times “church,” or even “gathering.” Fellowship is about the mystical interconnectedness of a community, the strength of sharing within a body, and a way in which a group is inextricably tied together in life and fate through the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s design is not that the church be merely an institution or organization or collection of clubs and auxiliaries, but that it be a communion. It is a shared life in which the people of God are joined in identity, calling, purpose, mission, and destiny. This does not mean, however, that the persons which make up the body should be crushed under the weight of it, or that their uniqueness be overlooked or dismissed. Contrastingly, it is very much the uniqueness of each member which gives meaning to the whole. So, they bring their talents, time, and treasure together to collectively work to fulfill the call of God. And in so doing, the whole body and being that we call “the church” rises and falls, triumphs and fails, sinks or swims together. This is God’s design. In short, we should embrace church as fellowship or church as communion because God set it up this way. It is who we are.

God has shaped and formed us into a body designed to move, live, and function as a unit (1 Corinthians 12). And love is the tie that binds us to one another just as it tied Ruth to Naomi, such that she could not imagine leaving Naomi to fend for herself. The only way that Ruth could have made the choice she made, is because she had already allowed herself to truly be in fellowship with Naomi. Her words and her actions flowed naturally from who she understood herself to be. She saw herself as deeply connected to and somehow responsible for caring for Naomi, and she acted accordingly.

Examining the Quality of Our Fellowship
We need not assume that just because we bear the name “church” that we are actually experiencing fellowship, the kind of fellowship we see between Ruth and Naomi. There is something much more to us than our organizations, our customs, and practices. All of what we are doing should be helping us to truly become the church, one that is committed to sharing the radical love of Christ demonstrated in how we live in unity and in communion with each other. That is the big identifier. It is the spoiler alert that reveals who we are to the world: “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

There is value, then, in creating space to actually consider how we are doing as it relates to being a fellowship of believers. It is appropriate to pray, think, reflect, and dialogue about what we are doing as both the gathered and scattered people of God. Are we sharing in real intimacy? Are we able to be honest and transparent with each other about our struggles? Do we see our challenges as ones we share and experience as a body, not just as individuals? Are we allowing the Holy Spirit to sit at the center of our hearts, linking us together in love and purpose? Have we chosen to be a church in fellowship? Or not?
Practical Applications

1. As suggested in the final section of the lesson, engage your congregation or ministry in a reflection exercise or set up a focus group or retreat experience that allows them to evaluate the quality of fellowship within your church. Here are some questions to explore:
   a. Does our space feel safe?
   b. Can you trust people in our group?
   c. Do you feel close to anyone in our group?
   d. How often do you spend time with other members outside of church activities?

2. As a follow up to the conversation, make solid plans to enhance the quality of and commitment to fellowship. Decide that this is who you will be and move forward in faith. Set clear and measurable goals. Embrace the Spirit of Pentecost and experience fellowship anew.

Closing Prayer

Loving God,

You have created us to be in relationship with each other and have called us to true fellowship in the church. Help us to open our hearts to you and to each other and bind us together in love. We desire to be more than a group, but we want to experience real connection, trust, and belonging as a body of believers. Unite us in heart, mind, soul, and spirit in Jesus’ name. Amen.
January 2021

Embracing a Communal Ethic

“Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God my God”.
Ruth 1:16 (NRSV)

Introduction
Last month we explored some of what it takes to experience a certain depth in our fellowship. This month we will consider the communal quality of fellowship which ultimately helps deepen it ever more. We live in a very competitive world that happily and openly promotes individualism. This stands in complete contrast to what a fellowship in the church should be. Let’s explore the importance of embracing a communal ethic as central to our fellowship.

Fellowship is Counter-Cultural
We learned last month that in making the decision to stay with Naomi, Ruth was considering Naomi’s welfare, and in fact saw her own fate inextricably tied to it. In this way, Ruth models what it means to embrace a communal ethic in thinking and living. Her care for herself necessarily included her care for Naomi. In her mind, both were necessary and possible, so she made the choice because she was concerned for “us/we” rather than simply, “I/me.” She did not agree that taking care of herself precluded her from caring for Naomi.

However, we live in a world that often encourages people to pursue or see our individual desires and interests as independent or in conflict with the needs of the community. Much of what we choose to do with our time and money, we do without consideration of how our individual actions affect others. Americans, in particular, value our “freedom” to order our lives however we desire, and often insist that what we do and how we do it is nobody else’s business. But this is antithetical to a truly Christian theological perspective, which is rooted in love and relationship. It does not seek its own way and is always concerned for others. Moreover, communal thinking and living is a key part of our cultural heritage as people of African descent. Therefore, this should be something that the Black Church does well, but individualism is quite pervasive in Western cultures.

For example, Western thought promotes the idea of working hard, getting educated, and making money for the purpose of taking good care of one’s self, and perhaps one’s family and progeny. And because many of us buy-in fully to this thinking, we spend our lives grinding and working to have and hoard more and more or find ourselves angry if we are not able to get more. We are never satisfied with what we have, and we glorify the pursuit of making money and amassing wealth. The problem is that this capitalist way of functioning, when devoid of care and concern for the community around us— the poor, and the vulnerable—creates a vacuum, and sets up a system of the haves and the have nots. What would it look like for the church to actively embrace a communal ethic at every decision-making table? How do we consider the poor within and outside our congregations when we make budgetary decisions? What implications will our decisions have on our wider community?
Our Personhood and Community are not in Competition
Sometimes we wrongly see our own desires and needs in contrast or in competition with what our community needs. We think that when we prioritize the needs of the community, that our specific, individual needs must go unmet. While the individual may set aside certain preferences and desires in the interest of caring for community, God can and will make provision for all. In the case of our narrative, Ruth glean in the field to be sure Naomi ate did not mean that Ruth would not also eat. Like Ruth, as truly communal thinkers, we are not satisfied if we are okay as an individual, but the community suffers or goes without. There is always a way for everyone to eat (or to have what they need)! Jesus demonstrates this beautifully with his miracle of the two fish and five loaves of bread. That day the disciples only had enough for a child’s lunch, but God’s power transformed the little they had into more than they needed (Matthew 14:13-21). Therefore, we must always look to God as our source and strength. Our own power alone is not sufficient, but our love and care for community is possible through God’s power and love.

If we struggle with this concept of considering the needs of all within the larger context of the community, then what we need is transformation by the renewing of our minds through the power of God’s Spirit (Romans 12:1-2). We are products of our environment. It can be difficult for us to think beyond ourselves consistently, but that is the call of God for the Christian. Jesus teaches us that we ought to hang everything in scripture on his commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. Notice how the second part of the commandment seamlessly ties the person to their community: love your neighbors as yourselves. They are not in competition; rather they go together. We are called to love both. And indeed, we are being perfected in this. It is a marathon, a journey, not a sprint. But we must avail ourselves to the work of God’s spirit so that we truly become the church.

Fellowship and Communal Ethics Are Costly
The fact is that choosing fellowship will often mean breaking ranks with the beliefs and practices of the larger societies in which we live. And it may mean that we do things that other people consider odd or strange; moreover, it will cost us. When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what more he could do to gain eternal life, Jesus replied, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (Matthew 19:21) There may be some practices, mentalities, or even some material things we have to be willing to release in order to truly walk in fellowship together. There is a cost.

We will never have to make the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us. He already declared that the work he came to do in redeeming the world was finished. However, the work he is doing in and through us is ongoing. But this requires our availing ourselves to the work that God has begun in us through Christ (Philippians 1:6). There is a pruning, a cleansing, and a transformative work we must submit to if we desire to truly be the church in fellowship we were always intended to be.
Practical Applications
1. Do a book study with your bible study or small groups/classes that explores themes such as being the body of Christ, Christian fellowship, and how they conflict with the larger culture.

2. Watch the movie “Black Panther” and discuss the messages therein related to community, especially as rooted in Black cultural identity.

3. Follow up by creating a vision for the church/group that embraces a communal ethic that we see operating in Ruth and Naomi’s story. Identify church practices and customs that need to be adapted to align with the communal vision.

Closing Prayer

Lord,

We know that you have called us into a beautiful fellowship we call church. You have empowered your church to go into the world and share the message of Jesus. But we are so shaped by the times and culture in which we live. Show us the areas that we need to change. Transform us by the renewing of our minds so that we can learn to move and live as the body of Christ, unified by your Spirit. This we ask in the name that is above all names. Amen.
February 2021

Working Together Is Worth It!

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and The Book of Ruth

Introduction

We know that Ruth and Naomi responded to their tragic loss by sticking together. And even though life had thrown them quite the curve ball, their choice positioned them to pool their resources and work cooperatively to turn things around for themselves. In so doing, they model Ecclesiastes 4:9 perfectly.

Lending One Another Strength

Naomi is very clear in the story about how she feels about her circumstances: broken, bitter, depleted. In fact, she says this directly when she meets her old friends upon arriving back in Bethlehem, “I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty.” (Ruth 1:21) She feels like she has nothing to offer (Ruth 1:11-13) but a painful vision of grief. Though she has lost a lot, she has not lost everything. She still has Ruth, and she still has a community that welcomes her with open arms when she returns.

While all this is true, it is hard for Naomi to see or feel any of that because of her pain, but Ruth’s presence and devotion to Naomi is quietly lending Naomi strength. Part of the reason Naomi can release her grief (and ultimately move on) is because she has a community (Ruth and the other women) willing to let her get it out. Their ministry of presence and listening allows for her feelings to be validated. But Ruth’s determination to show up for Naomi and plot their next move also helps lift Naomi out of her pain (Ecc 4:10). Sometimes we have to share the load when one of us gets tired. This is especially true in our ongoing fight for justice. It gets exhausting—taking turns and lending one another strength is a must.

Each Person Is an Essential Part of the Whole

Ruth’s determination to stick with Naomi landed them back in Bethlehem as a team and motivated her to immediately find work in a field where she could provide for them. She happens to start gleaning in Boaz’s (Naomi’s relative) field who finds favor in her and offers her special gifts and protection. When Ruth comes home and tells Naomi what happened, Naomi perks up and shares her wisdom and cultural savvy as a mature Israelite woman (Ruth 2). She then advises Ruth on how to engage Boaz and what to do next (Ruth 3). Of course, we know how the story ends. Boaz then plays his part, steps to the plate, takes care of family business, redeems Naomi’s field, marries Ruth, and provides the ultimate economic security they both needed (Ruth 4).
In this example, we find three different people doing what they can, sharing what they have to make life better for everyone. Ruth shares her hard work and determination. Naomi imparts her wisdom and knowledge and Boaz his integrity and generosity. But they all needed each other in order for things to work out as favorably as they did. Everyone had an essential part to play; and if one of them withheld what they had to share, the story would have ended much differently. In the spirit of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz exemplify how everyone doing their small part can literally transform one another’s lives.

Fellowship Reaffirms Our Faith

Naomi begins this story as an impoverished widow and childless mother, feeling the heavy weight of having lost everything, but by the end she has emerged as the witty and wise mentor and mother-in-law who is blessed with the joy of a grandchild. But a close look at the passage shows that it is Naomi’s friends who summarize her story and publicly declare the good God has done in her life. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” (Ruth 4:14-15)

This means that Naomi’s story serves as a witness to her, her friends, family, and community of God’s goodness, but it also means that the women want to be sure Naomi acknowledges the way God has masterfully transformed her situation. Sometimes we cannot even see all the good God is doing in our lives, and we need the fellowship of our community to point it out to us. While this fortifies our own faith and deepens our love and appreciation for God, it simultaneously gives hope to those around us. Put simply, our blessings bless us and others. When we live in fellowship with one another, we get to see up close what God is doing in our lives and one another’s lives. We get a front-row seat to God’s work of deliverance, transformation, healing, salvation and more. And we get to share in the joy of it all. All this sharing and sharing of blessings deepens faith and prepares us for whatever God has planned next.

Practical Applications

Plan some team building activities for your members. These can be things like going to The Escape Room (To learn more, see https://thescapegame.com/), but there are so many others. Google “team building” activities and find something in your area that would be suitable for your context. Most importantly, make time immediately afterwards to process the experience and reflect on what you learned about each other. Consider how those personality traits and talents can be used for the work of the kingdom.

Closing Prayer

Lord God,

In your infinite wisdom you have not only given us the gift of salvation, but you have also given us community and a fellowship of believers with which to share life and faith. Teach us to never take the people you have called us to journey with for granted. May we always appreciate them, love them, and choose fellowship with them. Keep us bonded together through your peace. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.
Part III - The Opportunities of Fellowship

March 2021

Being Intentional in Cultivating Fellowship

“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Acts 2: 43-47

Introduction

We have determined in a prior lesson that fellowship is not something that happens naturally; it begins with a choice and we must be intentional about cultivating it. The beautiful fellowship and solidarity we see in the story of Ruth and Naomi is possible for us today when we make a commitment to fostering it. Let us now explore what it takes to truly be intentional about fellowship.

Being Present

Being in fellowship with one another will require us to truly show up in community. This means embracing a practice of being fully present with one another in our interactions, gatherings, communication, and activities. Being present means being consciously aware and committed to living in the present moment, bringing our whole authentic selves to the moments we share and laying aside distractions. It means allowing the truth of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls to live in the now. It means really listening and responding to one another, not merely reacting. It means really being in the room, not just showing up in a space physically. Rather it is about caring for and attending to the people and the needs of the present moment.

Conversely, a community that practices being present is not satisfied with just going through the motions, or doing things without thought or purpose, or out of obligation. A community that really shows up for one another notices when something feels off and needs to be addressed and it takes swift action to do so. The quality of being present allows us to truly connect in relationship and validate one another’s feelings and experiences. Being present means we are not living in the past (enslaved) or anxious about the future. Rather it empowers the community to embrace the current moment in truth and love and respond to what is currently happening. It allows us to experience life with one another as it really is. If we are going to be in fellowship it means committing ourselves to being alert, participating, caring, and loving members of the community. Imagine worship experiences of a community that is committed to being present with one another. This is the Acts Chapter 2 church. They were present together and on one accord. They were present with each other and living in the moment. This set the stage for a powerful move of God through the Holy Spirit.
Be Invested
Being intentional about fellowship will absolutely require our spiritual, emotional, financial, and social investment in our church or church group. We must have some skin in the game. Part of what creates the bonds of fellowship is that we are sharing in a thing together and we are invested in its life. Church cannot be this place where we come and go as we please and move in and out whenever we feel like it. We must lend ourselves to the cause together; we must have a stake in what happens. This means we are actively risking something. As we invest our time, talents, and treasure we are giving something of ourselves in hope of ensuring its future and fulfillment of its mission. Without this, there is no real fellowship because people can walk away too easily. If it is not possible to get hurt or take a loss, then we were not truly in it. Rather there is just a surface-level collection of people who get together and worship or even do good things, but that does not make it a fellowship motivated by the power of the Spirit.

The Acts Chapter 2 church described above, pooled their resources, and shared in life together. They made sure everyone had what they needed. All this opened the possibilities for deeper fellowship, and they continued to grow closer and bigger in number. People want to be part of that kind of fellowship; it is good to the soul and it is reflective of God’s design. It is attractive and effective and influential. And the more the members give in all these different ways, the more the body (fellowship/church) has to share. The more influential it can be in the world around it because of the mass of talents, service, and treasure it can tap into and share generously. We see examples of this as churches do things like pay off medical bills of its members or community members and release them from crippling debt. Investment in our fellowship ultimately ties our fates together and deepens the bonds of community.

Be Authentic
Finally, to intentionally cultivate fellowship we must share our authentic selves. We really must allow the truth of who God made us to be to shine through and be celebrated. Church has to feel safe in order for real fellowship to emerge. When people feel as if they must put on fronts or wear masks, it gets old and it stunts the growth of the fellowship, usually damaging it. Moreover, being inauthentic can never lead to true fellowship because it brings something that is not real.

Admittedly, this is difficult for the church. We really do a lot of performing in front of each other, seeking one another’s approval, wanting to appear to have it all together or that we have all the knowledge, or that we are always strong. But real relationships are built on vulnerability! We have to be honest about who we are and how we are struggling, so that we can help one another through our life journey. If church is going to be a fellowship, it MUST cultivate a space that is SAFE for everyone. People must be able to be honest, and a true fellowship will encourage persons to be honest with themselves, with one another, and with God. We certainly do experience moments of vulnerability and authenticity in our worship at times (though that can also be performative as well, so we need to attend to that.) But as soon as we have been open and honest before God and community in worship, we often put our masks, hard exteriors, and costumes back on and get right back to pretending. The irony? We are not fooling anybody—not our church family, certainly not God, and not even ourselves.
We really must embrace vulnerability and truth as values and promote them within our church. And then we must celebrate and affirm people when they live out those values. We cannot judge them or ridicule them when they show up as their real selves. All of us are a work in progress, theoretically. But if we cannot be true to who we are alongside others with whom we are invested in this shared life of faith, then I am not sure we are progressing at all. If people have to hide their struggles or pain, if they cannot speak their truth, then there can be no light in our dark places. And this absolutely leaves room and space for the enemy to get to work. The enemy cannot stand or operate in the light or in truth. So, we must allow truth and honesty to shape our practices. Our fellowship must be cultivated in it.

**Practical Applications**

In order to see practical application of this lesson which calls for intentionality in becoming a fellowship, we are most likely in need of a change in church culture. This is not easy to do and each church/group will have to pray and think carefully about how to do this in their specific context. Churches are not alike and each one has different cultures operating within them. However, here are some ideas to get you started:

a. Do a sermon series that explores the power of cultivating intentional fellowship. What does it mean to “be present, invested, and authentic?” “What is fellowship?” Why is fellowship important? What happens when we truly live in fellowship? What does God say about being in fellowship?

b. Read and discuss *Rising Church: Creating a Place Where Your Heart Feels At Home* by Jim Kallm Jr. (WaterBrook Press Books, 2003). Create space for people to share their interest and hesitation about the idea of church as fellowship.

c. Make this an entire year’s thematic focus for the church. Challenge each auxiliary to explore ways they can enrich fellowship of their own group and of the larger congregation based on the lesson’s framework (or an alternative one). Have a time that these groups can present their plans with the congregation.

d. Ultimately, the people must both want it and own it for any real attempts and sifting the church culture in this way. So, find ways to get them excited about it. Recruit the appropriate personalities to lead the church and share and spread the energy and message. Be very creative and fresh in your efforts to realize real fellowship in your context.

**Closing Prayer**

*Loving God,*

*You have formed us into your body and called us to be your church. But we are broken in so many ways and often find it hard to live in close fellowship with one another. Help heal our divisions and inspire us to want more for ourselves in this area. Give us radical imagination so that we can dream and hope and work for the realization of true fellowship in your church. We know that all things are possible with you. Make us whole. Make us one. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*
April 2021

The Joy and Fun of Fellowship

“This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.”

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 (NRSV)

Introduction

While the church and its mission are definitely serious endeavors, this should never preclude the joy of our being together. In fact, it is the joy of being in fellowship with one another that fuels our connection; it is the glue that holds us together. This month we will consider why genuinely enjoying fellowship is so vital in the life of the church and how we can cultivate it.

God Says So

First, God wants us to enjoy the life we have been given as is expressed in this month’s text. After all, life is a gift from God, and who wants to give someone a gift and never see them enjoy it? All the things that make life enjoyable—fun, laughter, friendship—are gifts from God. Clearly God wants us to have fun. This was all God’s design. It was intentional. Life should be enjoyed to the fullest. It should be lived, really lived. We see this sentiment expressed throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, one of our wisdom books; having fun, then, is a wise thing to do. Even our elders have understood this as you might hear them remind us ever so often that, “God has a sense of humor.” Why shouldn’t we? There is plenty of time to work hard and take care of business, but we humans also need to enjoy life, laugh, and have fun. Balance is healthy. Laughter is holy. It follows then that when we emphasize laughter and enjoyment in the life of our fellowship, we are being obedient to God.

Second, people have enough problems and pain to deal with outside the church; no one wants to come to church and catch the same hell they catch elsewhere: in their homes, on their jobs, and in society in general. Church should be a place of healing and whole-making. Further, we are told in scripture that laughter is good medicine for the soul, but a broken spirit dries up the bones (Proverbs 17:22). What if the church decided to be that good medicine? Black folks, in particular, carry their own set of challenges just being Black in a majority-white society. And this is something the Black church must be sensitive to. The world is not kind to us; church should be. Even more, people are working hard to take care of their families and living with all the stresses and pressures that brings. They are challenged with health problems, financial struggles, mental wellness strains and more. Who wants to deal with a lot of fighting, drama, and tension at church? Most people will look for the nearest exit and never return.
Conversely, if people can laugh, have fun, and enjoy one another as a community they will want to spend more and more time together. Having fun as part of our practice of fellowship binds us to one another spiritually. Cultivating fellowship that is full of laughter and enjoyment will make people want to come together all the time. You will not have to beg and bargain with folks to be part of the church; they will come gladly and be disappointed when they miss. Here we do not mean that we should create contrived experiences of fun that are not authentic, but rather church should be a space where people are invited to be their authentic selves. There is a natural joy and healing that emerges from being yourself and being loved and celebrated just for that. And if we can laugh a little as well, it is a balm for our hurting hearts and spirits.

**Make Fun a Priority**

It is true: we have a million things to do at church and we probably cannot imagine adding “have fun” to the list! It just sounds so frivolous, right? But we have already seen that God wants us to enjoy our life together and to enjoy each other. Moreover, laughter and happiness actually have a healing quality to them. And people certainly do come to church to heal. Why not laugh while you do? What if we took God up on this proposition shared in the Ecclesiastes text? What would it be like to cultivate a beautiful spirit of happiness and joy in your church or church group? Every organization has a spirit or certain energy about it. Why not make yours a fun spirit? We can be serious about our mission and enjoy each other while fulfilling it. Those things are not in competition with each other.

All we have to do is to choose enjoyment if we want it. Bottom line: no one wants to come to a boring, mean-spirited, no personality-having, all serious all the time church. Human beings need to be able to relax some time and be real with each other. They need to enjoy an occasional unexpected belly-deep laugh and let the joy that flows from it ease some of their pains. Life is already hard; why make fellowship the same? Choose to make it beautiful by choosing to prioritize fun in your fellowship.

**Practical Applications**

1. Put some fun on the calendar for all members (not just the kids!). Plan some activities based on your church’s or group’s interests. The only goal will be to have fun together. Bonus for intergenerational and interactive events!
   a. Tip: Laughing Yoga is a great intergenerational group activity to try (Spoiler alert: It actually focuses on laughing, not so much the yoga part.) (See [https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/laughter-cure](https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/laughter-cure))

2. Be creative and innovative as you plan events that might naturally lend themselves to being more fun anyway and embrace that. Allow a spirit of joy and happiness to guide your planning and meetings.

3. Give the naturally fun/funny people of your church opportunities to host events or create fun and enjoyable environments at your gatherings. Highlight their gift for humor in the life of the church. They will help you cultivate a joyful spirit in the place.
4. Actively reject the notion that church is to always be serious. Do teaching and preaching that speaks to the joy of the Lord, the value of laughter, and how it all bonds us as community.

5. Provide resources and support such as counseling for members who struggle with depression, anxiety, and other mental wellness challenges. Find ways to support them and help them fully participate and experience fun in your fellowship. Please review the following resources:
   a. Bipolar Faith (Monica A. Coleman, Fortress Press, 2016)

Closing Prayer

Wonderful God,

Thank you so much for the gifts of laughter and fun. Teach us to not take ourselves too seriously, to lighten up and just enjoy the life you have given us. We know we only have a few days on this Earth. Please show us how to surrender our fears and live them to the fullest, laughing much of the way. May your joy always be our strength. May it anchor us and inspire all we encounter. In Jesus name! Amen.
Part IV: Threats to Our Fellowship

May 2021

Church Hurt: When Fellowship Is Broken

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Matthew 18:22 (NRSV)

Introduction

This curriculum would not be complete if we did not explore the reality of the brokenness in our fellowships. Though we want to do what is right, cultivating good relationships within our churches, we are often not successful in doing so. Try as we might to stick together, sometimes it seems impossible. What do we do when we take major missteps that do harm to our relationships? How do we move forward in order to find healing?

Recover the Practice of Truth-telling

Brokenness is a human reality. We live in a broken world and we are broken people; and sometimes we do harm to one another. At times it is intentional and other times it is not. Whatever the reason for the pain that has been inflicted within our fellowship, we must be willing to tell the absolute truth about it. We will NEVER heal pains that we do not acknowledge exist. We must create culture in our churches that welcomes truth-telling.

This also means we must be willing to listen to the truth, even when it is hard to hear. Again, our enemy moves in darkness and quietness, and truth brings everything to the light so that it can be seen, heard, and addressed. We should detest and reject efforts to silence and cover up problems and challenges occurring within our midst. Truth-telling requires us to release our protections of people in power, of our commitment to the idea of “minding my business.” This kind of thinking can have dire consequences, as it can keep important truths hidden from view. Part of the reason the U.S. continues to struggle with racism is that it refuses to tell the truth about our racist origins. This makes it impossible to address the current climate and challenges and find a way forward. Telling the truth will sometimes feel hurtful in the process, but it frees us to heal, forgive, be restored, and move forward. Not telling the truth keeps us trapped in our pain and in the past, and it destroys relationships and stunts the growth of our fellowship. And all of this has an impact on the mission we are called to complete as the church of God.
Confession of Wrongdoing and Making Necessary Changes

It takes a lot of courage to both tell painful truths and to listen to them being shared, but the act of someone actually taking responsibility for what occurred can be more challenging. Confessing our wrongdoing and acknowledging hurt allows for those who have been hurt to reclaim their dignity. It also affirms their personhood and validates their feelings. In effect, it tells them that they matter and that they are a valuable part of the fellowship. It sets the stage for reconciliation. But too often no one wants to own what happened. Think of Adam and Eve after they ate the fruit (Genesis 3:8-13). Everyone wants to explain their reason or defend their position. And it can be really challenging to apologize when you really do not think you are wrong. The scripture for this month tells us to talk to one another openly about the problem to work it out and the process to follow. Again, all we have to do is to look at the ongoing struggle for freedom and justice on the part of African Americans in the U.S. When no one wants to own the pain or injustice they have caused, there is often no healing, no peace, and relationships and fellowships can easily unravel or weaken.

So many conflicts in the church would be resolved if someone would simply admit they were wrong, apologize, and work to make amends. When we fail to do this, we let pride, arrogance, and fear become more important than our relationships and the health of our communion, which ultimately impacts the church’s mission. Jesus told us that people would know us by the love we have for each other. That love for each other and commitment to relationship and community sits at the core of our faith. Jesus died to reconcile us back to right relationship with God. So, when we value being right over relationships and walking in love, we hurt not only our communion, but we devalue our faith and our witness in the world. Sometimes we might even need to apologize for what happened even when we do not think we are wrong; if it will save the relationship and allow love to win, then that is a win for the fellowship. This does not mean we should ever cave to toxicity or deny ourselves the love or dignity we deserve. But if it is simply ego that is stopping us from reconciling a relationship, someone needs to take a step forward for love. Many times, what we need is real conversation where we truly listen to each other. That can go a long way in making things right.

Moreover, we must change the behavior or the environment that allowed or contributed to the pain inflicted. Sometimes church hurt is not about something that transpired between two or a few people. Sometimes it is related to church policies, practices, or culture or the ways in which we favor some voices or groups over others. And if we have acknowledged wrongdoing in that kind of situation, we must do more than apologize, we must also make the changes to the policies, practices that caused, or the culture that perpetuates the pain. Otherwise our words are empty, needless chatter that make things worse.

Forgiveness, Space, Patience and Divine Healing

Forgiving people for church hurt can be extremely difficult. This is because the church is the last place that people expect to be hurt. They open themselves there, they trust people, and they look for and expect safety and love. And when they are hurt by someone in church or by something that happened there, it can potentially do real damage to their faith. Therefore, acknowledging their pain and working to make amends quickly is vital! That can go a long way in the healing process.
That said, healing is possible, but it will absolutely require the work of God on the human heart. It is really important, then, that we do adequate teaching on what it takes to forgive, and how we can allow God to help us with that. Engaging in spiritual disciplines can help with this, but so can good pastoral care and counseling. Even then it may take some time, so we need to be patient and fervent in our prayers for one another when a major infraction happens. Remember that time does not heal all wounds. God does. On the other side of a painful moment, we should acknowledge it, apologize, then be still and let God work. Let go and let God. Once we have done all we can to repair things, we surrender it to God in prayer and trust Jehovah Rapha to heal us.

**Practical Applications**

1. Host a church symposium or conference (local or district) on "Church Hurt" that explores paths to healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Bring in trained professionals and trained religious leaders who are experts on these topics.

2. Develop a teaching series on healing, forgiveness, and the language of apology.

3. Develop a formalized comprehensive grievance process that your church or organization will use in conflict management that is rooted in Christian communal values and shaped and upheld by the community. This process would include opportunities to name grievances, hear apologies, and make amends.

**Closing Prayer**

*Healing God,*

*We need a healing touch from you. We confess that we have not loved one another perfectly. We have hurt each other, and we have not always taken responsibility or even acknowledged what we have done. In this way, we have done damage to the fellowship you gifted to us and have taken one another and you for granted. We are heartily sorry for, these, our misdoings. We beg your forgiveness and pray that you create in us clean hearts and renew right spirits within us. Make us more loving like you. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.*
Towards an Inclusive Fellowship

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.” “On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no disension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 (NRSV)

Introduction
This month’s scripture is a well-known one and probably shares the most detailed description of the church as the body of Christ. What are the challenges to realizing the vision that Apostle Paul casts here? How do our tendencies around exclusion and inclusion affect the realization of this vision? How can we best celebrate our differences and make room for all in our fellowship?

Acknowledging Exclusionary Tendencies
One surefire way to contribute to the demise of a fellowship is to make it clear that not everyone is welcome. And when people do not feel welcome, they ultimately leave. It can be painful when we see people leaving our churches, but we often do not stop to explore why. While that would be good to know, we may also need to examine why some people do not come in the first place. If a fellowship is going to flourish and grow, it really does need to embrace the spirit of inclusiveness and not take on attitudes and practices that make it difficult or unsafe for people to be part of it. And while in our world today inclusivity is often a conversation we have related to identity groups/politics such as race, gender, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation (which is appropriate for sure) within the church, we also tend to exclude around the spheres of popularity/prominence, family, age, and just about any aspect of church politics and their power dynamics. For example, we sometimes get into the practice of putting the same people in leadership roles, ignoring the gifts and ministry ideas of others, particularly less outgoing or likable personalities. In these and other ways, we overlook so many willing workers and faithful members of our fellowship. The bottom line is when we engage the work God has called us to do in the world and within the church and we do not include all parts of our fellowship, this hurts those who
are excluded, it hurts the quality of our communion, and it can slow our progress in our mission. Moreover, these tendencies do not reflect the “many parts, one body vision” (1 Corinthians 12) we are called to reflect within our fellowship. In that sense, to exclude is disobedient and not in alignment with God’s brilliant design, therefore falling short of the beautiful expression and embodiment of God’s love we are called to be.

Embracing Inclusivity in Valuing Our Fellowship
To be more inclusive, we will need to stop and look around to determine who is not sitting at the table and decide to do something about it. This is not something we can necessarily do broadly, but specific churches or even church groups should do inventory and determine who is missing and why (young people, women, etc.). If the answer is that we have made anyone feel excluded, then we need to make changes. This will certainly require having some courageous conversations (please see truth-telling from last month’s lesson), but it is so worth it. Moreover, we must embrace the belief that everyone really is welcome and deserves a seat at the proverbial table. **We must value everyone’s presence, and as we discussed in the lessons on Ruth and Naomi, believe that we are beautifully tied together in spirit, purpose, and mission.** It is the very reason that when Miriam was punished by God, having been banished from the Israelite camp for a week, the Israelites refused to travel any further until her time of banishment was complete. They saw her as a vital part of their community and stood in solidarity with her, despite her “wrongdoing” because she was part of them. Their attitude was, “Not without Miriam!” (Numbers 12: 1-16) We should ask ourselves, who is missing from our camp? Who are the people that we are inextricably bound to who we have been called to journey with? Are they present?

It is also important to note that some folks actually exclude themselves because they do not believe they have anything of value to contribute. Naomi comes to mind here. She almost missed her opportunity to experience real fellowship with Ruth. Naomi wanted to send both Ruth and Orpah back because she specifically said she had nothing to offer them (sons for them to marry). While Naomi was certainly being loving and selfless in that moment and in her care for them and their futures, she was greatly undervaluing what she had to offer them: her wisdom, savvy, and knowledge of her own culture and her people to whom they were returning. Naomi’s wisdom ultimately and Ruth’s careful application of it changed their lives. This meant that Naomi always had something to offer, but she just did not see it. Thank God for the Ruth’s of the world that refuse to move forward without those who do not see their own value. Who are the Ruth’s in the church that can stand with and love them through until they discover or reclaim their own voice and see their own value?

Ultimately, we must be clear that inclusivity is the design and will of God. We were not all supposed to be the same, and none of us has the right to exclude others amongst us because of our differences. In fact, we all need one another to be the body. Each member is a valuable part of our fellowship and must be embraced and loved as such.
Practical Applications

1. Examine your church leadership and board leadership to determine if some diversity and inclusiveness are reflected. For example, are there women on your steward board? Are the voices of young and old in your congregation being considered every time you make major decisions?

2. Examine the laity to determine if there are some members who would like to be more engaged but are not, for some reason. Have conversations about why not. Make the environment comfortable, casual, and inviting. (Translation: the gathering need not be at church. Serve or share food.) Focus groups or one-on-one conversations would be fine. This might be a great project for the Lay Council to take on.

3. Have every member complete a spiritual gifts assessment and find ways to get them involved in an area in which they are gifted. One great assessment is found here (Rock Church, San Diego, CA): https://www.sdrock.com/giftstest/

4. Search for articles, podcasts, and Ted Talks that explain concepts such as diversity, inclusion, equity, implicit bias, intersectionality, and privilege. Have reflective dialogue afterwards to discuss what members learned. Finally, have participants to define these terms in their own words and brainstorm ways to engage them within the life of the church or congregation.

Closing Prayer

All-Wise God,

Thank you for the gift of the body of Christ, the rich diversity of our fellowship, and for calling us all to be part of it. Please teach us to make room for everyone within our communion and transform us so that we know how to love one another better and grow closer together in unity. In your name we pray and give thanks and praise. Amen.
July 2021

When Fellowship Is Stagnant

“So here’s what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart’s been in the right place all along. You’ve got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can’t. The heart regulates the hands. This isn’t so others can take it easy while you sweat it out. No, you’re shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even. As it is written, Nothing left over to the one with the most, Nothing lacking to the one with the least.”
2 Corinthians 8:10-20 (MSG)

Introduction

One really important aspect of fellowship is maintaining a sense of your purpose and mission. Just like anything in life, there is often a lot of enthusiasm at the beginning of a project or experience, but we can later find ourselves burned out, unenthusiastic, and frankly, bored. The work and life of the church are no different. Thankfully, there are ways to keep ourselves motivated and focused on the goals ahead of us, while also maintaining a fresh perspective and an energetic drive.

Stay clear and focused on ministry call and goals

It is vital that as we approach our work together in the church that we spend time discerning what God’s specific call is for our local church, organization, or society. Yes, we know that the entire church is called to make disciples. Indeed, that is the entire mission and purpose of the church. However, who are the people our specific church should engage? Who is in our neighborhood? The elderly? Single moms? Single dads? Are there a lot of children nearby? What about people recently released from prison? Is there some specific group of people that have been placed in your path that God is leading your church to embrace? Who are you called to minister to specifically? What are their needs? And what is the scope of the ministry we are called to do with them? What are the specific goals? Pray and discern all these things and write them down. Then go after them.

This is important because as we continually seek God for specifics of the work that we are called to, we are positioned to make shifts in focus as necessary. When we establish measurable goals and pursue them, then we also know when we have completed them. Then it is time to discern again what God is calling us to next. All of this means that there is constant movement, and progress is happening. It is hard to be stagnant when we go through the process of setting goals, planning our strategy to achieve them, achieving them, giving God thanks, and starting the cycle over again. We get in ruts because there is no clear and specific set of objectives, no clear movement or sense of accomplishment. We are often doing the same routines over and over mindlessly following the general vision and mission, but never accomplishing much. That breeds boredom and almost assures that enthusiasm will wane.
Stay current with the times
The church has often been accused of constantly running behind time, not being relevant to the current generation or culture. There will always be varying perspectives on this, but either way the church is called to serve the present age. This means it needs to know what the most pressing issues are happening in the world-at-large but also within its own community. What is happening in the lives of the people around the church physically or connected to the church socially, and how is the church called to be part of their lives? This is critical if the church is going to position itself to truly make disciples.

COVID-19 forced us all out of our church buildings, and required many of us to learn all the new technology available for video conferencing, streaming, conference calls, etc. We should celebrate the way so many of our churches quickly made the adjustment and continued with the work of ministry. This proves that we can be both agile and relevant, but we need to embrace this attitude in all that we do. The world, the people around us, and we are always changing and evolving, so should the church in order to stay fresh and plugged into the lives of the people.

Stay connected to the Spirit
The only way we can stay focused, relevant and on task in the work of the Lord is to constantly check in with God. God can restore our energy when it is waning. God can give us new clarity and vision when our sight becomes blurred. God can reinvigorate our very beings when we get burned out and are in need of fresh passion and energy. So often we find ourselves running out of steam long before we have accomplished our goals. And this can often be an indication that we are trying to do God’s work without God. We must constantly check our connection to be sure that we are tuned into God’s voice and direction. God has promised to guide us whenever we ask for help. Remember it was the Spirit of God that sent the early church out into the world; the same is true for us.

The Holy Spirit remains on the pulse of life and the cutting edge of everything. While the church may sometimes become monotonous, we can be sure that God is not. God always knows what is happening (omniscient) and can feel, hear, and see the needs of everyone everywhere (omnipresent). If we stay really in tune with God, seeking fresh direction always, then we do not have to fear being out of touch. God will always lead us into new places in order to experience new victories. However, we must be careful to actually follow God and not some static idea we have of who God is. Think of how Jesus was always moving in and out of new places and doing what seemed like very odd things: healing on the Sabbath, talking to foreigners, eating with sinners, hanging out with women. Those things were all very taboo in his culture, but that was him staying connected and doing the will of the Father. There was nothing stagnant about his ministry, but it also wasn’t faddish. It was rooted in purpose and fueled by the Spirit’s power.

Practical Applications
1. When making plans for all ministries and programs of the church, set clearly defined, measurable objectives that will help achieve goals. This way the work we do has a beginning, a middle, and an end. We will know when we have completed an objective and when it is time to discern a new goal and objectives. Vision and missions are not measurable - objectives are.
2. Make time for spiritual and programmatic check-ins that allow your group or congregation to discern where you are and how things are going within the work. A retreat is a great way to do this. In this space you can ask questions about how on target the church is with its goals and objectives, whether they need to be adjusted, how connected the church is to the community and the world around it, if there some new need or ministry that the church should take on, or if a ministry or program needs to end. There needs to be uninterrupted time for reflection on how things are going and if any adjustments need to be made. It would be wise to have an expert in this area to guide this discussion if possible.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,

We give you thanks so much for creating us, saving us, and sending us forth in ministry through the power of your Holy Spirit. We desire so much to please you and to faithfully respond to your call. Give us vision, but also help us craft goals, objectives, and best practices for the work. Give us courage to be open to the move of your Spirit, and to go forth in faith even when we are unsure and afraid. May your will be done in all we do. In Jesus name. Amen.
August 2021

The Hope of Our Fellowship—Having Faith in the Freedom Church!

“God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.” Ephesians 3:20-21 (MSG)

Introduction
In this year of learning and reflecting on how to strengthen our fellowship, we have learned so much about what it takes to really be in communion with one another. We have been challenged to not only choose fellowship, but to also examine the quality of our fellowship and make improvements and changes that bring healing and wholeness. We have considered the vitality that joy brings to our communion and have learned to embrace our differences and to expect occasional clashes and conflict; and rather than being afraid of it, how to work through it for the good of the fellowship. We have been reminded that we ultimately have a call to make disciples and make a difference as we lean into the move of the Spirit, always checking in for fresh direction and insights that will keep us current and on task. But what of our heritage as the Freedom Church? How does that factor in here? What do we hope for our future? Who do we want to become?

The Future of the Freedom Church
As Zionites, we are very proud of our heritage and work in the fight for freedom throughout history. We have been leaders in every important movement for the freedom of the Black community. We were trailblazers in ordaining women clergy. And we are particularly proud to claim Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Frederick Douglas as members of our fellowship. We stand on some mighty big shoulders; and we should certainly spend more time learning our history as freedom fighters and justice seekers and allow that to inspire who we choose to become.

In last month’s lesson, we learned how important it is to get clarity about the specifics of our call; this should be tied directly to who we are. Our ministry, programs, and activities should be rooted in an understanding of ourselves as a church in fellowship with God and each other. How does our heritage further enrich our fellowship? What does it mean to be the Freedom Church today? What does it mean to be freedom fighters and justice seekers in our world today? What particular challenges does this present? What is our vision of who we are and how we show up in the world today?

This is not to suggest that we are not already continuing the tradition of working for freedom and justice because so many of us certainly are. But what does it actually mean to be the Freedom Church in 2020 and beyond? And then what does that inspire us to do? How does the Holy Spirit empower us to move forward? Does the world still need the Freedom Church? If so, what need is God calling us to respond to? How does our heritage give us a guide or blueprint for that work?
Embracing Radical Imagination
This is the time to dream with God about all the possibilities before us. How do we reclaim Pentecost among us, and experience it afresh? What kind of church do we really want to be? What will be the quality and dynamics of our fellowship? Will we be current with the times? Relentless in standing for equality? Agile and ready to move at the Spirit’s notice? Who are we going to be? We have spent time thinking and reflecting all year about what it takes to cultivate and live in true fellowship, and even how to heal it when it is broken. Are we ready to become that fellowship we have imagined? Can we become the 2021 version of the Acts Chapter 2 church that shared its life and all its resources and changed the world? Do we believe this is actually possible or are these just words we say? If you could imagine the church you most wanted to attend, what would it look, feel, and sound like? What are we ready to leave behind so that we can become that church?

The only way to embrace radical imagination is to first believe that anything is possible and with God it is. When envisioning the church you want to see and be part of, do not talk yourself out of it and say it cannot be; just dream. Making wildest dreams come true is God’s expertise, not yours so leave that to the pro. Times are constantly changing, but our calling has not. Meeting the needs of today’s world is completely possible. We simply must embrace a spirit of adventure and the playfulness and innocence of a child, co-creating a shared experience in the best kind of fellowship we could ever hope to experience. A fellowship that fights for freedom, that loves love and cultivates joy and unity. This fellowship loves to laugh and create great memories, though it never loses sight of the future. This fellowship relishes time in communion with God and always hopes for the best. It sticks close like a best friend and works for healing and wholeness for everyone. If we cannot dream of the fellowship we want to be, we can never become it. So have some courage. Have some faith. Dream the most beautiful church you have ever seen. Then partner with the Holy Spirit and each other to create it.

Practical Applications
1. Create educational opportunities so the church may learn the history of our church and its leadership and participation in the fight for freedom. This should include the history of your local communion. Help people embrace this aspect of our heritage and identity. Allow this to influence and to inspire your imagination and dreaming about who we are becoming.

2. Read and discuss Kirk Byron Jones book, Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Purpose (Jossey-Bass, 2007). In this text, the reader is invited to imagine life as a co-created experience in which we are on an adventure with God in living the life we most want to live. What would it be like for the church to do this?
3. Give space for people to explore the questions in the lesson or others you create that invite them to dream of the church they want to experience. For example, plan a Vision Board Retreat! Have a large number of members create vision boards that express what they want to see in their dream church. Then on a different day(s) display them all over the church as if in an art gallery. Give members a chance to walk around the church to view all the boards, then have them get into small groups to discuss what they saw. If there are any themes or commonalities which emerge, take note of that. Finally, have a large discussion and brainstorming session about who they believe they are becoming or who they want to be. Then start planning on how to move forward with that vision.

Closing Prayer

Creator God,

Thank you so much for all we have experienced and learned from you about fellowship. Help us to not fear the beauty of what can be and who we are becoming but teach us to embrace change and the bright future we can create together. Give us deeper faith than we have ever had and the most incredible love we have ever experienced. We cast out doubt, fear, insecurity, or anything that tries to raise itself up against you. May we become who you always dreamed we would be. In Christ’s name and for his sake. Amen.
Resources List

Websites and Video Resources

Faith and Leadership Online Magazine, Duke University, FaithAndLeadership.com

The Rock Church - Spiritual Gifts Test
SDRock.com/giftstest

Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference
SDPConference.info


Books and Articles


Williams, Aronne Yvette. 2014. *Love Like I’ve Never Been Hurt: How To Heal From Heartbreak.* Independence, MO: Aronne Yvette, LLC.


Rev. Arionne Yvette Williams

Arionne earned a Bachelor of Science in Human Development, with a concentration in Child and Adolescent Development with Music (voice) minor, from Howard University in 2005. She continued her studies at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and completed a Master of Divinity, with a concentration in Music Ministry, in 2008. Upon graduation, she was awarded the prestigious Myrtle Saylor Seer Award for Commitment to the Expansion of Women in Scholarship and Ministry. After seminary, she pursued and completed the Certification in Youth and Theology at the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2009. She is an ordained elder in the Missouri Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church and currently serves as Associate Chaplain at the University of Indianapolis. There she oversees worship, teaches courses in Christian vocation, provides pastoral counseling to students, and leads university interfaith activities and initiatives.

Arionne is the author of two books, "The Women of the Bible and You: A Weekly Devotional" and "Love Like I've Never Been Hurt: How To Heal From Heartbreak." Arionne created and taught a 5 week bible women's empowerment bible study called, "iSlay: Secrets of the Savvy Successful Women of the Bible." She has also expanded iSlay Bible Study to include a conference experience for college women at the University of Indianapolis. She is a contributing writer for the Christian Recorder and has also written for Duke University's Faith and Leadership Magazine. She currently serves on the Board for the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, Indianapolis, IN.

Arionne has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors including the Black Girls Rock Award presented by the Xi Tau Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha (2016) and the University of Indianapolis Staff Achievement in Inclusive Excellence (2018). She is a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

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