

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11  
Title: Church Health  
Date: 09.08.19  
Roger Allen Nelson

He spat out at me, “We have no idea what makes for church health. No one knows what a healthy church is. For decades Willow Creek was the pinnacle of what it meant to be the church in America; the whole Bill Hybels thing exposed it as a fraud.”

The friend who said this to me loves Jesus, loves the Bible, seeks the Spirit, is smart and compassionate, and believes the best in others. He’s also been bruised and betrayed by the church and the Christian institutions that he loved and served. And he’s not wrong....

As white evangelicals cling to the Trump presidency,  
as membership in most denominations craters,  
as average worship attendance tops out at about twice a month,  
as celebrity pastors implode and the depravity and cover-up of sex abuse in the Catholic church sickens,  
as we soak in the toxic sludge of American culture,  
as those with no-religious rooting are the fastest growing faith,  
it’s hard to be encouraged about the health of the church.

And yet, while I’m not sure that my friend is wrong, something in me flinched. There has to be some measure of health. There has to be some way to assess what makes for a healthy church? The church of 21<sup>st</sup> century America is a far cry from those first Christ-followers to whom Paul wrote letters, but there still must be some indications of health. There still must be some guides for what we’re aiming at....

Look. I think the only measure that matters is does the church gather and nurture followers of Jesus Christ? Does it make disciples? Does it embody the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Is it an alternative community that lives out (becomes) the gospel?

And, while no church is perfect, and Hope is as flawed and foul as any other church, we’ve tried to follow Philippians 2:1-11 as a guide for how we might live out the gospel. It is a matrix for how we do church. We keep coming back to this passage as a way to assess health, direction, and practice. And in that spirit, this morning let us consider the health of Hope Church.

The beginning of our text is addressed to a community:

*If you (plural) have any encouragement from being united with Christ,  
if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion.... then it will be found in life together.*

Some of you have found authentic community at Hope. You have raised children together, weathered storms together, gone on trips together, and built a life sustaining web together. You may have better friends in other places, but you know that at its best church is an

intergenerational web of mutually dependent people who, to use the language of our text, value others above themselves.

Church health does not depend on preaching panache, musical styles, or programs and projects, but on how we love one another, welcome the stranger, enfold new friends, care for the aging, nurture the young, forgive, practice hospitality, and make space for a variety of perspectives and orientations.

And it's not easy. When we live 45 minutes in all directions, new people wonder how they will find substantive connections, old people harbor old habits, and we've all got busy lives and boatloads of issues, but to embody the gospel is to be in community.

To that end we are working on these initiatives this year:

*Hope4Kids* is an effort to link kids with adults who will pray for, connect with, and encourage them. It is meant to supplement all the other ways that we try to be an intergenerational community. We have about 25 adults signed up and we need more kids to sign up. So, we're going to send out the sign-up letter one more time to families with kids in junior high and high school. We hope you'll talk to and encourage your kid. We believe that they'll be blessed and not weirded out.

There are two new teams taking up new work to enhance community. Ginny Carpenter is leading an effort to consider the atrium and how best that multi-use space can be organized and furnished. Nancy Kwasteniet is gathering a team to consider how we can be more welcoming and inclusive to all sorts of people with all sorts of needs. Both of these efforts are trying to help us be responsive to others and build community.

Council (Elders and Deacons) is still trying to find ways to use the "household" structures as a way to help people connect. And Elders have been thinking about how we might consistently use name-tags...

I know, gross. I hate name tags, but if it helps us take even baby steps to know one another and build meaningful relationships then it's worth whatever awkwardness and annoyance we might feel.

Now, those may seem like typical-churchy-initiatives but against the tide of individualism and loneliness we are longing after, searching for, and trying to build community.

Our text reads that our "relationships with one another" would arise out of the same "attitude of mind." It's an odd phrase because the translator is trying to communicate that "mind" means more than thinking or rationality; it is the fullness of human disposition, psyche, worldview, and a way of relating to creation. And therefore, to follow Christ is not just to be part of a community, but it invites a habit of heart and mind.

David Brooks wrote recently:

*We're living in the middle of a national crisis of solidarity — rising racial bitterness, pervasive distrust, political dysfunction. So, what are the resources we can use to pull ourselves together? What can we draw upon to tell a better American story (than the one*

*Donald Trump tells), one that will unite us instead of divide us, and yield hopeful answers instead of selfish ones?*

Dear friends, we draw on scripture and the resources of the Reformed tradition to tell a better story. We look to the way and will of God as found in Hebrew holy writ and embodied in Jesus to unite us and yield hopeful answers. Even with all of its complexity and obscurity we find our bearings in this ancient text and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But, that calls for a measure of biblical literacy in a post-biblical culture, that calls for the deep roots of the Reformed tradition in a rootless world, and that calls for some manner of investment of time, energy, attention, and self.

A few weeks ago, I sat in on a meeting of Sunday school teachers and their organizers. There were better than a dozen people around the table – all bright, gifted, and eager. There were as many men as women. They were interior decorators, CPAs, biologists, writers, theologians, and nurses.... And, their primary commitment is to help our kids know our story. Their primary commitment is to helping kids learn, inhabit, and shape an “attitude of mind” through scripture.

There are better than 135 kids involved in ministries at Hope. How well we engage them with the story of Jesus is a measure of health. There will be all sorts of disagreements about how we interpret that story but essential to health is a diet of scripture.

To that end we are working on these initiatives this year:

HEAT (Hope Educational Assistance Team) is trying to gather best practices from parents that will help their children learn. We want all kids to be welcomed and learn as best they can. We’re richly blessed with professionals and specialists to help us be resourceful and responsive toward that goal.

In May, after the Sunday School year is over, we will be offering a three-week confirmation class for those who are considering making profession of faith. As we have celebrated all ages at the communion table it has meant doing some rethinking and reconfiguring of rites of passage. This new confirmation class is one such effort.

Bible studies keep popping up at Hope. There is a thriving women’s Bible study, the early sprouts of a men’s study, and conversations about how we might do occasional bread/soup and intergenerational Bible study nights. For all sorts of reasons HARP (Hope’s Association of Retired People) disbanded but there is some “conversatin’ and ruminatin’” on what that it might look like if it were reborn....

And, there are some crucial questions that we want to think about together during this program year. The denomination’s study about human sexuality calls for our attention and the intersection of faith and science seems ripe for exploring. We’re considering ways to best engage the mind of Christ around those questions.

The second half of our text is thought of as one of the first distinctly Christian hymns. Therefore, it’s helpful to think of the first verses of our text as if a preacher was encouraging a congregation, stirring them up, building to a homiletical high point...

*In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had, who...*

And then just at that crescendo the preacher breaks into song.

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather he made himself nothing....*

And out rolls this beautiful hymn about the movement from deity to death. The Greek word for it is *kenosis* ~ emptying. This early hymn proclaims the staggering mystery of the self-emptying God.

When church health is often measured by buildings, budgets, and butts in the seats, or how we feel after worship, the reminder in our text is the calling to *kenosis* ~ the self-emptying of Jesus Christ. And that is to say that we're little more than a liturgical-country-club or a pencil-necked-book-club if our life together is just community and education. To be shaped in the mind of Christ is to be engaged in this world in love and service.

A third measure of health is servanthood, mission, cultural engagement, *kenosis*....

We exist to empty ourselves for the sake of others. That's hard to define and even harder to live into, but it is a mark of health. By vocation and avocation, we're called to pursue, bear witness to, and empty our very selves for the sake of creation's *shalom*.

Let me point to a couple initiatives we're undertaking this year.

One is to support and encourage Moises and Erin Pacheco in their calling to plant a new church in the city. I like to think of it as Hope in East Garfield Park....

Now, the CRC has an abysmal record in church planting. It's not in our DNA. We can't seem to shed our gifts or our baggage. Who knows.... And, church planting is exceedingly hard work. Almost a year into trying to gather a core and build momentum, Erin and Mo can testify that it's harder than they thought....

But! But, to stick with the health metaphor, if this past year was a sort of gestation period, there are currently some hopeful signs of contractions, and progress toward birth. These next few months and a series of gatherings for worship will be crucial and we will continue to stand with, pray for, encourage and support the Pacheco's and their calling to birth a new multi-ethnic, intergenerational, church.

Second thing. We're connected and committed to a denomination that makes an oversized impact for its relatively small size. Paying 100% of our Denominational Ministry Shares is a big ask. They make up almost of a 1/3 of our budget. And most CRC churches are not able to reach that goal. We try to. There is an insert in your bulletin today with a clear explanation of what they do. Please read it. Later....

Our text descends to death on a cross and from there it reaches to the highest place in heaven wherein all people – in time and space – fall on their knees to worship Jesus Christ. The movement is from *kenosis* to cosmic lordship. Our text starts in being united in Christ, traverses through the cross, and ends in all creation joined in worship. And, notice, by the way, that the worship is rooted in the crucifixion and not in the resurrection....

Worship is the sustaining heartbeat that has carried Hope through all sorts of triumphs and tribulations. It is the one constant that gathers us together. We are united in bowing and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Ours is something of an acquired taste. Not unlike coffee or hoppy beer our liturgical-folksy-blended-worship takes some getting used to. And while the essential core and quality remains the same we continue to tweak the edges to be hospitable and accessible. We are consistently led by intergenerational voices in prayer, liturgy, and music. We are passing on the best of hymnody while trying to seamlessly incorporate new music. We invest in the gifts of Dora Diephouse, Lynn Hollender, Dave and Bev Baar, and Erin Pacheco. Each brings a unique musical voice and each is charged with drawing out the gifts of others. We are richly blessed! This last year has seen a new sound system, changes to the worship folder format, Schuyler Roozeboom's leadership in manner of media, and surprisingly well received podcasts.

Dear friends, in the better than 17 years I've been at Hope I've never called it "my church." It is Christ's church or your church. I serve at your call and when that service no longer makes sense, or helps, I trust you'll tell me. But, I also couldn't be prouder of our life together.

We've got lots of flaws,  
and there are all sorts of churches for all sorts of people,  
but I love what we're trying to do in community, education, kenosis/mission, and worship.

I'm not sure that "health" is ever used in scripture to describe congregational life, more likely it's a contemporary organizational/leadership term. I think we're pretty healthy by lots of measures and marks. But, I also know that health is fragile and fleeting. And it doesn't take much for a congregation to start a slide that it can't reverse. It doesn't take much to get caught up in a cultural/demographic shift that sucks the life out of church. I agree with my friend there are ways in which we have no idea what church health means or looks like....

So, I'm not sure that health is the right measure, but I am sure that faithfulness is. We are called to faithfully embody the gospel, in community, education, mission/*kenosis*, and worship. May each of us, empowered by the Spirit, take up that calling with both our gifts and resources, and our flaws and failings. May we offer them all to Jesus Christ, the Lord,

*to the glory of God the Father.*

Amen.