

THE NEW CHURCH

Message from Bruce Van Blair

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Of concern to most of us, and perhaps especially
as we think of those who may join with us
who have not participated in a church with us in the past

First of all, let us be clear: If we do not become a genuine faith family – a community of people with strong and growing relationships – we are not a church. Love is our product (maybe faith and hope and a few other things too), and if we “have not love,” as Paul said, we are nothing. Of course, I think Paul was talking first and foremost about love for God (he was rabbinically trained and knew the commandments). In any case, we come out at the same place: If we love God, who loves us, we do end up loving each other. Only, this is the Spirit’s doing, not something we can achieve by grunting harder.

But the thought has and will continue to cross all of our minds, if we are an online church: How can we build relationships? “How do you hug over the internet?” We have already said we hope to have in-person retreats each year so we can see each other face-to-face. I, of course, have concerns about all of this, seeing as I have never pastored a church that was electronically based rather than land and building based. So I have wanted to share some perspective with you, though my hunch is most of you have already come to many of the same realizations yourself.

Our relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus, on which all the rest depends, is not land or building based – it is not dependent on physical proximity as we normally think of it. Sometimes our relationship with the Spirit feels more real than anything we experience physically, so we do not always stop to think of the mystery and magnitude of the Spirit’s coming to us. But the point is, we already know realities which are not dependent on physical proximity.

Some of the most powerful relationships in my life are with people not physically present. I have bonds with Paul and Jeremiah and Luther, and quite a few others too, which are stronger and closer than most of my bonds with other humans who are physically alive. I know them better, talk with them more, feel their influence (and their approval or disapproval) more clearly than I do with all but the closest of my current friends. Time and distance can be real barriers, but they are not the barriers we usually take them for.

Because of spiritual disciplines and theological study, I am constantly reminded to spend time with Paul (or Peter, Jeremiah, Luther, Joseph, or Samuel, etc.). But what of others? Most of you have relationships with people who have “passed on.” You still think of them and sometimes feel communication with them. I am not making this up; you have told me so. I do as well, most often with my father, but from time to time with various others.

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There is often a “shyness” about this part of reality, I suppose because skeptics and those who call themselves “realists” (because they pay attention to only a very narrow portion of reality) are quick to sneer or talk about wishful thinking. Since it is often appropriate for us to be humble and open about our subjective experience (is there any other kind of experience?) and since our minds really are powerful, we pause to wonder: Are we making things up? Even on careful examination, it often does not appear to be likely. We really are helped, guided, and feel supported and cared about. For some of us, prayer is more real than most objective reality, which is nearly always a very narrow and limited piece of what is going on all around us. So I am particularly guilty of wishful thinking. I *wish* those who have never explored the interior life or opened themselves to prayer or the presence of the Holy Spirit would keep quiet about things they obviously know nothing about and have no interest in learning about.

I am not trying to say everything that needs to be said on this subject. Just want to get us thinking about the subject with fewer negative concerns and with more open and legitimate eagerness and hope. There is no reason to assume or expect that our “fellowship” will be blighted or limited because of time or distance. Over the years since I left my last brick-and-mortar parish, I have lost the edge on a great number of relationships that were both meaningful and important to me. But this is true because I put them “on hold” on purpose. I stopped encouraging them because I did not want to interfere with the ways in which the church needed to regroup and gather around new leadership and apart from my role as Pastor there. At the same time, there have been some relationships (for various reasons) which have continued to grow and which are very close and meaningful to me, and the physical distance has not lessened their reality or their import at all. I consider this to be a strong hint! For myself at least, there is more than sufficient proof that physical proximity is not the major or essential ingredient to significant relationship or true community. “For all the saints” is the hymn that comes to mind.

Finally, I do note there are hundreds of churches all over the landscape that are proving on a regular basis that physical proximity is not a guarantee of genuine or growing relationships, nor is it a key to authentic spiritual community. The New Church may fail to achieve its goals in these areas. But if it does, it will not be because of our electronics.

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