

LIFE TOGETHER AS CHRIST'S BODY

All church workers serve in a context—in individual congregations, institutions, or schools. These organizations can be health-enhancing. Or they can be places about which members and workers say, “It makes me sick.”

Organizational health is central to the health of the members of the organization. It is no different with congregations and schools. Thus, when we want to support church workers, we begin by focusing on organizational health. St. Paul gives this significant emphasis in his writings. In Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12–13, and Romans 12, the apostle paints a magnificent picture of the Christian community. Together, the community of believers forms the Body of Christ, in relationship with one another because of Christ’s work for us.

These relationships are not simply human bonds, forged by the convergence of human needs. Christ Himself has created them; He sustains them. These relationships are His gift to us.

Ever since Jill had worked on the annual spaghetti dinner with Anne, she felt irritated every time Anne came into view. “Anne really likes to have her own way,” Jill thought, “She just rubs me the

wrong way. If she would just ramp down some of her pushiness, maybe I could at least stand her.”

During their evening devotions together one night, Jill and her husband, Steve, happened upon 1 Corinthians 12. Two verses caught Jill’s heart and mind: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13) and “But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose” (1 Corinthians 12:18).

“I am very convicted by these passages,” Jill said softly. “I have let my irritation with Anne cloud the bond that Christ has given us. I have seen her as pushy, as Anne-the-Irritant rather than as a person God has placed with me in the Body of Christ. I wonder what God is teaching me?”

Jill had no easy answers to this new question, at least not yet. But the Word had grabbed Jill’s attention. Steve and Jill closed their devotions together in prayer, and Jill resolved to discuss this emerging spiritual issue with Deaconess Shirley in the next day or so.

That people in the Christian community differ from one another is self-evident. It’s underscored by all the “body language” Paul uses. But Paul also makes it clear that despite our differences, every part of the Body belongs and is held together in, through, and by Christ. Consider:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head,

into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15–16)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7)

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

We are connected to one another in the Christian community not simply by the bonds of human relationships and good will, not simply by the bonds of emotion and personal experience, but fundamentally, we are joined together in and through Christ. We celebrate the gifts Christ gives each of us for the good of all of us, and we work to help one another enhance and grow the gifts Christ has given. We want to see the Body grow as it “builds itself up love” (Ephesians 4:16).

Christ calls us to this. Paul writes, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Ephesians 4:1). Because the community exists by virtue of Jesus

Christ, the community is marked by certain behavioral and ethical characteristics. Paul identifies some of these in Ephesians 4:25–32.

- **TELL THE TRUTH.** This is key. It includes not lying to or about one another. It also includes telling the whole truth rather than partial-truths. Paul encourages us, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25). Paul grounds this first ethic in God’s grace, in the reality that Christ has made us members with one another.
- **DO NOT LET EMOTION CAUSE DIVISION.** Strong emotions can drive wedges between people. Satan lurks, ready to exploit this truth. That’s one reason Paul writes, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26–27). People will have emotional responses to one another’s words and actions. Apparently, the emotion is not the problem; how we deal with our emotions can be. As Christ’s baptized people, we want to use emotion in constructive ways to build up the Body. We address conflicts that arise; we don’t allow them to simmer and grow. This is part of the spiritual warfare God calls us to engage.
- **WORK.** Among other things, work has a utilitarian purpose in the Body: it provides resources we can give

to those in need. Again, Paul writes, “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Ephesians 4:28). We work for ourselves, but we also work for the sake of others.

- **SPEAK GRACIOUSLY.** We intend that our words build up others in Christ’s Body. We want what we say to nourish, sustain, and support others. Destructive speech has no place in the Body. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29).
- **REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM.** In Baptism, Christ has sealed us as His own. Our redemption is secure. Even so, we can sadden the Spirit of God by our words and actions. Indeed, the Spirit may weep over our behaviors. Paul writes, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). Our baptismal seal comforts us, even as it calls us to new ways of being and doing. Though we sometimes fail, Christ’s cross is ever before us, sustaining us.
- **GET RID OF THE NEGATIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE STUFF!** “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31). Paul’s language includes no ambiguity. The term he uses, “be put away,” is very strong.

- **LIVE OUT THE CHRISTLIKE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS OF YOUR NEW IDENTITY!** “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32). Once again, St. Paul returns to his central, foundational theme: Christ has forgiven us; Christ propels us into relationship with others. Those relationships take as their template Christ’s own behaviors. We emulate His example by His grace.
- **LOVE.** When you get right down to it, the core issue is love—love made possible by the love Christ first showed us, love animated by our membership in the Body of Christ. Everything comes from Christ. Paul writes, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1–2). There is no genuine community without Christ, who gave Himself into death for us and who holds all things together.

Paul created a similar list in Romans 12. In addition to the behaviors listed in Ephesians 4, the apostle includes these in Romans 12:

- **SHARE FEELINGS LIBERALLY WITH OTHERS.** This includes feelings both of a positive and negative variety. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,” the text tells us (Romans 12:15). This sharing of feelings would seem to point to the capacity of people to empathize with one another and to help one another more deeply understand experiences.

- **AVOID VENGEFUL THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS.** Instead, look for the good. “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (Romans 12:17). We focus on the positive and on doing positive things, even in the midst of evil behaviors by others.
- **MAKE IT YOUR AIM TO DO GOOD.** As God’s baptized children, we need not let evil overwhelm us. The apostle counsels, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). These words sound a note of hopefulness. Christ was victorious over sin, death, and the devil. As we cling to our Savior, evil cannot overcome us.

Paul paints a clear picture of the Christian Community. Christ creates the Body, and He is its core and center. Diversely and abundantly gifted, this Body builds itself up in love as the Spirit strengthens it. Claimed by Christ, members of His Body fulfill certain ethical standards, imperatives, and expectations as we relate to one another and as we interact with those outside the fellowship. Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 both point to our central motivation—love.

Jill had a lot on her mind when she met with Deaconess Shirley. Her anger and irritation at Anne had turned inward. Now she was unhappy with herself. “I ought to be dealing with this in a different way,” she lamented to Deaconess Shirley. As they talked, the way seemed clear: Jill would need to talk directly with Anne. Deacon-

ess Shirley reminded Jill of the forgiveness that Jill had received in the work of Christ. She and Jill prayed together. The next day Jill called Anne and invited her out for tea.

The conversation went well. Jill explained she had been reacting to Anne's behavior and asked for forgiveness. Anne recognized that her assertiveness had been a problem for Jill. Anne asked Jill for forgiveness for her insensitivity. Together the two women rejoiced that their relationship had been repaired and for the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst. Most certainly Christ was present in their conversation, for that was and is His promise.

In words and actions, Jill and Anne lived out the description of the Body in the letter James wrote to the Early Church:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:13–16)

Like everything in the Church, our support for the workers God sends to us grows out of our identity as the

community created by Christ, His Body. We respect one another, and we treasure the diverse gifts our Lord has given each member. We use our gifts to build up the Body, and we follow the ethical and behavioral imperatives God has given, imperatives that are necessary for the Body to flourish.

SPEAKING PERSONALLY

When we join forces in organizations, we often can accomplish much more than we ever could as individuals. But organizational dynamics can wear people down instead of building them up; those dynamics can help members stay healthy or help sicken them. You've probably seen and perhaps even experienced this. I know I have.

I have also worked through a number of exercises and workshops designed to promote organizational health. Many books have this as their theme. I've referenced some of them in the "Additional Resources" section at the end of the book.

Still, if I do not begin and end with Christ, my work with organizations is neither churchly nor, in the most holistic sense, healthy. I used to think that if we opened and closed with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide us, that that would ensure success. I ignored one key and often missing ingredient—my own responsibility and willingness to hold myself and others accountable for healthy, Christlike behaviors.

The most faith-challenging experiences of my life have come as I have observed the inner workings of congregations and church organizations. At times, what I have

seen has shocked me. I've watched as leaders allowed, condoned, or even supported uncivil behaviors—all under the guise of piety and righteousness. Only the content of the conversation seemed to matter. No one challenged or even discussed behavior. The Pauline emphasis on behavioral ethics that follow from membership in the Body of Christ was somehow lost.

In writing this, I am painfully aware of my own shortcomings in this regard. The imperatives Paul sets before us in Ephesians, Romans, and 1 Corinthians make it clear that I fall dramatically and radically short of the ideal. The picture Paul paints differs drastically from my own sinful words and deeds. Recognizing this reality, I flee for refuge to Christ's cross.

Yet, assured of His forgiveness, those ethical imperatives beckon me to a healthier life, as they beckon all humankind. They call all congregations toward becoming healthier organizations. They offer hope, the hope that flows from the truth that the Body of Christ is centered in Christ and enabled by Him to become more like Him.

All of this helps me live in optimism and hope that our congregations, institutions, and schools can become more and more places where St. Paul's words ring true:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1–2)

