

# TOGETHER IN A COMMON LIFE



'They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), in the breaking of bread and prayers'. In these words, Luke describes the life of the first Christians. (Acts 2.42)

*Koinonia*, usually translated 'fellowship', is a very rich word. It can also be translated 'sharing, participation, communion'. That common life is a sharing in the quality of relationship, which we believe, is at the very heart of God's own eternal Life.

God is not the detached 'unmoved Mover' of some philosophies, living in eternal solitude. Rather, Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in eternal relationship, each giving to and receiving from the others from all eternity. God is the passionate God of Love who willed his embodiment within his own creation in Christ. The Father also sent his 'other' hand, the Spirit, to open up to us ever new vistas of the glorious potential of his creation.

As Christians we believe that communion is at the very heart of God's eternal Being.

We are called to *koinonia* because God has made us in the divine image for a life of relationship and mutual giving and receiving patterned on his own life. We are constituted as persons and discover ourselves as such within our developing relationships with God and one another.

So, *koinonia* means participating

- in God's love
- in the gifts of the Spirit
- in the life Christ offers us
- in God's mission.

God calls us *together* to learn with one another and from one another, to share together and to work for him together, to be - in our togetherness and love for one another - a sign of his love for the world. *Koinonia* is about responsible, accountable sharing, as we journey on together, responsible to God and responsible to and for one another.

*Koinonia* is central in every dimension of the Church's life. In the local church, each member brings unique gifts and insights. These are both special gifts or charisms of the Spirit and insights that come out of that person's particular experience of life, shaped by their particular human location. *Koinonia* is lived out in local church life as we discover, delight in, learn from and

Listening to and receiving from others in a spirit of humility

minister to one another at the local level. The quality of our *koinonia* is tested out as we learn to listen to and receive from others in a spirit of humility, as we learn to cope with the tensions that are inherent in human life while we remain a company of sinners.

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*Koinonia* involves mutual respect and listening on the part of everyone - ordained ministers, lay leaders and all people. *Koinonia* starts at the local level but does not end there. Each local church is 'fully church' because of the presence of the risen Christ who has promised to be 'where two or three gather in my name'. However, each local church is also made 'catholic' or 'universal' because of the presence of the Spirit in it constantly calling it to openness to the concerns and gifts of every other local church from whatever 'tradition'.

Every local church is called to acts of *recognition, reception* and *inter-dependence*. Each church is called to *recognise* authentic Christian life and service wherever encountered in any other Christian community. Each church is called to an open *reception* of the experience and gifts of the other local churches. Each church is called to establish *inter-dependence* or connectedness by which it may make responsible decisions with others in matters of common concern.

In 1987, the Churches in Britain and Ireland pledged themselves 'to move from co-operation to commitment'. They said:

- We can no longer be content to be separate.
- We need one another's gifts.
- We need to use resources wisely.

In sum, we need to share God's love with one another and the world. The 'Common Life', *koinonia*, is at the heart of Christian living in all our varied traditions.

As English Christians, we have a very rich heritage: Anglican and Free Church, Catholic and Orthodox, Black-majority and new churches. *Within* each of our Churches there is also much variety. From this we can learn respect for the variety we encounter in other traditions.

We have much to give to one another and to the rest of the world. What we have to give to the world is, above all, a pattern and model of human relationship, based upon mutual trust, confidence, respect on the part of the community for the individual and his or her gifts, and on the part of the individual respect for the wider interests and wisdom of the community.

Separation is an evil, but, despite this, there has been a 'rich bestowal of grace which is meant to embellish the *koinonia*'. John Paul II

The 'Common Life' is an integrated whole of worship, mission and service. In worship our vision of God's will for his world is developed and we receive the grace and inspiration to serve him in the world. All aspects of Christian living form a common life and mission.

So what can we do?

We can certainly learn from what is already happening in various places.

#### **Beddington & Wallington Churches' Mission Statement**

- share God's love with all people.
- meet for regular bible study.
- meet for joint worship in one another's traditions
- work for justice and peace
- share in acts of witness

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At the 1987 Nottingham Conference of the *Not Strangers But Pilgrims* Process, the Churches in England said: 'Unity comes alive as we learn to live in one another's traditions'.

**At Telford**, common worship in varying traditions is held each month. *'We have found it possible for Christians from all traditions to share in worship of other forms, and then, over coffee, to explore the differences positively and creatively in a non-threatening environment.'*

This is why joint worship in one another's traditions and Bible study are so important. We discover things we had not experienced before.

There are also many issues of poverty and social justice in our own country that the individual churches are scarcely addressing. We should address them together and will be more effective when we do.

**Churches Together in South Yorkshire** held a *Poverty Hearing* to listen to stories of personal experience of poverty. They have formed a *Church Action on Poverty* group to continue the dialogue between the public and those responsible for public services and policies in the city.

When we learn to live and share *together* in God's peace and justice, we will the more effectively share those gifts of God with wider society.

Over the last few years, many valuable suggestions have been made as to how we might deepen our common life. We can:

- ✓ pray for one another's churches in our locality at our main Sunday service;
- ✓ proclaim our common identity by adding to our notice boards 'Churches Together in X' below the title of our local church;
- ✓ share church magazines and newsletters so that we become aware of one another's concerns;
- ✓ take account of one another's agendas.

Sharing in a common life means being ready to give to others and to receive from them.

In 1992, the **Liverpool Methodist District Synod** added to its agenda questions on the work that it could offer to or ask ecumenical partners to do.

A very good example could be the reception of the Baptist Union's *Core Values* document by other churches. The Baptists add questions about how we do these things in the local church, in the national denomination and in society. Translated into ecumenical terms, this means questions about how we live these core values in local Churches Together groups and Local Ecumenical Partnerships, in our country, and nationally and internationally.

#### **Five Core Values of a Gospel People**

- a prophetic community
- an inclusive community
- a sacrificial community
- a missionary community
- a worshipping community

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In pondering these things, we remember that the ground and the goal of all our thinking and action is God's Kingdom. We remember that the Church Universal is called to be 'sign, instrument and first fruits of that Kingdom'. Its vocation is 'progressively to image the Kingdom'.

Our sharing in a common life is integral to God's plan. We cannot love Jesus without loving all those whom He also calls his own. Our unity is for the sake of the wider unity of humankind.

Learning to share with all God's people, in prayer and worship, witness and service to the Church and the world is not an optional extra; it is essential to following Jesus.

We need to ask ourselves regularly:

what have we learnt from other Christians about

- celebrating God's love in worship?
- serving others in Christ's name?
- working for kingdom values of peace and justice?
- making the kingdom hope credible in the quality of our fellowship?

The traditional Methodist Covenant Service included this prayer for forgiveness:

'If we have made no ventures in fellowship...'

And, in all these respects, what *new* insights have we realised, what *new* patterns of celebration, love and service have we developed *together* as God's Pilgrim People?

The common journey to God's Kingdom is the most exciting one we will ever make!

You are invited to send your comments on this material to Common Life at Churches Together in England, 27 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9HH or email to [commonlife2001@churches-together.net](mailto:commonlife2001@churches-together.net). Your response can then be incorporated into the website, [www.churches-together.net](http://www.churches-together.net).

Copies of this leaflet may be obtained from Churches Together in England, 10 for £2 incl. p&p. You may photocopy this leaflet, download it from the website, or obtain it as a rtf file by email from [commonlife@churches-together.net](mailto:commonlife@churches-together.net). Feel free to adapt the text for particular local situations. Please acknowledge Text © Churches Together in England 2001.



TOGETHER  
in a COMMON LIFE

O God, Holy and Eternal Trinity,  
We pray for your Church in all the world.  
Sanctify its life; renew its worship;  
Empower its witness; heal its divisions;  
Make visible its unity.

Lead us, with all our brothers and sisters,  
Towards communion in faith, life and witness  
So that, united in one body by the one Spirit,  
We may together witness to the perfect unity of your love.

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