



Present for one another in *God's family of the church*

David Thompson highlights some of the challenges experienced in expressing our life together as God's people today and ponders some opportunities to think about that differently.

I'm sure you have noticed how it is a feature of a lot of our worship services that we decide to keep our distance from one another. In a large building that is no longer full, rather than sit beside each other, the worshipping congregation is dispersed here, there and everywhere, usually as far from the front as possible. What is it that makes us choose to do that? Why is it that sitting beside someone else in church, unless they are family, has come to feel so much like the invasion of personal space?

This kind of physical arrangement of the worshipping congregation may be symptomatic of a wider approach to our participation in the life of the church. Often it has come to look a lot like that begins and ends with me and my personal relationship with God, to

the exclusion of the New Testament's picture of church as a community of brothers and sisters in the family of God.

The 'one another' sayings scattered throughout the New Testament paint a picture of church that is up close and personal. Among many other things, we are told we are to: greet one another (Romans 16:16); care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25); serve one another (Galatians 5:13); love one another (John 13:34); be

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devoted to one another (Romans 12:10); build one another up (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11); be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32); bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2); comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18); encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11); speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19); pray for one another (James 5:16); stir one another up to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24); and show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9).

It is difficult to imagine doing any of that while keeping our distance from one another. It all sounds so up close and personal, perhaps even uncomfortably so in today's individualistic, privatised world.

Present

FOR ONE ANOTHER IN GOD'S FAMILY OF THE CHURCH

The challenge of time, the opportunity of space

One of the current challenges to expressing and experiencing the kind of life in community that the New Testament pictures the church to be is a widespread sense of time poverty in our lives today. It is common to hear people say how busy their lives feel. There may be many reasons for that, driven both by expectations others have of us and expectations about life that we place upon ourselves.

Allied to this feeling of busyness, is a growing expression of weariness. It can't just be coincidence that as many of the institutions in society which are the biggest employers show signs of cracking under the strain of underinvestment and staff shortages that the stresses and demands that result take an ever-increasing toll on the population as a whole. Time, energy and appetite for participation in church life all seem to be suffering as a result.

However, conversely, where intentional space is carefully and creatively crafted for people to be together beyond the worship service, there are signs in congregations of a growing desire for participation by members in wider aspects of church life. That can be true of early morning prayer times, daytime Bible studies for mums with young children, occasional get-togethers in men's ministry, even a cup of tea in the church hall after the service.

Perhaps the change is from big and often, to little and less often, but maybe that is proving a better fit for the rhythms and routines that shape most of our lives today.

More of our time, or more of ourselves?

Whatever the truth of whether we really are time poorer, or that we always have time for what is really important to us, requests to give more of our time to church activities aren't yielding the kind of responses that they used to in previous generations. Might it be that church life has grown bloated, overly segregated by age and gender, heavy with too many meetings for meetings' sake?

Perhaps a better way to think about increasing congregational participation in church life is to ask not that we give more of our time, but how we can give more of ourselves when we are together.

How can our gatherings continue to provide space for Scripture, prayer, praise, necessary business, but also create space for sharing, discussion, conversation that enable us to actually engage with one another? What would it mean for a midweek Bible study to strike that balance? A kirk session meeting? A young people's discipleship group? A meeting of Presbyterian Women? A Sunday school class?

That will require more than a change of programme however, it needs a re-programming of our understanding that we come to participate with others in church life, not to consume or spectate as an individual. For some of us that will be more immediately comfortable than others, but we can all grow into it. The more reflective, listening introvert has as much to give and receive as the more outgoing, talkative extrovert.

Present for one another in God's family

Shaping the right environments for being together goes such a long way towards developing a different culture for living together as the people of God. Even the way we set out the chairs can make all the difference. There are times for us all to be sitting facing the front. But there are also times for us to be sat facing one another. Thinking more deeply about that and pushing past our innate desire to be together in the well-worn ways that are safe and familiar to us can be an important first step in being present *to* one another, towards genuinely being present *for* one another in the family of God.

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So, let's ask questions about how we will be together, as well as how often. When is the best time, as well as how much time we have? What do we hope to achieve when we meet, as well as what do we have to get through?

God calls us to be present for one another in his family. Why not start by shuffling up the pew on Sunday to at least get up close, if not personal, with that other person who just happens to be your brother or sister in Christ?

Rev David Thompson is PCI's Secretary for the Council of Congregational Life and Witness.