

Why Do We Have Social Activities?

Have you ever thought about the word *fellowship*? It's not a word we use much outside of church. But in the WELS, we use fellowship for a lot of things: for our teaching about which churches we can work with and which ones we can't. We use the word to talk about being one in Christ – our fellowship within the WELS. We also use the word to talk about social activities. We often call them “fellowship activities.” Sometimes, we even say, “We had some fellowship.” We use the word that way because we believe that we are a fellowship, a gathering of people, even a family under God. Those activities are an expression of that oneness. That really brings me to the last of the why questions we've been talking about for the last several weeks. It was the hardest one to formulate because I wanted to say something like, “Why do we fellowship together?” but I didn't think that would be clear. But the question that I came up with isn't much better: **why do we have social activities?**

Maybe that question surprises you. Maybe you think that's really what church should be doing. You might even compare us to other churches that you've belonged to or to the way Peace worked in the past and feel that we're not doing much of this at all. I've heard about a lot of things that used to be done here at Peace, like pancake breakfasts and dart ball tournaments and bowling leagues. Sometimes, people will tell me that other churches do a better job of having activities for their youth to participate in. Maybe there is room for improvement in this area.

But why does a church do things like that? What's the purpose? Last week, I made a point of saying that this isn't a social club. It's church. This is where God comes to serve us with word and sacrament. How does socializing fit in? Well, the most obvious answer is simply the joy of being with people who share our faith. Most Sundays, when I want to start Bible class, I can't right away because everybody's talking. Now, I do need to start class. But everybody is talking and laughing and yes ignoring me because they enjoy seeing each other. That is a blessing from God.

But does social interaction serve a deeper purpose in the church? I think it does. It helps us get to know each other so that we can serve each other. You have to know what a person needs to help them. You have to know a person to be able to show love to them in a meaningful way. You have to know a person to be willing to ask for help. Even when we're praying for someone, you have to know what to pray for. I can sit in my office and run through the directory and pray for every one of you. But in some cases, it might be fairly generic: “Lord strengthen this member in their faith and remind them of your love.” That's a worthwhile thing to pray. But if I know that you have a surgery coming or that you're anxious about how your child is doing in school, I can pray specifically about those things. But I have to know you well enough to have heard about them. You have to know me well enough to share them.

In this sinful and broken world, there will always be hurts. There will always be needs. God calls all of us to love him by loving each other. God calls all of us to serve him by serving each other. In the economy that God has set up for the church in this sinful world, sometimes we get to be the person who serves. And sometimes we have to be the person who needs serving. Now, obviously, we'd rather be the person who serves. It feels good to help someone in need. It's a blessing from God. But every one of those situations needs someone who is hurting or grieving or sick. God calls us to serve and help, so that means he has to call us sometimes to be the one who needs to be served and helped. Since it is a blessing for me to exercise my faith in Christ by helping you, it is a blessing for me to have people in my life who need that help. When I have to be that hurting person, God is using me to bless my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fellowshipping – socializing with each other is often how we learn what others need. I'm sure there're people in this congregation that you know better than others. Think about one of those people you know really well. What do they need your prayers for? How can you help them? It might take a few minutes just to list everything because you know them. Now think of someone who you barely know here at church. What do they need? What prayers can you offer for them? That's a lot harder isn't it? Because God made us social creatures, fellowship activities help us learn those things.

So how well do we actually do in this area? Some people might find their fellowship here to be very rewarding. Some of their best friends in the world go to church here. If you have family here, if you grew up here, if you've watched your kids go through school here and you've gone on field trips and watched games and

heard your kids sing in church with other parents, you might fall into that group. But if you're new here, do you find it easy or hard to break into the group? My experience as tells me that new people might find it to be difficult. They might even describe our church as "cliquey". Now, to be fair, that might be more perception than reality. It's always hard to break in to a new group. But this is church. This is the family of God on earth. We don't want new people to feel like it's hard to break in.

To be able to serve each other, we have to trust each other enough to open up about what's going on in our lives. That's the part that maybe we need to work on more. Are we interested enough in each other to reach out to people we don't know and make them feel welcome? When I was 19, I joined the army. After spending a year on the west coast, I was sent to Texas for five or six months. Thanksgiving fell during that time and a friend in Killeen, Texas invited me to come for the holiday. Killeen is right outside Ft. Hood, a huge army base. We had a church there, so on Sunday, I went. When I walked in, there was lady standing there with two grade school girls. She walked up to me and introduced herself and welcomed me to the church. She asked me where I was from and what brought me there. I only visited the one time. But six months later, when I was Germany, I ran into this army family again. They remembered that one visit and suddenly we were old friends. Thirty-five years later, they're still some of our closest friends.

What did that Christian lady do that was so special? She was just friendly. She expressed the love of Christ to someone she didn't know. She asked questions and tried to make me feel welcome. That's all it takes to begin to build relationships. So why doesn't it happen more? Do you know what I think the biggest reason is? Fear. It's scary to talk to people you don't know. Nobody ever believes this when I say it, but I'm a very shy person. I cover for it by overcompensating. But it's scary for me to start or to jump into a conversation. Do you ever feel that fear?

There are other reasons. It takes commitment to say, "I'm going to talk to someone at church I don't know." Most of the time, we're thinking about something else when we get here. We're running late. We need to ask this person about something. We have to get home in time to get dinner on. We're not trying to blow anybody off. Our heads are just somewhere else.

Sometimes, it just isn't a priority for us. We have all the friends we need. We often see that with the fellowship events we plan here at church. The same small group of people attend. The rest of the congregation doesn't show up. It's not a priority because the church has changed. In our grandparents' day, people who went to church tended to fulfill all their social needs at church. Their family was there. They made friends there. They formed softball leagues and bridge clubs with church people and that's who they got close to. Quite often they found their spouse at church. Those days are gone. Today, most families have both parents working, so they don't have time to socialize with people at church that they don't know that well anyway. They have social obligations at work. It surprises me how often my wife's job plans social events. If you came into the congregation as an adult, unless you just moved here, you already have friends and family that you do things with. You didn't come here to join a social club.

So is all that a problem? Well it's hard for us to serve and support each other if we don't know each other. It's hard for me to pray for you and for you to pray for me if we don't know each other very well. I also think it's a problem when the family of God is so low on our priority list that we can't find the time to engage with them. I think it's a problem when fear paralyzes us – and I know a lot about that. It isn't open sin. But it is our sinful flesh getting in the way. That's what makes us fearful and lazy and finally, selfish. We should recognize those things for what they are. Now everyone does have priorities. God calls us parents to care for our children and us children to care for our elderly parents. God calls us to be faithful workers and good citizens and good stewards of our property and means of income. I'm not trying to heap guilt up on people who are trying to be the Christians God calls us to be.

But the fact remains, if we were perfect in our faith, we would never be too afraid to talk to each other or to share with each other or to trust one another. If we didn't have sin in our hearts, we'd never struggle to figure out which God given responsibility comes first. We'd never feel guilty for neglecting any of them. The fact that we do shows that we need Jesus. He is the only answer to feeling guilty because he is the only answer to being guilty. Jesus is the best friend we could ever have. He never failed to reach out in love to people who needed it. He always promoted trust and openness. He built our fellowship, in fact, the Bible calls us "the body of Christ." He was perfect for all the times that we weren't, for all the times we were selfish or uninterested or just too afraid to reach across the divide that separates us in this sinful world. That counts for us.

Then Jesus died for all the times that our sinful nature got in the way of us building a close and loving family under God. He died and paid for all the times our sin turned people off and drove them away. He died and paid for the times we weren't willing to make the effort to make people feel welcomed here. His blood washed all that sin away. He rose to tell us that. He rose to assure us that we are forgiven, that we are a part of God's eternal family and in heaven, we will have perfect fellowship with God and with each other forever.

And Jesus rose to make us his body here. The word and sacrament change our hearts and give us courage. The Holy Spirit working in that message of forgiveness makes us want to serve each other and willing to be the one that is served. The gospel brought this congregation into existence and the gospel of Jesus Christ is the lifeblood of our oneness here. The Holy Spirit is working.

Rejoice in what Christ has done and is still doing for you. In joy, let's work harder to build our family here. God has forgiven us. Let's forgive each other for every time we failed to show love, for every time that we didn't listen or help when that help was needed. God has welcomed us into his family. Let's welcome each other. Let's be open with each other and learn to know each other better so that we can serve Christ by serving each other. Can we have more social activities here? Should we? We obviously can. Whether more organized fellowship activities would a good thing is finally a matter of Christian wisdom. We're free to do all kinds of organized things. We're also free to choose to focus on simple efforts one on one. But God does call us to love one another. God does call us to serve him by serving one another. God does give us the strength do that through the good news about Jesus. Take advantage of those opportunities. Serve God by serving each other. Amen.