

FELLOWSHIP IS MORE THAN A WORD

By

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For more than three-quarters of a century, Faith, Freedom and Fellowship have been seen as a triad of the Congregational Way of Christian discipleship. As so often happens with code words and symbols, there is the danger that faith, freedom and fellowship become pious clichés among us. Faith must be Christian, freedom responsible, fellowship meaningful. In organizational form, fellowship may be creative or anarchic. Fellowship is more than a word; it is a complex expression of actions and attitudes.

F – Family of Faith might be another way of defining the gathered company of Christ's faithful people who have covenanted to form a local church. Just as the nuclear biological family is part of an extended family so the local church is related to regional, national, and international organizations which unite local churches sharing a common spiritual ancestry.

E – Education is one of the functions of the faith family. The local church seeks to fulfill its educational responsibilities with Sunday school classes for various ages and other adult study ventures. The churches of an area may express fellowship through cooperative continuing individuals education projects for their teachers and the sharing of curricular and audio-visual materials. Pastors from other denominational backgrounds who serve our churches should be provided opportunities to acquaint themselves with our organizations procedures and traditions.

L – Loyalty to Christ, the Head of the Church, is basic to true fellowship. Discipleship precedes knowledge of the truth that liberates.

L – Loyalty to our Congregational Christian Witness should find expression in financial and psychological support of our regional and national associations. We do not impose denominational dues. It is a sorrow to note how many of our churches give little or nothing to support the causes in which they claim to believe. Self-solicitation should help every church to determine its fair share of financial responsibility for common projects.

O – Opportunity for acquaintance and friendship with co-religionists is a facet of fellowship through which we encourage one another in our several callings and places of service. The stated and occasional meetings of regional and national organizations furnish this beyond the local church for pastors, men, women and youth.

W – Working together in missions is another expression of fellowship: building new local churches, educating men and women for professional leadership in the churches in each generation, aiding sister churches in other parts of the world exemplify this.

S – Spiritual concern for the churches and for one another in a non-judgmental context is a positive aspect of fellowship.

H – Helpfulness is related to the foregoing. In our unstructured tradition the extension of helpfulness is not easy of application since intrusion is improper. In former days ecclesiastical councils composed of delegates from the churches meeting at the invitation of a sister church brought the collective wisdom to bear upon a particular problem. This counsel had the force of its inherent wisdom rather than legal mandate.

I – Inspiration renews individuals and churches on their spiritual pilgrimages through the sharing of their stories, festival services, spiritual retreats, and conferences. Christ calls his followers to encourage one another.

P – Prayer is the ultimate intangible element of fellowship. Just as the covenant of the local church creates a compact of intercessory prayer among individuals so should there be prayer partnership among the churches strengthening the bonds of love and undergirding common programs. How delightful it is to meet personally those for whom one prays regularly and seriously.

If fellowship is to be more than a word among us, our area and regional organizations, associations and fellowships should reactivate and encourage pastors' associations, women's organizations, annual workshops for teachers, biennial workshops for deacons and trustees, family camp, and conferences for youth. The talent and resources exist. Is there sufficient interest and will to transform words into deeds?

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