

Dear Members of the Body of Christ,

I am writing this letter during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and will conclude the week on a retreat with pastors who gather for reflection and prayer and worship in a setting of Christian unity. Sometimes we forget that many who consider themselves to be Christians are not worshipping and studying scriptures weekly, are not engaged in and engaging others in Christian fellowship. Harvard University professor Robert Putnam talks about social capital and the decline of social networks. Social networks are formed by church groups, bowling leagues [and of course golf leagues.] Putnam also discussed the need to **restore or revive community**. Social networks have amazing powers. For instance, people who are more connected live longer and are healthier. In the 1950's folks joined churches and service organizations but by the 1970's the decline had taken root. From the 1950's to the 1990's organizations noted a 50% decline in membership. At the same time churches have averaged a 25% decline in worship attendance.

We, the church, have a challenge to rebuild social capital. People who were coming of age by the 1970's are not inclined to be joiners, and if they do join, they tend not to participate in organizations in the same ways as did people of earlier times. We have a challenge to invite and engage people in the mission and ministry of St. Paul Lutheran. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul reminded the congregation what they needed to do to build social capital: Your hearts and minds must be made completely new. You must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy... for **we are all members together in the body of Christ**. If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin; do not stay angry all day. Do not give the devil a chance...help the poor. Do not use harmful words when talking. Use only helpful words, the kind that **build up** and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear it. No more shouting or insults! No more hateful feelings of any sort! Instead be **kind and tender-hearted** to one another, **forgive one another**, as God has forgiven you in Christ. [Ephesians 4]

Paul knew that the early church needed to build connections among its members to support and assist one another for the sake of Jesus Christ. I hope that this congregation is a life-saving support for all members. Our grandparents took for granted that the church would provide community. We no longer sit on the front porch or visit our neighbors. Rather, we tend to isolate ourselves in our homes and rooms and before the television. John Buchanan, editor of *The Christian Century* writes: We know that modern life seems almost to constitute a conspiracy against community. We know how many people live isolated lives, apart from family, friends and neighbors. When people are watching four hours of television per day on top of an eight-or-ten hour workday, there is not much time left for relating to others or building community.

Since our society that tends not to connect with one another, we, the Church, must be deliberate at reconnecting with God and with one another. Thanks to our Council, we will have an opportunity to connect as we gather for a meal on the last Sunday in January at our annual meeting. We will gather [to eat again] on February 23rd for a meal, thanks to the Willing Workers. We gather for Sunday school weekly, the Worship Committee will gather to plan worship for our Lent and Easter seasons. This year we are not rushing into Lent, but will offer soup suppers during Wednesday Lenten services. St. Paul needs to gather and include and invite others so we can become acquainted and reconnect with one another and with Christ. I look forward to seeing you as you gather with us. Invite a friend, neighbor or co-worker. The world is waiting for us to invite and include others in our gatherings. People need social networks to thrive.

Thank you for your prayers and assistance during this time of healing since my fall where I fractured my pelvis in 2 places. I'm trying to be a patient patient!

Shalom, Pastor Bev

