

There are many reasons why people gather together – social scientists tell us (and I believe them) that humans are hard wired to be social. Babies without loving contact fail to thrive – as do any of us – prisoners placed in solitary confinement struggle even more with mental health (that’s usually the point). Communities form first for survival, then special interests, friendship and common purposes. And we all know that doing a job -like cleaning the house– while it may be more efficient to do it on your own when you’re parenting, it certainly is more fun when you effectively work together to get it done.

But, if we want to think of community – especially a community of faith, like ours, we need to look a little deeper. We ask “What does it mean to worship together? What does it mean that we gather together to praise God? How does worshipping together affect our community? Does worship make a difference in your life? Do you miss worship when you can’t attend? Why?

A simple way to think about worship is to compare it to breathing. Our bodies were made to breathe. When we regularly take deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling in rhythm, we thrive physically. Blood circulates, our body systems function almost without notice, we think clearly, and we carry out our daily tasks with ease and energy. If we stop breathing, we will die. Without the steady flow of air into our lungs, our physical bodies will not survive.

When we join the intergenerational community of faith in weekly worship, we are strengthened by the breath of God’s Spirit and by the love and care of God’s people. Though we can worship God alone—in our homes, in nature, or in lonely midnight hours—we cannot flourish as Christians without worshipping with other Christians.

The love and grace of God that we breathe in during worship changes us. As we praise and thank God, we become grateful disciples in daily life. As we bring our deepest desires and longings to God, we are formed as people who trust God with our everyday needs. As people who breathe in and out together in the rhythms of song and prayer, we learn what it means to be a body, to depend upon each other’s gifts, and to give and receive.

But sometimes this breathing in God’s spirit together isn’t enough. And sometimes we need something more before we can even begin to breathe in God’s spirit.

Mission workers around the world have found that people cannot really hear the Gospel – the good news of God’s love - until their basic needs have been met. If the people are cold – they will not know anything until they are warm. If the people are hungry – they cannot taste God’s love until they are fed. If there is abuse and injustice, people can’t truly experience God’s unconditional love.

Part of the mandate for MCC is to help with meeting and educating for the basic needs of people – local and around the world – so that when the basics are met – people have opportunities for healing, hope, peace and joy – more opportunities for wholeness.

Sometime God’s Spirit may be everywhere around us – but people have closed their eyes, convinced each other that they’re lost in the desert. If there is no water, then all that people can focus on is their thirst.

Take for example, the people of Israel – wandering about in the wilderness. They just recently experienced indisputable evidence of God’s provision toward them. They witnessed God’s responses to

their cries for salvation from slavery. They witnessed the plagues; they witnessed God's miraculous hand parting the Red Sea...and they received food when they cried out for it.

But as soon as they got to a place where it was a little dry they forgot all that and started complaining. They mobbed poor and demand water to drink.

Moses was stumped! "What?" he demanded, "Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?" <sup>3</sup> But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

<sup>4</sup> So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me."

<sup>5</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel's elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd's rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. <sup>6</sup> I'll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink." Moses did so while Israel's elders watched. <sup>7</sup> He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, "Is the Lord really with us or not?"

Exodus 17:3-7 (CEB)

Is the Lord really with *us* or not?

Instead of being angry with the people, our compassionate, merciful, and gracious God told Moses what to do. Not only that, but God was "Standing there in front of Moses on the rock."

And what happened? God caused the rock to gush forth life giving water – enough clean water to quench the thirst of 600,000, plus all the flocks and herds – for many days – and even through battle.

And the people questioned the Lord's presence?

Don't **we** ask, or at least think, that same question ourselves sometimes? Sometimes even when we're surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses and the air is hard to breathe because it's so full of the Spirit of God – we don't realize it. We can't see it! We can't touch it! We want to taste God's presence, but we've forgotten that we are LIVING because it is God's presence coursing through us that is keeping us alive!

When we look at the stories in the Bible we can see how Yahweh has provided and we begin to trust that God will always provide. We trust the promises given that there will be streams in the desert – water gushing from the rock – food when there is none – shelter through the storm – children running through the streets – and shepherds to remind the flock that they're standing in meadows of sweet grass by calm waters.

My friends. God provides! God has in the past, and God will in the future. It is what God is all about! Sometimes we can't see it or can't feel it – but know that you're here because of God's spirit moving through you! God has led you through trials and tribulations – through the sea to this place.

When we are connected to God, our lives have purpose and meaning. Our souls thrive.

God has made us to be companions with each other and with God, and when we worship, and when we live our daily life, we are invited to breathe in – to drink from our communion with God.

Our worship is a time for showing our love for God, for being with God, and for breathing in the goodness, mercy, and beauty of God. Our worship is our claiming into ourselves the deep wells of God's provision.

But we need each other together to more fully grasp God's presence. In the book, "Worship: A Mennonite Perspective," we read, "Christian worship is corporate in its very essence: the fullness of the Spirit falls upon the gathered community; the fullness of the Word is heard here. In worship, the broken bones of the body of Christ are reset and restored to health.

Though worship happens in many settings  
in the serenity of a lakeside at dawn,  
in the fervour of a peace rally,  
in the intensity of a concert performance<sup>1</sup>  
it is grounded in the weekly gathering of the church on the Lord's Day."<sup>1</sup>

Just like fear and doubt can explode to exaggerated panic when people come together – as it did for the Hebrews in the desert. The same way when we pray and worship together, we gain strength in faith and hope, commitment, and love.

When we pray and worship together, plan and play, organize and serve together we are reminding and reassuring and supporting each other. We become the body of Christ. The body of Christ that is present NOW. Our every act of love in community becomes an act of worship and prayer.

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<sup>1</sup>John Rempel, "An Anabaptist Perspective on Music in Worship," in Music in Worship: A Mennonite Perspective, ed. Bernie Neufeld (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press and Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1998).