

The View From Here **Part Three**

1. Shared Life

- Genesis 2:18, 1:26; Philippians 1:1-6; John 13:34b-35;
Galatians 3:27-28

2. Shared-Out Life

- 2 Corinthians 9:13

3. Shared-Shaped Life

- Psalm 133:1

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West Valley Church
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The View From Here¹ ***Part Three***

People don't go bowling in leagues anymore. Mind you, bowling has never been so popular – it's just that the majority don't bowl in leagues. For example, a study done in the 1980's showed that while the percentage of American bowlers increased by 10 percent between 1980 and 1993, league bowling declined by more than 40 percent.

That is the image that Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam uses for his book, "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community"² to describe the steady decline of community life and civil involvement in the United States. In his book, Robert Putnam says the following statistics are indicators of the decline in community life in America over the past 25 years: Attending club meetings: down 58%, family dinners: down 33% and having friends over: down 45%.³ It is an interesting book that shows how the decline in community has impacted all facets of our society from families to civics to schools to sports and to churches.

If that is today's culture, then it is counter-cultural for our church to be the thriving place of growing biblical community that it is – and yet here we are. West Valley Church is at an amazing place in our 60-plus year history.

¹ *Primary source:*

Schwanz, Keith, and Joseph E. Coleson. *Missio Dei: a Wesleyan understanding*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011)

Secondary sources:

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White, James Emery. *Rethinking the church: a challenge to creative redesign in an age of transition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003)

² Putnam, Robert D., *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY, Touchstone Books, 2000)

³ *ibid*

Today we are in the last of our three-part series entitled, “The View From Here,” exploring vistas in your life and in our church. We’ve been using the idea of a hiker, kind of piggy-backing on the series we did before, called “Camino: Walking in the Way.” I find it interesting that despite the statistics about declining civic and community involvement, there is an increase of more and more people who are going hiking together. Last year, a little over 42 million people participated in hiking in the US. But as of spring of this year, over 47 million people participated in hiking! Apparently we’re *not* bowling in leagues, but we *are* taking to the hills together! I guess people are figuring out that the fresh air and amazing views can do great things.

You see, where *you* are in your spiritual life is a place that God has brought you to – a place where *you* will get a fresh and new view of the way forward in *your* life, like a climber who has been hiking until he finally crests the mountain and is able to see the amazing expanse of what lies ahead. I’m praying that today God will open to you new vistas in your life of where you can go from where you are. The same thing is true for our church; God has brought this church through the years to this place and time.

And with all the amazing things that God is accomplishing right now in our church, we have an incredible view of where to go from here. We want you to be able to see *The View From Here* for West Valley Church.

We want to help you see the view of the new and exciting ways we are fulfilling our mission, as well as how you and I can live missionally as Christians in this world.

In this series we’ve been talking a lot about our new work out at Mountainview Elementary School, and we will do it again today, because this is the beginning of an exciting next step for our church – something that God has had in mind for us and that we’ve been working toward for at least the last eight years. These are exciting days for West Valley Church. But you might wonder why this should matter to you personally. I want to give us some reasons why the work in Mountainview *should* matter a lot to us, and how it makes a difference in our own lives.

I want to talk about the biblical concept of the Greek word, “koinonia.” Koinonia is used throughout the New Testament many, many times. It is an important word in the Bible, usually translated as the word “fellowship.” Sometimes it might be translated “share,” “sharing,” “participation,” or “communion.” Scholar Derek Brown points out that it describes a two-sided relationship or partnership. (It describes the unique fellowship or communion (that) believers share in the gospel and (in mission).⁴

“For example, Acts 2:42 tells how the early Christians devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to ‘fellowship’ (*koinōnia*). In Galatians 2:9, Paul speaks of receiving the right hand of ‘fellowship’ (*koinōnia*) from the Jerusalem leaders.

⁴ Derek R. Brown, *Lexham Bible Guide: Philippians*, ed. Douglas Mangum (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), Php 1:1-26.

First John 1:6 says that Christian “fellowship” is made possible through walking in the light of Christ.”⁵

Koinonia speaks to the deepest needs and the greatest achievements of the Church. Koinonia describes both who we are and what we do. And what we are doing at Mountainview Elementary is all about our *Koinonia*. As people who seek to fulfill God’s mission, first, I want us to see that Koinonia is about a...

1. *Shared* Life

You and I were created for relationship. Remember that before God finished his work of creation, he got all the way to creating a man, when he stood back and said:

“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Genesis 2:18, nrsv)

We read that verse and assume it means a wife, and that *is* correct, because of course God then made Eve. But God was also making a larger statement, which is, that we are made for relationship, and it is not good for any of us to be alone, married or not. “Loneliness brings pain both individually and socially because it violates our very nature.”⁶ And our deep need for relationship makes sense, when you think about God who created us in his image; God designed us for relationship because God himself exists in relationship: God is the Father/Creator, and the Son/Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit/Comforter. We can hear the voice of the Trinity in the very words of creation:

“Let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.”
(Genesis 1:26, nrsv, italics added)

But let me help you with something: right now, you are probably thinking about these words, and you are applying them from the perspective of *your* individual relationship with God. And that’s fine, but I want to challenge you to rethink these passages from the perspective of *all of us* – here together; not just *you* personally, but think of yourself as part of the *whole community* of West Valley Church. Sometimes we bring to Scripture our own perspectives. Here’s what I’m trying to say: those of us who are a product of Western Culture tend to be very individualistic; our perspective is on *our* individuality; we have a “can-do” attitude that says we need to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps. So we read most things in Scripture as applying to our own personal life and relationship with God, right? Which is okay, but that doesn’t go far enough, because *most* of what is written in the Bible is *communal* in perspective; it is written to the Church *collectively*, *not* the Christian individually. So when we read that God said, “It’s not good for man to be alone, so he made a helper and partner for him,” yes, it is an individual marriage, but it is *also* a statement about humanity as a whole; it is a statement about our need

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Schwanz, Keith, and Joseph E. Coleson. *Missio Dei: a Wesleyan understanding*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2011), 149

for each other as a congregation, as a church, as a people. *God designed us for community*. God calls us to work *together* as partners in the Gospel. For example, Paul writes to the church in Philippi and starts out his letter saying:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:1-6, niv)

Paul is writing to them as partners in the Gospel; almost every single time in the Epistles of the New Testament, when you see the words, “you,” or “your” it is *plural*; we read it and think it is singular – to ourselves. But it is almost always plural – to the collective church. We need to understand that we were created for community and we were converted into community – through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and our trust in him, we are now the church, and Scripture is written to community. We bear the communal image of God. That means that my image of God is incomplete without your image of God, too. God’s mission for us is to represent God-in-relationship here on the earth, to live *koinonia* – in God’s image.⁷

So Jesus commanded us:

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34b-35, niv)

That “you” is plural, by the way.

This kind of true *koinonia* will only be built *intentionally*; it doesn’t just happen. If we are not intentional about it, “we will drift back into our default of isolation and individualism.”⁸ This biblical mandate of community is exactly why at West Valley Church we are committed to the process we have – that if you are new here, meet us at Starting Point so you can get acquainted with us and consider community with us. It is why the next steps of our 101 and core classes are so important, it’s why small groups are so important, it’s why we use the Connection Books every Sunday – we are being intentional about *koinonia*. It is also why we practice hospitality with our neighborhood through events on our campus, Upward Soccer, our open-use policy of our campus, and our partnership with Wide Hollow and now with Mountainview elementaries – because we want to welcome them into *Koinonia* with us and bring *Koinonia* to them (remember, today people won’t first believe so they can belong; they first belong before they consider believing).

Are you familiar with the word, “companion”? The first part of our English word “companion” is “com” – which means “together,” and the second part, “panion” is from the Latin word for “bread.” So literally, to “companion” with someone is to

⁷ *ibid*, 150

⁸ *ibid*, 151

“share bread together.” The reason we do Wednesday Night Dinners is intentional – to “companion” with each other. And, did you know that we have several families, whose children attend homework club, who come to pick up their children and stay for dinner as our companions? “When we companion together over a meal, the table service and food are not the primary focus; they merely serve the purpose of making space to connect with the people with whom we share. We make space in our hearts for others, caring about their concerns, rejoicing in their victories, learning their thoughts and dreams.”⁹

And before we move on, I want to share this one last thought about the shared life. The koinonia that reflects God’s image is diverse. It is a diverse shared life – it thrives on diversity. Paul wrote this to the community of the Galatian Christians (remember – “you” is plural):

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28, niv)

I might add, there is no American or Mexican or English or Spanish or Anglo or Latino. Those differences are celebrated – but they go away –they fade away in the presence of Christ and our koinonia in God.

So this matters to you personally because you (singular) are a part of you (plural). True fellowship – Koinonia – is too good to keep to ourselves. It is a...

2. ***Shared-Out* Life**

There is another time that Paul uses this word in his second letter to the church in Corinth. He’s describing their giving contribution that they had gathered up in order to provide relief for the poor. This is what he wrote:

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in **sharing** with them and with everyone else.” (2 Corinthians 9:13, niv, emphasis added)

I’ve added the emphasis on the word “sharing,” because that is the translation of koinonia. A more literal translation would be “sharing out.” The reality of their faith was evident in the way that together they “shared out” of themselves toward those in need, both inside and outside of the church. Churches often tend to naturally turn inward on themselves and their shared life with each other. But that kind of community grows insular and will eventually weaken and die. Reaching out together is the only way to develop true koinonia.

In our society in North America, we have traditionally used the word “church” to refer to the building that we meet in, as well as the people who gather in it. The problem is that we begin to think that the two meanings are the same thing, so when

⁹ ibid, 151

we invite people to be a part of our church community, it means “come to our church building.” But the church is *people*.

There’s something else, too; I mentioned at the beginning Robert Putnam’s book, “Bowling Alone.” At one place in his book he mentions the difference between “bonding” and “bridging” when it comes to a healthy community. “Bonding” is only to each other, and “bridging” is reaching out to others. According to Putnam, one is unhealthy, the other is healthy. Let me explain it this way: as the people of West Valley Church, we share some very important values and priorities – and rightly so! But as we “bond” together around those priorities, there is a natural tendency to become a *closed* or *exclusive* group; so that if someone is in agreement with us, they “belong” and are on the inside, and if they don’t, they are excluded, are on the outside – they are not let in. That’s “bonding” as Putnam defines it, but it’s not healthy to community. This is the natural tendency of most churches. But we are not called to be natural; we are called to be supernatural. So “bridging” reaches out to those around us, seeing their value, showing hospitality, and welcoming them in. “Bridging” is inclusive instead of exclusive. Putnam says that this results in what he calls “social capital” – which is a community that is healthy and offers value to people.¹⁰ What he doesn’t realize is that he is describing *koinonia* – a group of people with shared priorities, serving each other and sharing out, as Paul described in the passage we read.

Healthy churches – like we are at West Valley – are bridging – they are shared-out communities, not merely bonding. Like the “Shakers.” Maybe you’ve heard of the church denomination called “Shakers”? They’ve been around since the 1700’s. They were a sect of the Quaker movement whose times of worship and prayer were so dramatic that they would “shake” – so they were called “Shaker-Quakers,” or “Shakers.” They believed that hard work and craftsmanship were a way to worship God. Maybe you’ve heard of “shaker” style furniture? That’s them. One of their strong doctrines was celibacy – that they should not marry and should not have children. Then, in 1961, they decided that in order to keep their doctrine completely pure, they would no longer accept new members. Today there are only two left in the world.¹¹ When those two die, the Shakers will disappear from the earth.

That is an extreme example of “bonding,” but some churches are sort of like Shakers; they treat those outside as if they are never to be included – at least not until they shape up and start acting to their standards.

But true *koinonia* is a shared-out community. *Koinonia* is what we were created for and converted to – so it should matter to you. And because we are a *koinonia* community, we are now expanding our reach to the community of Mountainview Elementary. We have a small group of folks who meet weekly from our church, and who live in that neighborhood. They are also involved in the PTA, they are building

¹⁰ Putnam, 22-25

¹¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/there-are-only-two-shakers-left-world-180961701/>

relationships with the faculty and staff and families, are helping out at their functions, and doing whatever they can to serve their needs. They are putting to good use all that we've learned over the years in our relationship with Wide Hollow. *Have the small group members stand.* They are a shared-out extension of West Valley Church, in the hopes that other families out there will join their small group, and grow to the point where they are another campus of our church, worshipping there at Mountainview – perhaps even at some point becoming their own church. So we pray for them and for their favor in that community and for their success in sharing out.

We are a shared community that shares out, but the great thing is that true koinonia is a...

3. *Shared-Shaped* Life

When we live in koinonia, it shapes *us*. As we share out, our own needs get met. In the US, we like to focus on our own individual rights, wants, and needs. We fight for those. But in Koinonia, we focus on “our,” not “my.” So in true koinonia, you focus on me, and I focus on you. And in the process, our needs get met. Too often we focus on ourselves and not the other. But if we only focus on ourselves, no one's needs get met. Instead, if we *all* focus on the other, *our* needs get met too. As we share this life together, our lives get shaped as well – the community shapes us. “We grow together, becoming more and more like Jesus as we serve God and serve each other in love. A (sort of symbiotic) process develops because (in Koinonia) we are shaped *for* mission, yet we are also formed while *on* mission and *in* mission.”¹² The Psalmist wrote this:

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”
(Psalm 133:1, nrsv)

“As we share life together in community and conform more closely to the image of God, healing and reconciliation occur in us as individuals and as a community. The Greek verb *therapeuein*, from which we derive ‘therapy’ and ‘therapeutic,’ means “to serve” or “to take care of.” We act as a therapeutic, healing community as we serve and care for each other and the world around us.”¹³

I want to share a quote with you from David Augsburg who is senior professor of pastoral care and counseling in the School of Theology at Fuller Seminary, and is the author of 20 books in pastoral counseling, marriage, conflict, and human relations. He writes about koinonia, saying that we participate in the “kin-dom” of God where grace transforms human interaction:

“The kin-dom of God grows among people as they join together in viewing one another in a radically new perspective – seeing each other as God sees us in grace – and then treating each other accordingly. Within this new

¹² Schwanz and Coleson, 156

¹³ *ibid*, 156

kin-dom, followers of Christ participate in the social construction of an alternate reality. In place of the vengeful, violent reality based on retaliation and retribution, they construct a world by the words and actions of forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation.”¹⁴

Do you see? As you strive to live out koinonia with the other people in your church and in your small group, and through your church and small group to those beyond the church, your own needs get met, too. In this way we all become healthier and more whole as the grace of God moves through us to each other and to others who need to see and hear the Good News. This is why it should matter to you! We get better, the world gets better, and you get better by the Gospel of God.

When we share life together, we have the incredible privilege of showing the rest of the world what life looks like as Koinonia – as the fellowship of God’s people. In our daily interactions with each other in the church and our grace-filled outreach to those outside the church, we demonstrate and share the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love for everyone.

This is why what we do here is so important. This is why what we do in our neighborhood, at Wide Hollow, and now Mountainview is so important. What we are doing at Mountainview Elementary is “The View from Here”: it is what God has brought West Valley Church to this time and place for. What we are doing at Mountainview Elementary is the Spirit-led next step of our Koinonia.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 157