

## TOGETHER....LET US GROW IN OUR FAITH

- I. What do folks think of when they hear the name *Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren*? Do they think of our building at 1392 Robert Fulton Highway? Do they think of beliefs and practices associated with Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren...immersion baptism...feet washing... an historic peace church? Do they think of our ball field or our milkshake stand at the Solanco Fair? Do they think of our Children's Outreach Ministries or our WOW program?

-as we all know, the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren is not primarily a place but a people...not primarily a facility but a family of faith...not an organization but an organism...not a bureaucracy but a body of believers.

- II. I think small children have not been taught correctly about the nature of the church. Many adults will clasp their hand together and say: 'Here is the church...here is the steeple...open the doors and see all the people'. I think there is a more accurate way to speak to our children about the church: 'Here is a building...here is its steeple ...open the doors and see the church'. This new version may not rhyme but it is more accurate.

-if indeed the church is a people and not a place, we can weather any problems, persecutions or pandemics. We can weather any lockdowns or limitations on assembling together.

-a children's song says: 'I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.' If indeed WE are the church, what are the commitments we have made to the Lord and to each other? At our baptism we promised to be loyal to the church upholding it with our prayers, our presence, our substance and our service.

-have we been faithful to those vows? Did we abandon the church when the sailing got rough? What has happened to the virtue of loyalty within our world today among our friendships...in our families...in our marriages and in our church?

- III. A few generations ago people displayed great loyalty to the products they purchased, the organizations they belonged to and the causes and institutions they supported. I grew up in Hershey and there was never a Wilbur Bud, Milky Way bar in our home and certainly never a Nestle product...our family was loyal to Hershey.

-when I was growing up- my dad drove a Pontiac and never thought of purchasing a car that was anything but a Pontiac. He was loyal to Pontiac and the dealer who sold them. My great-grandfather reportedly told my grandfather...marry whoever you wish but be sure she's Brethren.

-today's society is vastly different...brand loyalty or being a company man or woman is a thing of the past in most cases. We live in a diverse, pluralistic society.

IV. We tend to pick and choose what suits our needs with little likelihood that loyalty will determine our choices. This can be both good and bad. We need to be discerning and discriminating in making right choices. No one political party can possess all the best candidates. No one candy company can have all the best products. No one denomination can have all the best brides.

-I do not want to paint pessimistic portraits of our present day. I dislike doomsayers but to be honest, I think America is heading to the brink of disaster because we have become an unfaithful people...not honoring our commitments to our families and marriages; not honoring our commitments to honest labor; not honoring our commitments to the church and our Lord and Savior.

-if something or someone fails us or does not live up to our expectations we are quick to throw in towel...pick up our marbles and look for greener pastures... better opportunities...other church families down the street or drop out of the family of God altogether.

-many sociologists have raised the question if people will start returning to worship services as the pandemic subsides or will people drift away from the church or be content to watch the worship services in the comfort of their homes in their pajamas, slippers and cups of coffee and forego the fuss of making the effort to assemble with their brothers and sisters of the faith.

-is loyalty lacking in your relationships and in your church life? Maybe I am preaching to the choir this morning. Therefore a copy of this sermon will be sent to every member of our church this week.

V. *The more we get together, together, together; the more we get together the happier we'll be; for your friends are my friends and my friends are your friends. The more we get together the happier we'll be.*

-I am sure most of you have heard those words before and probably have sung that song in some sort of silly setting. I am not sure if merely getting together guarantees happiness or not. But this I know.... if the church is to BE the church we need to be a people who get together....and get together regularly for worship and fellowship, study and service, prayer and praise.

VI. In that little ditty we sing about the more we get together the happier we will be and then it suggests that your friends will be my friends and my friends your friends. The subtle suggestion is that when we find ourselves together we forge friendships.

-in John chapter 15 Jesus said to his disciples: 'I no longer call you servants but I have called you friends'. The church is where faith is formed but it is also where friendships are forged. I want to suggest to you this morning that if we are to really be members of the church...the body of Christ...we need to commit ourselves to three things: to get together.... to go together.....and to grow together.

VII. Today's message is a call for us to make a renewed commitment to each other and to God to get together as His family of faith...to go together as God's people united in common purpose...and to grow together in becoming one in God's spirit.

-several years ago the Church of the Brethren adopted the motto: *Continuing the work of Jesus...peacefully, simply, together.* That phrase appears on our bulletin cover every week. While each word of that simple motto is significant in identifying the essence of the Church of the Brethren and the Mechanic Grove Church, it is the last word, the word TOGETHER, that I want to focus on today.

VIII. Without a doubt I believe we can all agree that the early church committed themselves to getting together regularly and often. In the Book of Acts chapter 2 verse 46 we read: 'Day by day the believers spent much time **together** in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts'.

-as fellow believers and members of Christ's Church in 2021, we too need to commit ourselves to getting together...regular worship, involvement in a Sunday School class and some other small group or activity in the church.

-I saw a saying outside the Water Street Rescue Mission which read: 'Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.'

IX. The basic commitment we all need to assess, as we are able to do so is: are we willing to get together regularly and often? Are you willing to make being with the People of God a priority in your life? The writer of Hebrews challenges us in chapter 10, verse 25 'Do not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some, but encourage one another'.

-every week as a child our family went to Sunday school and worship on Sunday mornings and then Christian Endeavor and worship on Sunday evenings and prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings. And the only time we missed is if we were really sick or on vacation two weeks of the year. Other than that, our family as well as many others in our church were at church every week and multiple times. The church was at the center of our family life. Being together with our church family was a priority.

X. Obviously times have changed. More activities vie for our attention and priority. Vacations, sports, entertainment, hobbies and other pursuits compete for our priority and loyalty. The latest pre-pandemic statistic I heard from Christian researcher George Barna is that persons who label themselves as regular church attenders average one Sunday of church attendance a month. In essence, it now takes 4 people to equal one for worship attenders.

-let us fervently and faithfully commit ourselves to get together and then GO TOGETHER.

XI. *The more we go together, together, together; the more we go together, the healthier we'll be. For my life is your life and your life is my life. The more we go together the healthier we'll be.*

-to be the church we must do more than get together. There are a lot of clubs and organizations, support groups and social gatherings in our society which promote getting together. Many of these groups are worthwhile and provide a needed and necessary niche in people's lives.

-but the church is unique in providing spiritual insight and encouragement and in specifically advancing God's Kingdom. The people of God who commit themselves to go together are often a very diverse group of believers. Can we be diverse without being divisive?

XII. About fifty years ago, I heard James Glass, who was then president of Lancaster Theological Seminary say: "There now exists more differences WITHIN denominations than there is BETWEEN denominations." As the years have gone by, I have often reflected on the truth of those words as that chasm has widened. Likewise local churches are often defined by their diversity.

-the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren like many congregations in many places is a somewhat diverse group of people...politically... economically... educationally... generationally...theologically and socially.

XIII. We are a diverse group of people at Mechanic Grove who can find a unity in Jesus Christ and support one another as fellow followers of Christ. As a congregation we need to commit ourselves to pursue a common cause and forge a common identity. That is what it means to GO together. We do not all need to think and act alike but can we think and act together in unity and love? We can have diverse backgrounds, opinions and interests and yet still exhibit a unity of spirit.

-once again turning to the Book of Acts, chapter 2 verse 44, Luke states: 'All who believed were **together** and had all things in common, they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need'. The church is no place for individualism and selfishness but all together for the common good.

XIV. The first followers of Jesus who constituted the church were actually communal in their existence...pooling their resources...sharing their lives and their possessions so that no one in their number had need. When we decide to go together, we commit ourselves to helping meet the needs of our brothers and sisters, physically, spiritually, emotionally. The prophet Amos asks the question: 'Do two people walk hand in hand if they aren't going to the same place?' The COB now has a compelling vision.

-as members of Christ's Body, the Church, we need to agree on a common vision, a common destiny. The Apostle Paul in characterizing the church as a body says: 'If one member suffers, all suffer **together**; if one member is honored, all rejoice together'.

XV. I think we do relatively well in caring for one another when hardship or tragedy happens but do we do as well with the other side of the coin in rejoicing when others rejoice...celebrating the achievements and successes of our brothers and sisters in Christ...or does a spirit of envy and covetousness come upon you wishing that honor...that success...that achievement had been afforded unto you?

-if we are a healthy body of Christ we need to learn to love one another and encourage one another. Once again let me quote from Hebrews chapter 10 verse 25: 'Do not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some...but encourage one another'.

-encouraging one another is such a vital part of being part of the church. The writer of Hebrews tells us to encourage one another. James 5:16 admonishes us to 'Pray for one another so that you might be healed. For the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective!' This is what it means to be part of the church!

XVI. We need to exhibit a spirit of mutual love, mutual concern and mutual support for the Body of Christ is not one member going this way and another going that way; but all working TOGETHER in harmony and love. This is what it means for the church to GO TOGETHER; building healthy relationships. But more than a commitment to GET TOGETHER and even more than a resolve to GO together as the church, we need to commit to GROW together.

XVII. *The more we grow together, together, together; the more we grow together the holier we'll be for Christ's way is our way and our way is Christ's way. The more we grow together, the holier we'll be.*

-when we go together we agree to head the same direction in our life together as the church; but when we agree to grow together, we truly move toward becoming one....united and bound together by God's Spirit.

-this was Christ's earnest desire for his followers. For his fear was that his followers would fall into factions.

XVIII. In John chapter 17 as Jesus faced his final hours before his crucifixion, he prayed for unity among his followers. Jesus prayed:

'I ask on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me.'

-in today's scripture reading from Ephesians chapter 4, the Apostle Paul says: 'Make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace'. He later adds: 'We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, Jesus Christ.'

XIX. So many churches are floundering in factionalism and strife. It takes prayer and persistence and patience to achieve unity and maintain unity and it only happens as a gift of the Holy Spirit when we commit ourselves to grow together as unto Christ, our head.

-for you see friends....if we are not growing together we can easily fall apart. I was organist in a church of another denomination at age 14. It was a church that had a worship service in which nothing had changed since Jesus instituted it 2000 years ago.

-every Sunday the organist would play the little chorus HEAR OUR PRAYER O LORD following the pastor's prayer. One Sunday the choir director and I decided the choir would sing the words: HEAR OUR PRAYER O LORD rather than just the organ playing it.

-would you believe that one change caused such a stir that they called a special board meeting to deal with the crises. Too many churches get caught up in conflict which diminishes our witness to a watching world.

XX. Let us lift up Jesus and make him our focus rather than our own petty preconceived prejudices and personal preferences. Unity will result in our church if we lift up Jesus first and foremost. Jesus said 'I, if I be lifted up will draw all people unto me'.

-brothers and sisters of the family of faith....let us commit ourselves to get together....go together and grow together. The more we GET together the happier we'll be. The more we GO together the healthier we'll be. The more we GROW together the holier we'll be.

-may it be so among us as we reassemble and renew our commitment to the Lord, to each other and to our community and our world! WE are the church...a people not a place. The Bible says 'Not even the gates of hell shall prevail against the church!' Praise God for the blessing of our church family at Mechanic Grove with all its faults and failures, yet God desires that we maintain the unity of the Spirit.

-I stated in last Sunday's sermon that division is the devil's delight. I long for unity in our church. That is not just my hope and prayer but God's deepest desire. Can you be part of bringing unity to our church? God will bless you for it.