

Koinōnia: The Gift We Hold Together

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Abstract: This essay, prepared at the request of the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference, is a study of how the family of terms related to *koinōnia* is used in the New Testament. The essay illuminates the way in which the church as *koinōnia* is rooted in the *koinōnia* of God. The *koinōnia* of the church is created by a peacemaking and reconciling God in and through Jesus Christ. *Koinōnia* finds expression in the most immediately practical response to human need as well as in the profundity of communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper. It concludes by reflecting on its relevance for the *koinōnia* that is Mennonite World Conference.

Koinōnia has rightly become a central term and concept for Mennonite World Conference. In various addresses, publications, and programmatic efforts leaders have for years been nudging the global Anabaptist community to a fuller and deeper relationship with one another. The vision as articulated and approved by the General Council in Bulawayo in 2003 states it succinctly: "Mennonite World Conference is called to be a communion (*Koinonia*) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness."¹

Even when we don't use the term "*koinōnia*" itself, much of the terminology we use is dependent on it: sharing, meeting needs, mutual encouragement, mutual gift giving and receiving, fellowship, partnership, interdependence, solidarity, consensus, communion, community, unity, "together." Central to *koinōnia* is the notion of *sharing*, as in "Shared Convictions"² or "gifts,"³ and most importantly, the shared identity and life as the "body of Christ," arguably the most concentrated instance of *koinōnia*.

This brief study is intended to aid the "putting flesh on bones" of the vision by exploring the *koinōnia* group of terms in the New Testament. It

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1. See "Vision," <http://www.mwc-cmm.org/index.php/home/about-mwc>.

2. See *Courier / Correo / Courrier*, 2003, nos. 3 and 4, p. 24.

3. Pakisa K. Tshimika and Tim Lind, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2003).

is true that attempts to clarify the meaning of a word or concept through word study can run the risk of “killing the letter,” robbing it of its spirit, if I may (mis)use 2 Corinthians 3:6. But it is equally true that words can be like windows or doors through which we can experience reorientation and discovery. By their very nature *koinōnia* and its immediate family of terms do not lend themselves to precise definition. Sometimes their meanings are very ordinary, other times profound to the point of mystery. What we shall see is that the ordinary *and* the transcendent *together* give force and depth to the terms. This study emerges from a conviction that even as we attend to the treasury of words we are accompanied by the Word-made-flesh.

KOINŌNIA IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Koinos “common”

At its most basic the root of the *koinonia* family of terms is the adjective *koinos* (“common”).⁴ For example, the New Testament was written in “common” Greek (*Koinē*)—unsophisticated and crude “street Greek.” As in a number of languages, “common” can mean “ordinary,” “profane,” and in contrast to holy or sacred, even “unclean.” In the New Testament we find *koinos* used with negative connotation where it is the opposite of holy or acceptable to God, as in the argument Jesus has with the Pharisees in Matthew 15:10-20 and Mark 7:1-14 over what “defiles” a person.⁵ This would hardly be of interest to us except that from a Jewish perspective Gentiles were viewed as *koinos*, as is illustrated in Peter’s grace-filled nightmare in Acts 10 and 11, in which, in preparation for his encounter with the Gentile Cornelius, he needed to come to the point where he would eat what is *koinos*. If we bring that story into relationship with Paul’s vision of the *koinōnia* of the church as Christ’s bringing together those who know themselves to have been chosen and set apart (holy; i.e., Jews) and those hitherto rejected as *koinos* (non-Jews viewed as common and unclean by Jews), then we can see that the “new human” Christ creates in himself (Eph. 2:16) is always a community of rebirth and transformation, in which those who were *koinos* become *koinōnia*.

4. Masculine, feminine, and neuter forms are *koinos*, *koinē*, *koinon*.

5. See also Rev. 21:27, where nothing *koinon* will enter the New Jerusalem; cf. Rom. 14:14; Heb. 10:29.

2. Koinōnos/Synkoinōnos “partner”

“Common” carries within it the notion of something held, experienced, or practiced together with others, something shared.⁶ Such persons are “partners” (*koinōnos*; pl. *koinōnoi*). *Koinōnia* can thus mean “partnership” as in business or friendship.⁷ Sometimes the term is strengthened by adding the prefix *syn-*, which means “together” or “with,” as in *synkoinōnos*, “co-partner,” “co-participant.” On a few occasions it carries the negative meaning of being “co-partners” in sin.⁸ In addition to the instance of *synkoinōnos*, the prefix *syn-* serves well to capture the relationship of believers to one another in the service of the Gospel. Paul thus employs the prefix for “co-slave” (*syndoulos*; Col. 1:7; 4:7; cf. Rev. 6:11), “co-soldier” (*systratiōtēs*; Phil. 2:25; Philem. 2), and, most familiar to us, “co-worker” (*synergos*; see again Phil. 2:25 and many other instances). In short, within the *koinōnia* of the church members are “partners,” “co-participants” with one another, both in relation to God and in relation to God’s reconciling the world in and through Christ. Paul can thus call the Philippians “*synkoinōnoi* of grace” (Phil. 1:7), and himself a “*synkoinōnos* of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:23). John of Patmos refers to himself as a *synkoinōnos* together with his readers in suffering, reign, and endurance “in Jesus” (Rev. 1:9).

3. Koinōnia of “giving and receiving”

In his letter to the Philippians Paul depicts his coworkers (*synergoi*) and his churches as engaged in the “*koinōnia* of giving and receiving” (Phil. 4:15). They supply Paul with funds for his work, much like we might think of donors or funders of a venture. But they are much more than that. Their material support is nothing less than “*koinōnia* in the gospel” (Phil. 1:5).

We learn from 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 that this *koinonia* extended beyond financial support for Paul’s and his associates’ apostolic work to eager participation in the *koinonia* of the relief effort for the suffering communities in Judea (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Paul’s extensive enterprise of collecting funds in Gentile churches for the Judean believers who were suffering famine, often simply called “the Collection,” was a major part of his apostolic work. It anticipated by two millennia the early concerns

6. Acts 2:44 speaks of the believers holding all things in “common” (*koina*).

7. See Lk. 5:10; 2 Cor. 8:23; Philem. 17. Also M. Jack Suggs, “Koinonia in the New Testament,” *Mid-Stream*, 23:4 (1984), 351-362.

8. Rev. 10:4; cf. Mt. 23:30.

of Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee.⁹ It is clear from Romans 15:22-33 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 that Paul views such meeting of need as much more than relief. It is nothing less than the realization of the *koinōnia* of the church. It is an opportunity for Gentile believers to show their gratitude to their Jewish “parents in the faith,” (Rom. 15:27). Paul sees it also as an opportunity to imitate and to reenact the self-giving of Christ, and thus an act of material evangelism (2 Cor. 8:9). Moreover, such material acts of *koinōnia* are participation in God’s great economy of worship and thanksgiving (2 Cor. 9:6-15). Paul clearly understands the “spiritual” dimension of material *koinōnia*, of making experientially real the gift of *koinōnia* bestowed by God.¹⁰ So when Paul calls the gift of money itself *koinōnia* (Rom. 15:26), he is loading such “fleshly worship” (15:27)¹¹ with the full freight of God’s *koinōnia* project.¹²

4. *Koinōnia as solidarity in the Body of Christ*

It is clear that we have moved far from everyday partnership to a *koinōnia* that is best translated as a mix of sharing, participation, and interdependence: communion. In Romans 12, Paul’s own “Sermon on the Mount,” Paul urges believers to make the needs of the saints their own (12:13). N.R.S.V.’s “Contribute to the needs of the saints” hardly captures the verb “*koinōneō*.” N.I.V.’s “Share with God’s people who are in need” is not much stronger. In Paul’s view, those who are members together in one body (Rom. 12:4, 5; cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27) experience the needs of other members of the body as their own. If one suffers, all suffer; if one rejoices, all rejoice (1 Cor. 12:26; Rom. 12:15).¹³

The life of faith is lived within the “body” God has created “in Christ.” This shared life is not one we create, but is a gift of God. At the same time, this *koinōnia* exists in being lived and practiced *as koinōnia* and *with koinōnia*, nurtured through acts great and small, material and “spiritual.”

9. John A. Lapp and Ed van Straten, “Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000: From Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (Jan. 2003), 11-16.

10. See the perceptive discussion of 2 Cor. 8 and 9 in relation to gift-giving in Tshimika and Lind, *Sharing Gifts*, 84-85, 94.

11. Paul suggests that if the Gentiles have shared (*koinōneō*) in their spiritual matters, then they ought to serve them (*leitourgeō*) in fleshly matters.

12. To borrow a line from the title of Bernhard Ott’s *God’s Shalom Project*. It could just as well have been entitled *God’s Koinonia Project*.

13. Tshimika and Lind offer profound insights on the relationship of needs and gifts within the body of the church, showing how needs are a gift to the church.—*Global Sharing*, 27-33. Debra van Deusen Hunsinger speaks provocatively of “the beauty of needs.”—“Practicing *Koinōnia*,” *Theology Today* 66 (2009), 366.

5. Koinōnia as participation in the divine koinōnia

Such *koinōnia* is not only a way of living in community, of making it possible for diverse and often conflicted persons and groups to find their communion in Christ, but is also itself a participation in the *koinōnia* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many theologians have recognized the deep link between *koinōnia* and Trinity, in that it locates both difference and unity within the Godhead.¹⁴ Conversely, the Trinity thus also provides a way in which we can understand the profundity of our relationships with one another in the body of Christ as those who are both different and distinctly unique and at the same time one. Of course, when we speak about God, most especially about the mystery of the Trinity, we speak of that for which our words are at best pointers.¹⁵ But as we observe how Jesus related to his divine Father, and the sense of intimacy he exhibited with God's Spirit, we see a kind of oneness and diversity that serves as a model for our understanding of *koinōnia*.

The *koinōnia* of the Trinity is more than modeling or analogy, however. As shocking as it might seem, we are invited to participate (itself a way of translating the verb *koinōneō*) in the divine communion. Whereas "*koinōnia*" or any of its family of terms never appears, no better example of this bracing truth exists than Jesus' prayer in John 17:21-24.

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 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 become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The direction of *koinōnia* is not only *toward* God. Believers are not only drawn into the divine *koinōnia*, but God comes *our way* in Christ.¹⁶ The letter to the Hebrews expresses this in terms of Jesus becoming just like

14. See here, e.g., Fernando Enns, "Koinonia from a peace church perspective," presented to the M.W.C. International Planning Commission, 2003; A. Katherine Grieb, "People of God, Body of Christ, Koinonia of Spirit: The Role of Ethical Ecclesiology in Paul's 'Trinitarian' Language," *Anglican Theological Review*, 87:2 (2005), 225-252; S. Mark Heim, "Witness to Communion: A Trinitarian Perspective on Mission and Religious Pluralism," *Missiology: An International Review*, 33:2 (2005), 192-199; Hunsinger, "Practicing Koinōnia," 346.

15. See Alfred Neufeld's caution in *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2007), 19, 20; but see also 120.

16. *Ibid.*, 37.

us (Heb. 4:15). In a wonderful image of *koinōnia*, “we see Jesus” (2:9), “pioneer of our salvation” (2:10), standing in the midst of those he calls his brothers and sisters (2:11), quoting Scripture, including Isaiah 8:18: “Here am I and the children whom God has given me” (2:13; cf. Jn. 17). Verse 14 makes the link to *koinōnia* explicit: “Since, therefore, children share (*koinōneō*) flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise shared¹⁷ the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” Or, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:38-39, after rehearsing the intensity of God’s commitment to and solidarity with us in Christ and through the Spirit:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁸

In this context *koinōnia* means identification and solidarity—of God with us. The Johannine writings emphasize the same point. John 1 is, of course, the most dramatic example, where the Word that was with God—and that *is* God!—becomes flesh and “tents” with us (1:14), among those who have such a difficult time comprehending and welcoming that Word (1:11). Similarly, 1 John 1:1-3 identifies this coming-our-way explicitly with *koinōnia*: “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have *koinōnia* with us; and truly our *koinōnia* is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

We owe to Paul the phrase “in Christ,” which captures in most concentrated form the *koinōnia* we share with Christ. Ephesians speaks of Christ in and through whom “all things in heaven and on earth” are being gathered up (1:10)—one of the grandest images of a cosmic *koinōnia* in which God is “above all and through all and in all” (4:6). But we note that Ephesians speaks also of Christ being in us (3:17). In Galatians 4:19 Paul speaks of Christ being formed in us (cf. Phil. 2:20). The *koinōnia* we have with Christ is mutual. We are in him, and he is in us. Thus, in the so-called High Priestly prayer, Christ prays to his father and ours (cf. Heb. 2:11; Eph. 3:15) for those whom God has given him, namely, that they (we) may be one, as also the Father and Son are one (cf. 1 Jn. 1:3). The divine *koinōnia* is one we “share” in by the initiative of God in and through Jesus.

17. Here the verb is *metechō* (“to partake of”), a virtual synonym of *koinōneō*.

18. See the thoughtful treatment of *koinōnia* in relation to Rom. 8 by Flora Winfield, “For Nothing Can Separate Us from the Love of Christ: Who Does Belong to the Body of Christ?” *Ecumenical Review* 47:3 (1995), 364-372. She refers to the bond of God’s *koinōnia* with us as “inseparability.”

Our *koinōnia* is with the Father and the Son, but also with the Holy Spirit. We speak often about the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” We do so even though we think of “fellowship” as being weaker than “communion.”¹⁹ However much the connotations differ in contemporary English usage (other languages in the M.W.C. might face other connotations), we should recognize that both fellowship and communion translate the Greek *koinōnia*. If we keep in mind that the *pneuma/ruach* (“spirit,” “wind,” “breath”) of God has given life to this universe from the beginning, and which continues to give breath and energy to each of us, fueling our desire for faithfulness, then the “*koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit” is yet another way of talking about the divine initiative to bring us into *koinōnia* with one another and with God. “Fellowship” can thus come to carry the full freight of “communion.” In the famous benediction at the end of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians “the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit” is set alongside the “grace (*charis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ” and the “love (*agapē*) of God” (2 Cor. 13:13), suggesting in good trinitarian fashion that they are virtual synonyms—different yet one.²⁰

For Paul, as for early Anabaptists, and many of our sisters and brothers today, such sharing in the divine *koinōnia* also means sharing in the sufferings of Christ. To be “in Christ” is to “participate” (*koinōneō*) “in Christ.” It is to have the mind of the One who emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, obedient to the point of death, as Philippians 2:6-10 shows. We might be asked to participate with Christ’s suffering at the hands of a world resistant to God’s efforts at reconciliation (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13). It means “co-suffering” with one another (2 Cor. 1:7; Phil. 4:14; Heb. 10:33), bearing the abuse Christ also suffered. And it means “suffering” one another (cf. Rom. 15:1-3). Notice that Paul employs the hymn celebrating Christ’s self-giving to the point of death in Philippians 2:6-11 as support for his exhortation to live the “*koinōnia* in the Spirit” (2:1) by practicing compassion, humility, unity of mind (or disposition), and unity of love, thinking of others and their needs as more important than our own. *Koinōnia* with the self-giving of Jesus, to the point of dying for us, informs a continuum from putting up with one another in the body of Christ to participating in the suffering love of Christ for the church (Col. 1:24) and the world. To “participate” in the divine *koinōnia*

19. In 1972, the M.W.C. executive secretary, C. J. Dyck, wished to move beyond “fellowship” to “communion” in terms of how Mennonites would view themselves in relationship to one another in the M.W.C.—Lapp and van Straten, “Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000,” 28.

20. For “*koinōnia* of (or in) the Holy Spirit” see also 2 Cor. 1:7; 8:4; Phil. 2:1.

means sharing in the suffering of God, in the suffering of Christ, so that we might also experience the *koinōnia* of the resurrection (Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 4:13; 5:1).

6. *Koinōnia and the Lord's Supper*

Nowhere does the church, regardless of tradition, and regardless of time and place, celebrate, experience, and reaffirm this *koinōnia* more intensely than in the Lord's Supper, where we experience the *koinōnia* of Christ's blood and body (1 Cor. 10:16). Anabaptists speak typically not of "eucharist" (from *eucharistia*, "thanksgiving"), but of "communion" (*koinōnia*). We might think of communion as a less "loaded" term, since "eucharist" is usually associated with "high-church" sacramentalism. Everything we have discovered about *koinōnia* thus far should alert us, however, to the fact that we could not use a more loaded term than "communion"—becoming one with, participating in and with, sharing at the most profound level, as members of one body "in Christ."²¹ We can sense the potential in such terminology of a mystical identification between us and Christ in the sharing of the meal.

A careful reading of both 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 together suggests that for Paul *koinōnia* is not first and foremost centered on the bread and the wine, but on the gathering together of the diverse members of the body, to "re-member" with another as members of the body of Christ, to connect with Jesus within this body, and to remember and proclaim the death of our Lord. "Discerning the body" means to recover a sense of who we are to one another as part of that one loaf that is broken for us and for the world, and to do what it takes to make that body one of peace and mutuality.

The reason Paul gives these instructions is not first and foremost to provide a theology of the eucharist, however much we surely glean from this passage, but because in his view the Corinthians do not fully appreciate the nature of the "body" of which they are a part. To eat and drink together is "re-membering" (with) Christ, becoming one with his ministry, his death, and his resurrection, but just as importantly, waiting on each other, and quite literally waiting for each other, eating and drinking across cultural, racial, ethnic, class, and gender boundaries within the *koinōnia* Christ has created "in himself" (as 1 Cor. 12 will show; cf., Eph. 2:16). In Paul's view the highest and most solemn moment in the life of the church is at the same time tested by the most

21. The Mennonite Encyclopedia has no article on *koinōnia*, but it does have one on "Communion," which is almost entirely focused on the Lord's Supper.—ME 1:[page#]; John D. Rempel's update on that article in 1989 stresses the depth of "participation" with Christ in communion.—ME 5: xx.

practical, material exercise of mutuality and solidarity. Here he shows himself to be James' equal in how true faithfulness is tested at ground level, so to speak (e.g., Jas. 2). In this core passage Paul is interested in theology to the extent that it is tethered to the practice of *koinōnia* within the body. The life in and of the body of Christ is "sacramental." But the sacramental moment is just as likely to be providing for a needy sister as it is taking the bread and the cup together with her. As Paul reminds the Corinthians at another point, *diakonia*, being each other's servants, is *koinōnia* at work (2 Cor. 8:4). *Diakonia* gives integrity to *koinōnia*.

We are here in the presence of an insight we sometimes ascribe to the Anabaptists: practice and conviction are inseparable. We quote Hans Denk frequently: "Only those know Christ who follow him in life." It is clear from our brief study that, at best, Anabaptists recovered something of the biblical wholeness; namely, that there is no belief that has any integrity without the living out of it; there are no convictions, however much they are "shared," that are not tested for their integrity in the practice of sharing, in material *koinōnia*, that is, *diakonia*.²²

Summary

Koinōnia is one of the deepest and most comprehensive words we have for our unity with one another and with God in Christ. It is the biblical name we give to the most lofty and at the same time the most ordinary and practical of contexts. This is never a matter of "either/or" or even of "both/and." Rather, it is in the nature of the *koinōnia* God gives us, in the incarnation of the Son, and in the blowing of God's spirit, that the most profound dimensions of *koinōnia* are to be found in the utterly ordinary exercise of it.

Koinōnia is one of the names that characterizes our communion with God, a communion we celebrate, proclaim, and renew in the Lord's Supper. Such *koinōnia* is inseparable from how we relate to one another in the body of Christ. We recognize and acknowledge *koinōnia* as a bond, a shared identity, that shapes and informs how we view one another, how we engage one another, how we communicate with one another, encourage and correct one another, and, most immediately and practically, how we share (*koinōneō*) in response to one another's needs.²³

22. Notice how in 2 Cor. 8:4 Paul refers to the "*diakonia* of this *koinōnia*" (similarly in 9:13).

23. Tim Lind relates a line from a sermon he heard in South Africa that captures fully the nature of *koinōnia* and gift giving and receiving: "When things are used they are

It is clear that *koinōnia* is an identity-giving, life-shaping, commitment-forging, and action-provoking gift of God. We receive it with Christ standing among us and his Spirit enabling us to both receive and exercise this gift.

KOINŌNIA AND MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE

Following are some musings and reflections on how this study intersects with concerns within the Mennonite World Conference. As stated at the outset, *koinōnia* has for a long time been front and center for those giving leadership to M.W.C. Larry Miller, former general secretary of M.W.C., has correctly identified it as both the reality undergirding our life together, and as a goal toward which we are moving.²⁴ It is both fact and vision, “already” and “not yet.” While the specific terminology of *koinōnia* is not employed by Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind in their *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith*, it is clear that “global gift sharing” captures many of the dimensions of *koinōnia* perfectly, not least in locating its ground and origin in God’s own gift sharing.²⁵ The emphasis throughout Tshimika and Lind’s work on mutuality, equitability, generosity, and giftedness is entirely consonant with what we have discovered about *koinōnia*. While the specific vocabulary of *koinōnia* is also not given prominence in either the seven “Shared Convictions” or in Alfred Neufeld’s commentary on them²⁶, the emphasis on “shared” convictions and the methodology in how they were arrived at, as well as in Neufeld’s exposition, is highly resonant with what we have discovered in the New Testament.

The International Planning Commission of the M.W.C. identified “autonomy” as one of the given realities of the M.W.C. community of churches.²⁷ It is in fact one of the criteria for membership in the M.W.C.²⁸ As I see it, *koinōnia* and autonomy are in considerable tension. “Autonomy,” literally being a “law unto oneself,” implies independence rather than interdependence (“I have no need of you,” 1 Cor. 12:21), and

material to us. If we give them to others they become spiritual to us and material to others.” — Tshimika and Lind, *Sharing Gifts*, 57.

24. Larry Miller, “Koinonia in the future of MWC,” *Courier*, No. 2 (2004), 2.

25. Tshimika and Lind, *Sharing Gifts*, 41-50.

26. Neufeld, *What We Believe Together*.

27. Conclusion 10 of the I.P.C.’s report to member churches in 2003. See Larry Miller, “Diversity: Blessing, curse, or call to communion? A reflection on the Mennonite World Conference experience,” *Vision* 11/1 (2010), 62-73. This stress on autonomy was there from the very beginning. — Cf. Lapp and van Straten, “Mennonite World Conference 1925-2000,” 14-15.

28. M.W.C. Constitution, Article 2, 2009.

thus a drive in the other direction than the oneness Jesus prayed for. That is likely not the intention behind the use of the term in the M.W.C. But there is a sense that in the history of the M.W.C. the insistence on autonomy has reflected the desire not to have the search for unity compromise faithfulness. It lies in the Anabaptist DNA that the desire for faithfulness sits uneasily alongside the desire for unity in Christ.²⁹

Larry Miller sees autonomy rightly as a challenge to reaching true *koinōnia*. He thus calls for “autonomy-in-communion,”³⁰ clearly wishing nevertheless to move “beyond autonomy into communion-in-diversity.” Might our study of *koinōnia* nudge us thus to speak less of autonomy, independence, and self-determination, and more of granting one another the space to be as diversely and distinctly and uniquely faithful as possible? This is a *koinōnia*-space where the walls are thin, the windows and doors are open, the conversations are overheard, maybe even interrupted, where we grant each other profound respect without distancing ourselves beyond the reach of both offering and receiving counsel, correction, and exhortation.

Paul’s letter to the Romans provides what I believe is a helpful illustration. In 14:1-15:13 Paul addresses a vexing set of issues in the circle of house churches in Rome, made up of observant Jews and not so observant (or otherwise observant!) Gentiles. Should one eat meat? Should one observe special days? These issues might seem trivial, but they were experienced as at least as troubling as any doctrinal or ethical issues we face in the M.W.C. What made the issues so difficult is that they were competing visions and practices of holiness and worship. How do you compromise on faithfulness?

Interestingly, Paul never settles the question as to who is strong and who is weak, whether meat should be eaten or special days observed. He does insist that nothing is *koinon* (unclean, profane) of itself (14:14). But even that hardly settles the question. Paul recognizes that these issues are a test of the *koinōnia* of believers with God and one another. He insists that Roman believers not violate another’s efforts at faithfulness. They must find a way, precisely as those whom God has welcomed, who together share one Lord (14:1-6; 15:7), to grant one another such space and freedom.

29. This was recognized by the I.P.C. in Conclusion 9.

30. Miller, “Diversity.”

Such mutual respect and freedom does not show *koinōnia*'s weakness but its strength. This is not a defined space, and the dynamic quality of *koinōnia* suggests that it can shrink and expand. But those granting one another such space remain firmly tethered to one another in the "chain of peace" (Eph. 4:3; cf. Rom. 14:17-19), not because of their resolve, but because of God's. It is God who calls friends, strangers, and enemies together into the body of Christ. It is God who chains them together.

We might think that true *koinōnia* would have the effect of shrinking the space, of lessening differences that have the potential of bringing tension and conflict. It does not; it opens it up. Indeed, it is driven by a "desire for difference."³¹ It does indeed undermine autonomy, but it provides space for difference as gift.³² Given that it is always the "*koinōnia* of the Gospel," a radical hospitality that invites and embraces with love not only strangers (Rom. 12:13) but also enemies (Mt. 5:43), this space must be expected to be the noisy and often conflictual place of new creation. Indeed, new spaces will open up, new challenges to unity arise, new strain put on the chains of peace precisely because of the Spirit's sometimes disturbing "fellowship." We should remember that true *koinōnia* is always the *koinōnia* of the Spirit, the wind of God that blows where it wills. So it is also with those who are born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8). We should not expect to have found true *koinōnia* when things have "settled down." We find it in the mix of joy, exultation, friendship, and unity, but also in the vulnerable search for such unity midst an often energetic and contentious hospitality modeled after Christ (Rom. 14-15).

Such an understanding informs our relations to the global body of Christ, whether the M.W.C. or the larger ecumenical body of the church, where we are coming to value the differences history and diverse walks of both faithfulness and unfaithfulness have brought about. This appreciation is not the tolerance of "live and let live," but a recognition that we belong to one another by act of God, and that *koinōnia* in such a context is a mix of listening, appreciating, exhorting, critiquing, dialoging—all in the interests of growing closer to one another within the *koinōnia* of God.³³

31. Tshimika and Lind, *Global Sharing*, 21.

32. As Tim Lind puts it: "Difference is such a beautiful thing; how ironic it seems that often we allow our differences—our gifts—to divide us and keep us apart, as though it would be better if we were all the same! How sad it is that the ugliest acts in human history have been committed because of these beautiful differences."—Tshimika and Lind, *Sharing Gifts*, 11. See also Miller, "Diversity," and Neufeld, *What We Believe Together*, 12.

33. So also Neufeld, *What We Believe Together*, 13. See Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "Forbearance: Binding Loosely or Loose Bindings? Biblical-theological Reflections," in *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honour of A. James Reimer*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul G. Doerksen and Karl Koop (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2007), 27-43.

Should we expect that true *koinōnia* will constitute a convergence of belief and practice? Can we or even should we expect consensus? M.W.C. has, as part of its commitment to seek greater *koinōnia*, come to practice consensus as a means of both learning to listen to the diversity of voices and to give voice to that diversity.³⁴ What does welcoming one another midst deeply held differences mean in relation to the search for consensus? We know that a body made up of “all things in heaven and on earth,” as Ephesians 1:10 has it, will never be one of uniformity—by design!—but of God-created diversity. Might it even be that such diversity will and should generate God-given tensions and conflicts that will serve to render us all more faithful? It is my firm conviction that the church’s faith and faithfulness were deeply impoverished when the tension between Jews and Gentiles gave way to the “peace” of a Gentile church, however vexatious such a troubled *koinōnia* was. What does consensus look like then? Larry Miller has used the word “catholicity” to describe such a community of lively discourse and discernment.³⁵ What does catholicity look like in an ever changing, ever newly challenged set of questions and answers reached for? What does “living together in structures of solidarity but also sharing life in structures of authority and accountability”³⁶ look like when diversity, even contentious diversity, has been embraced as a gift of God?

Koinōnia will present different challenges in different parts of our communion. In a modern and postmodern context *koinōnia* is provocation to individualism, to autonomy, to self-sufficiency, to a power-and-control-oriented culture of communication and authority. In highly homogenous parts of our communion it may well collide with the human propensity for same-seeking-same, for being profoundly threatened by difference. *Koinōnia* stands for unity *midst* diversity, unity *in* diversity, oneness *within* multiplicity.

By way of a concluding observation, it takes very little imagination to see how the various commissions of the M.W.C. are all, each in their own way, profound expressions of *koinōnia*, and *each in their own way, and all together*, they help us move ever deeper into communion with God and one another. The Mission Commission represents “the *koinōnia* of the

34. Larry Miller, “Koinonia in the Future of MWC”; see also Hunsinger’s insightful exploration of “nonviolent” or “compassionate communication” as *koinōnia* in practice.—“Practicing Koinonia,” 348-361.

35. Miller, “Diversity.”

36. Miller, “MWC: ‘Communion’ on the Way Between Local Church and Church Universal,” *Menmonitisches Jahrbuch* 2000.

gospel." The Deacon's Commission might, in light of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, have been named the Koinonia Commission. The Peace Commission is a reminder that in light of what we have seen in the New Testament, *koinōnia* is shalom in the making. And the Faith and Life Commission is engaged in nothing less than helping to forge a *koinōnia* of conviction.

Koinōnia as word, concept, and experience is a pearl of great price. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit enable us to receive this gift—again and again.