



21st-century church: A fellowship of the heart

Lyle Young

Church has taken many forms over the last two thousand years, including house churches in the decades after Jesus' ascension; Christian meetings in the catacombs in Rome; towering European churches that took hundreds of years to build; megachurches—particularly in South Korea, Brazil, and the United States; and services held online during the pandemic.

Online church has met the needs of millions the last few years. But further into the 21st century, what will church look like? Also, could the questions of where to meet, what kind of building to have, and whether to meet in person or online be secondary to the more fundamental question of what will church feel like in our hearts?

The last chapter of Paul's monumental epistle to the Romans is made up mostly of warm, personal greetings—to Priscilla and Aquila, who "risked their necks" for Paul (16:4, English Standard Version); to Mary, who "has worked very hard among you" (16:6, New Revised Standard Version); to Rufus and his mother; to Nereus and his sister; and so on. Paul's, and his coworkers', affection for and interest in these various members of the Christian community at Rome show what church can be at its best—a rich, welcoming fellowship of the heart. But beyond admirable human friendliness, that fellowship was based on an inclusive theology that sees God's salvation as embracing everyone because God as Spirit testifies that we are all children of God.

Being children of one God, Spirit, gives us the strongest possible basis for love in a local church. But the only way to show this love in church is to show it in our lives in general. This may mean searching our hearts to eliminate any indifference (or worse) toward others and more consistently committing to loving and cherishing everyone in their true being as a child of God. The inner discipline of putting aside views of ourselves and others as imperfect and staying with the thought that each of us in our true being is perfect—not a perfect human being, but a perfect spiritual expression of this one perfect God—brings harmony to relationships and to the world. Then, like a musician who comes prepared to play with the rest of the orchestra, we

bring to church activities that inner discipline, that interest in and concern for others, and everyone is blessed.

Christian Science uniquely emphasizes not only that God is Love but that all that truly exists is divine Love and its spiritual expression, God's creation, including each of us. For example, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy says: "Divine Love is infinite. Therefore all that really exists is in and of God, and manifests His love" ([p. 340](#)).

This concept of identity as Love's individual expression, purely spiritual—not subject to sin, sickness, and death—may seem abstract initially, but as people have grasped it and made it their own, it has brought healing. Each church member living this love in their daily life lifts membership beyond the institutional to the inspirational—to being a fellowship of the heart. Jesus said, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" ([John 13:35](#)).

This deep, spiritual love expressed in church in tangible ways draws people in and helps us feel divine guidance relative to, for example, where to hold services; what kind of building to have; whether to meet fully in person or have a blended service, with some attending online and others in person. This same love impels us to examine our motives when deciding how to attend services. For instance, if attending primarily through digital means, do we have a genuine need to stay away, or is it for personal convenience? Spiritual love opens our thought to God's guidance and to ideas from God that create a community where everyone is valued as a unique, indispensable, spiritual expression of one universal Father-Mother. This builds a church of such focused love that it supports healing, including physical healing.

While the expression of this love can take different forms, my own branch Church of Christ, Scientist, continues to reflect the diversity of our community, with members and participants originally from English- and French-speaking Canada, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, China, and Mauritius. We come together in response to a common calling—to express universal Love, the substance of Christ Jesus' ministry.

Praying daily that divine Love embraces everyone in church; devoting time, energy, and prayer to the Reading Room and Sunday School; maintaining an active website; and offering strong, welcoming church services, members show much hospitality to and care for each other and for other church participants. These practical actions help everyone feel included and valued and

put relationships at the center of church—first, the relationship each has to God, and then, the precious relationship that each participant has with others.

So, church in the 21st century? Very exciting! Because we're into a whole new chapter of this universal fellowship of the heart.

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