

A Body and Parts

Our Ministries As A Church

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Introduction

Being Australia Day, in today's service we have sought to acknowledge the hurt experienced by the traditional owners of the land on which we now live. This acknowledgement can be regarded as quite formal rather than personal for two reasons: first, I've not had anyone in either of the churches identify themselves as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and second, I've not been requested by any member of our churches to make this acknowledgement. Rather, the Uniting Church has asked all congregations to mark the Sunday before Australia Day (which was technically last week) as a Day of Mourning, something which I have been comfortable in doing. While I don't like tokenisms making this acknowledgement is a helpful opportunity for us to recognise past hurts and failings and move forward to greater healing and hope for first and second peoples.

It was as I was thinking on the formality of today's acknowledgement that I was prompted to reflect on one of the questions posed for January. The question was asking about the ministries of our churches and what is being done to assist lonely people and people in need. It struck me that part of the issue when determining whether a church has a particular ministry is whether you expect a ministry to be part of the formal structure of the church with all that that entails or whether you see the informal and very personal service of members of the church to be just as valid as a ministry. We're going to explore this more in today's message.

Corporate and Organic Tension

One way in which the difference between formal and informal ministries can be considered is in seeing the church organically, like a family, or seeing it corporately, like a school or company.

For me personally, I have predominantly considered the church as a family, which means that I look at the church in an organic way. This means that I see the church fairly flat structurally and I don't think that ministry only happens when the pastor or Counsellors are involved. Thinking of the church in an organic way lines up with Jesus' teaching and parables about the kingdom of God where he often uses organic images as well as the descriptions of the early church in Acts and the letters which we have in the New Testament.

However, as a pastor and a member of our Church Council I am quite aware of the corporate nature of churches and the bureaucracy that impacts us. When we think about people looking after kids we don't just ask, "Does this person love Jesus and love kids?" We also ask, "Does this person have a blue card, undertaken Safe Ministry With Children training, and have a good track record?" Of course we want to make sure that our children are safe and many of the requirements that are put upon us either by our denomination or by the government are appropriate and reasonable (sometimes this processes is half-seriously referred to as the formalising and documenting of what previously was considered 'common sense').

On days when I can be frustrated by the amount of rules and regulations with which we have to be compliant, I try and remember that early in the church's life there was a formalising of positions and requirements. In Acts 6:1-7 we read, In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a

convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Here we have an account of a problem of an informal ministry causing some people, namely Greek speaking Jewish widows, to miss out on assistance and this problem being solved by the formal appointment of seven people who had certain pre-requisites. Interestingly, some people see one of the great miracles in the Bible happening here and that is that following on from this situation there was a great number of people coming to the Lord and that things seemed to actually improve after an increase in bureaucracy!

People joke about this not only because of our experiences with government red tape but also because of the history of the church. When we look at the church there is an almost constant move to becoming more formal and corporate and this only seems to be compounded by the rise of denominations (something we don't find in New Testament descriptions of the church). Indeed, I remember reading through the Basis of Union, the founding document of the Uniting Church, and being very impressed with the missional emphasis of the document and how it sought to strip away much of the cumbersome wording that is in many church documents. However, having read through the Basis of Union I turned the page of the book and I came to the Constitution, and the Manual for Meetings and I was drowning in guidelines and regulations again. I asked my pastor, "How quickly did the Uniting Church move from being characterised by the lean and missional Basis of Union to being encumbered by all these regulations like most other denominations?" My pastor responded that there was no good answer and that it was a cause of much heart break for a number of people who had advocated for Union. I share this, not to put down the Uniting Church, but simply to remind us that there is a constant pressure to formalise things and thus make things more corporate. This is natural because formality normally makes things

clearer (who is responsible, what are their jobs, etc.) but it can hinder the work which God wants to do in and through us, even when we're messy and disorganised.

To conclude this section on the corporate and organic nature of the church, I would say that while it is very helpful to view the church in an organic way, and we should never lose sight of the family nature of the church, it is to be acknowledged that both in the Old Testament and in the early church there was a movement towards the establishment of formal structures and roles and this formalising process shouldn't be avoided or looked down upon but kept in balance with the overall focus of God for the church and his work in and through people.

Local Body Of Christ Is Made Up Of Many Parts

It is this work of God in and through the individual members who make up the church which we now turn to. This is the focus of today's reading, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and there are three brief points I'd like to highlight from this section about the unity and diversity in the body.

First, the oneness of the body does not take away from the diversity of the parts and likewise the diversity of the parts does not detract from the unity of the body. Have a look at verses 12 to 14 and notice the repeated uses of the words, 'one', 'many', and 'all'.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

We can see how Paul is seeking to emphasise strongly that the individual members are part of the church and this is based upon all believers receiving the same baptism in the Holy Spirit. This foundational work of God is what allows for a celebration of differences because those differences don't override the overall unity which is already established when we put our faith in Jesus and what he has achieved for us.

Indeed, my second point is that, differences should be recognised, accepted and even celebrated. If all people, and thus all ministries, looked the same this would be to the detriment of the whole church. It may be true that people who are blind often have very good hearing but most people recognise that it is better if you can both hear and see.

It is a bit of a joke in my family that if you want a story to read to you then Alison is the one to ask. Alison naturally reads ahead, can put on different voices and has a great ability to keep kids engaged. I, on the other hand, struggle with this. I am much more monotone when I read and seem to easily miss my spot when I'm reading out loud. However, if you want a story just told to you I can normally do that in an engaging and interesting way and my stories are normally fairly easy to follow. In contrast, when Alison tells a story without notes she will get to the end and wonder why there's no reaction only to realise that she left out some critical piece of information. We all have our strengths, we all have our weaknesses and the church is blessed when people serve in the way that God has made them.

The third point from this section is that even weak members of the body or those members who are hurting remain part of the body and so should receive love and acceptance even as we put extra care or protection around them. It is a tragedy when the church has rejected those who struggle with brokenness more openly. If we're a body we will do what Paul describes here, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." We should never view a struggling brother or sister in-Christ as a problem to be removed from our midst but rather we're to see in them a part of ourselves who needs extra love and care.

We Serve For The Benefit Of The Whole Body

One final extra point that I would like to make from the reading, and I don't have time to go into much detail, is that gifts and talents are given to the members of the church primarily for the benefit of the whole body of Christ.

We see this hinted at throughout where Paul points out that if everyone was an eye where would the sense of hearing be, etc. It should be obvious that the eye doesn't take what it discovers about the world and jealously guards it from the ears or other parts of the body. No, the particular gift is given for the sake of the whole body.

Paul then presents this in another way in verses 28-31, "And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts." When Paul says that the Corinthian Christians should eagerly desire the greater gifts he is pointing to those gifts which come earlier in the list, apostles, prophets, teachers and all these gifts exist for the building up of God's church through an understanding of God's word and will. Paul then proceeds to list just a few of the spiritual gifts which God has give to the church and it's notable that obviously other-focused gifts of healing and helping are listed before the more personal gift of speaking in tongues.

Put simply, Paul is encouraging his readers to desire gifts which can be used for the building up and encouraging of Christ's body, the church. I am encouraged to be in a church which has so many servant-hearted people who give of themselves for the sake of others. Many people do their service without being on a roster or having a formal position, they simply serve as they see a need and opportunity. These acts of service make up so many of the ministries of our church because that's what ministry is, acts of service.

I know that there are many people in our church who give of themselves to others and that includes to lonely and needy people. I'm thankful that whether we've formalised it or not, we have a ministry to such people which grows out of the faithful members of our church who serve for the building up of others and of Christ's body.

Conclusion

In conclusion, does our church have a ministry to the lonely and needy?

Yes we do because I know we have members who serve those who don't find it easy to get out and about. Not only at the personal or organic level do we have such a ministry but I know that some of our formal ministries such as our craft groups also connect to the lonely and needy in our communities. However, could we do more? Yes but we're also to manage wisely the resources with which God has blessed us.

I would encourage each of us to pray about the personality and passions which we have as well as the gifts and talents we've been blessed with to determine how we can bless God's body by serving the church.

Why don't we start this process now? I am going to give us a whole 90 seconds of silence for each of us to pray that we would think clearly about our gifts and abilities as well as pray that we would have wisdom as to how we can serve.

[Allow for time of silent prayer and then close before singing "Man of Sorrows"]