

be quite clear – it **is** an unworthy motive for our service! We need to love people because God loves them, because they are made in his image – even when that image seems to have become quite unrecognisable in them! People will never become disciples of Christ if our love is other than totally wholehearted – and if it ceases because the “message” is rejected. But did Jesus stop loving just because they nailed him to a cross?

But “unconditional” should never mean “non-directional”! Our hope – and our prayer – in all our serving is that people will recognise and respond to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The *Regulations* indicate that “**The Church Council shall give priority to building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world**” (3.1.13 (a)). The *Basis of Union* gives all that as the prime task of the Elders with the life of the congregation (*Basis* 15 (b)).

We all find it much easier to relate to Christ’s mission within the Church. What is “Christ’s mission in the world”, and how does our service “out there” relate to the Church’s life “in here”?

- How do we relate serving and evangelising? In what ways can we appropriately make the gospel clear to people through our service? How can we maintain true “unconditional” love in our service even when people appear to reject the grace of God?
- What more can we do to “lead the congregation to a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world”?

8. Serving

Bible references: Mk 10.35-45; Jn 13.1-17; Mt. 25.31-46; Eph. 4.1-16.

In our diagram in the first session, “evangelising” and “serving” are in the same circle. “Evangelising is in the “coming” phase of church life. “Serving” is part of the “going” of the church.

In that first session, the comment was made, “People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11.28). They experience this in the caring **service** of God’s people. And they hear it when the good news – of Christ, forgiveness, salvation, new life – is shared with them (**evangelising**) and they have the opportunity to respond to Christ by faith.”

Sadly, many congregations have been divided between those who see themselves as “practical” – and therefore involved in working bees and street stalls – while others are “spiritual” – going along regularly to the Bible studies and prayer meetings. Acknowledging valid differences in temperament, such a division is not healthy.

And there are congregations who set up community services with a conscious choice never to put the gospel into words lest that make an ulterior motive for their serving. Other congregations are full of “talk”, but without any validating service. Congregational health keeps the two together. Our love for people will lead to both unconditional serving and intentional evangelising.

- To what extent do the folk in our congregation divide themselves into the “practical” and the “spiritual”?
- To what extent does our congregational mission and practice keep together “unconditional serving” and “intentional evangelising”?

Service within the Body

Some of the members of our physical body work for the health and well-being of the body. Our heart keeps on pumping blood and our lungs keep breathing – even when we sleep. We take it all for granted until something goes wrong.

Other parts of our body relate us to the world about us – our eyes, ears, voices, arms, hands, legs... They have much more to do with our conscious choices – with intention and will. Yet the physical body needs both.

So too with the Body of Christ. Some of our “serving” will take place within the Body, working for its health and well-being. Another part of our “serving” is out in the community, motivated by the love of Christ for human beings in need. The “divisions” we have discussed above are very sad. We need the “spiritual”, building up our core

relationship with the Lord. But there is something wrong if the “spiritual” doesn’t move us into “practical” care for people beyond the life of the church.

Jesus had taught a great deal about the Kingdom of God. The disciples pictured this in terms of human kingdoms where the king ruled with autocratic might – and where they might have the best places of honour!

But Jesus said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk 9.35). And again, not too long afterwards – “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10.42-45).

Jesus graphically illustrated what he meant in the upper room when he took towel and basin and began washing their feet. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13.14-15).

Serving... that’s why we are given gifts. An important part of our serving is within the life of the Body of Christ itself. Paul wrote, “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God’s people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4.11-12).

As noted in the previous study, “As people recognise their gifts, it is vital that they understand the life and mission of the whole Body. Spiritual gifts, after all, are not given to boost the individual but to build up the Body. Sometimes this understanding of the life and mission of the whole Body helps people discern the specific part of that mission to which God is calling them.”

- Sometimes “serving” gifts in the life of a congregation are hidden and little appreciated. Some of the hidden organs of our human body are like that too! Let’s pause to recognise and name some of the quiet “servers” in our congregation. Why is their service a valued part of the life of the Body of Christ?
- What “service” does the Body need in order to be built up and to grow in grace and in mission?

Service beyond the Body

But, as we have noticed before, the Body doesn’t exist for itself, but to fulfil the mind and will of the Head, the Lord Jesus. The Body needs to be healthy and growing so that it can do this, but if we have the idea that our main task is to admire ourselves in the

mirror, we’ve got it all wrong. The equal but opposite mistake is to bemoan that we no longer live in “the good old days” when we thought we were more “successful”. The constant danger of the Church is to spend our time measuring our own success instead of attending to the call of the Head of the Church.

In Jesus’ graphic picture of the last judgment, he makes it clear, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Mt. 25.35-36).

Those described as “the righteous” seem unaware of having done any of this. They haven’t been “ticking up” their good deeds at all. They have simply been responding to human need. Yet “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (v. 40).

When Paul wrote about the grace that saves us through faith, he went on, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2.8-10).

As a whole Body and as individual Christians, we are called to live as Christ’s servants in this world. It is this motivation that led to the establishment of Blue Nursing, Life Line, children’s homes, aged-care facilities... Such activities were begun with conscious faith and vision. Once institutionalised, it is not always easy to maintain the faith and vision of the founders.

As individual Christians, we can believe we are doing our “serving” through such caring institutions, and can fail to recognise the ways in which Christ is calling us to serve others. After all, we pay our taxes and the government is supposed to be looking after all those people now!

- What are the practical human needs in our community to which the Lord of the Church may be calling us to respond – as a congregation and as individual Christians?
- To what extent does the community recognise our congregation (and its members) for its conspicuous service?

Service and Evangelism

We come back to the commission we have been given – “All authority has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt. 28.18-20).

We have “deified” the concept of “unconditional love”, almost making it a sin to want people to become believers – certainly an unworthy motive for our service. Let it