

family – we need one another, and we regularly need to express our worship together (note Heb. 10.19-25).

⇒ **Fellowship.** The Greek word (*koinonia*) begins with what we have in common, joint participation, sharing together, community, communion... Notice the emphasis on fellowship in 1 John 1. Our fellowship is first of all with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ – sharing in his love and redemptive activity. But if we say we are sharing together in him and yet live in darkness, our life is a lie. On the other hand, as we live in his light, we have real fellowship with one another and his redemptive activity is at work within us.

⇒ **Witness.** A witness is a person who gives the evidence he knows in a particular case. Christian witness is giving the evidence about Jesus to those who are not believers so that they will come to the right verdict about Jesus and put their trust in him.

The demon-possessed man was healed and directed by Jesus to “go back home and tell what God has done for you” (Lk. 8.39). The evidence of this man was not simply the facts about Jesus (though this was undoubtedly part of what he said), but the evidence in his life of what Jesus had done. The witness was in personality as well as word. In his Great Commission to his followers (Mt. 28.18-20), Jesus emphasised that they were to go everywhere to make people his disciples. It’s not a matter of “doing witnessing”, but of “being a witness”. This surely begins with being a friend.

Do we expect to see people “grow in grace”? If so, what more can we do to encourage them in Bible reading, prayer, worship, fellowship and witness?

What specific growth opportunities should we be providing for the members of our congregation?

6. Nurturing

Bible references: 1 Cor 3.5-9; Eph. 4.14-16; 1 Pet. 2.1-3; 2 Pet. 3.17-18

Having focussed on “evangelising” and on “conversion and new birth,” we come to the second circle of our original diagram – “nurturing.” The *Regulations* put this second in the responsibilities of the Church Council –

(b) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace.

Nurture implies life and looks forward to “growth in grace.”

If you have a “pet rock”, you may need to wash it – or at least dust it – to return it to its “as new” static condition. You don’t “nurture” it! You would be rather alarmed to see it change!

Reflecting on nurture within the church context, there are perhaps too many times when our prime concern has been to get a person to look like, speak like and act like a Christian – according to the stereotype of our congregation or denomination. That has been our measure of growth. This has been a danger equally in churches that are “traditional”, “liturgical”, “charismatic”, “evangelical” ...

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Discernment

We don’t need to be so discerning in some of our shopping these days. A number of items proclaim themselves as “one size fits all.” It’s not exactly true, yet there are some products suited to this style of manufacture and marketing.

Sometimes we have wished to apply this principle to Christian nurture. We note the convenient way – very practical and workable too – in which evangelistic crusades are organised with a standard approach which is to be followed by all counsellors. Wouldn’t it be good, we think to ourselves, if we had one simple learnable process for nurturing church members?

For a number of reasons, the answer is “no” – though it is good to take the opportunity to train for such counselling when it is offered.

The evangelist is endeavouring to get people over the “great divide” to conversion and new birth. The challenge is specific and the “enquirers” are responding to an appeal for first-time or re- commitment. Because people have made a “response” to a specific appeal, it is usually possible to find out why they are responding and to lead them further through counselling.

In this context an agreed counselling format is appropriate and important, since the evangelist has a specific goal. Also, there are usually a number of Christian denominations involved – possibly with different approaches.

However, in “nurturing members in their growth in grace” in the local congregation, where can we begin? We need to discern where they are in their Christian walk. That can be as diverse and unique as the number of members! And it can vary from week to week!

Discernment is a matter of prayer and listening. Don’t make assumptions! The regular literature from the local church may – or may not! – provide a beginning point. Pray as you listen. Hear what the person is saying. Hear what the Spirit is saying. Sometimes a Bible passage or verse will be helpful. Most times it is appropriate to pray. Be positive about that – not “Would you mind if I pray?”, but “I want to pray for you. Is that OK?”

Why is discernment needed in nurturing church members?

How can we develop and exercise the gift of discernment?

Alive by Grace

We have already noted that nurture implies life and looks forward to “growth in grace.” There are some who may have long-term involvement in the life and worship of the congregation, but are not living by grace – they have not, in fact, crossed the “great divide.” Some think God will accept them because of their faithful service. Deal gently with such people! Over the years they have heard all the “bits” of the gospel and often need only a little directed encouragement to cross the “divide.”

Here’s a simple approach. Do they know John 3.16? Say it to them. Ask, “Do you know God loves you? Do you know Jesus came for you? Have you ever believed in him – asked him to be your Saviour and Lord? Have you ever thanked him for his gift of eternal life?” If they would like, lead them in a simple prayer, based on John 3.16. Go over John 3.16 again, this time putting their name in it – “God so loved John/Mary, that he gave his only Son, that as John/Mary believes in him, John/Mary will not perish but will have eternal life.”

This is a simplified approach which I believe is helpful and appropriate for the situation I have described. It doesn’t challenge people to repentance and faith in so many words, but does so by encouraging them to turn from trusting their own faithful “good works” to the finished work of Jesus Christ.

In what ways is this approach helpful in leading faithful church members to a living faith? What other elements should be included?

Growing in Grace

Jesus said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (Jn 17.3).

Eternal life / salvation – the whole Christian life, in fact – is a relationship made possible by the redemptive grace of God in Jesus Christ. Growing in grace is growing in this new relationship. Nurturing is providing a faith environment in which this growth can occur. Expect a passion to grow – that is a sign of life. If there is no passion to grow, seek to discern – is there some spiritual “blockage” leading to an unhealthy spiritual life? or has the person never crossed the “great divide” in the first place?

It is helpful to remember five principles that are important for spiritual growth – Bible prayer, fellowship, worship and witness/service. At this point, the inter-relatedness of our original diagram is apparent. We have already noted that worship is central to the life of the Body of Christ. As we look at nurturing, we need to keep in mind equipping people to serve. Remember Eph. 2.8-10 – we are saved for the very purpose of doing good works. Our life with God is going to be reflected in our life within the Body and “out there” in the world.

⇒ **Bible.** Reading the Bible is not simply an intellectual activity. We do not, of course, read with our intellect in suspense. As we read we gather information and understanding that will challenge and shape our whole world-view and way of life. On the other side we do not read as passive recipients – our minds are active to question, probe and enter into dialogue with what we read. Those who desire to grow spiritually need to read the Bible as the Word of God and as testimony to Christ in whom is life.

⇒ **Prayer.** Jesus placed a great deal of importance on **faith** when talking about the practice of prayer (Mt. 21.21-22). Faith is a relationship of dependence and trust. It is not faith in praying, but faith in God. This is highlighted further in Jn. 16.23-24 when Jesus teaches that we are to ask **in his name** – in other words as his people and according to his will.

⇒ **Worship.** We have been made to relate to God, and that proper relationship is worship. The English word “worship” comes from **worth-ship** recognition of God’s worth or worthiness. This “worship” needs principally to be our constant attitude and relationship with God (note Jn. 4.24). But it also needs to find expression in congregational worship. To be a Christian is to be part of a Body, a