**Take a step in encouragement**

﻿ In Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonika, he writes:

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. [1 Thessalonians 5:11]*

The word *encouragement* literally means to *give heart to.* The faith practice of *encouraging* is to develop the ability to say and do things that give confidence, assurance, esteem and hope. Especially hope.

Some perspectives to consider on how you can take a step in encouragement include:

* Improving the heart-health of the congregation,
* Providing encouragement to people in times of need,
* Practicing long-term and deep encouragement

**Strengthening our congregational community**

One of the primary metaphors used in the New Testament for the Church is the *body of Christ.* Using this metaphor gives a tangible reference for talking about the health, heart, and members of the congregation. If a body is diseased, uncoordinated, under-nourished, out of shape or otherwise afflicted, it impacts the capabilities and over-all health of the body. Primary to a healthy body is a healthy heart. What are the things that can weaken the heart of the congregation? They are the same things that weaken community.

As Judith Spent writes:

The word "community" is rooted in sharing. Shared experiences, shared values, and shared space lead to community. The church shares the love of God, the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit who continually calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us. The forces of sin work at division and estrangement. They promote differences as barriers to community. Encouragement is the practice of all those actions and attitudes that promote friendship, break down distrust, and bring us to the fullness of the blessed community of God’s own life. It takes courage to connect and hold onto each other. In Christ we are encouraged. That is to say, gifted with community and the valor to maintain it.[[1]](#endnote-1)

When sin and fear are at work in a community, then the things that are said and done—especially the things that are said—weaken the bonds and the strength of the community.

Luther provides the following interpretation in his explanation of the 8th Commandment, *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*:

We should fear and love God, and so we should not tell lies about our neighbors, nor betray, slander, or defame them, but should apologize for them, speak well of them, and interpret charitably all that they do.

To promote the health of the congregation, the following Code of Conduct was included in our congregation’s Bylaws:

To support fellow members and preserve harmony, I will:

• Focus on our common goals not our differences

• Support and respect my pastors, leaders, and fellow members

• Be open minded and realistic in my expectations

• Seek the best in others first

• Choose to encourage rather than criticize

**Giving strength to the faint hearted**

Also in Paul’s letter to Thessalonika, he urges them to *encourage the faint hearted* [1 Thess. 5:11] or, in other words, *give heart to those who are weak of heart.*

How is it that we encourage one another? Fundamentally, it is about giving *hope*. Whenever we find ourselves in present circumstances that are hard, painful, bleak, or overwhelming and *project into our future* *more of the same*, then what ensues is despair.

As Christians, we stand on a foundation of hope because of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and his promise that he will always be with us. This faith along with our own experience of God’s faithfulness allows God to use our listening ear and willingness to be present as instruments of hope.

**Nurturing a future in others**

Some types of encouragement are like a sprint. Others are more like a marathon. In your own life, you can identify the persistent, caring encouragers that helped you whether the ups and downs of your life. We call these people friends, mentors, and models. Because of the longevity and persistence of these relationships, their words and actions have power to “re-write” the disempowering tapes that we have in our minds. Such empowering words continue to point toward a faithful and life-giving future.

Are there people in your life who need for you to be a consistent voice of encouragement? Who might they be? How could you become a better source of strength for them?

**Steps you can take to become an Encourager**

**Ways to take a step to give heart to our community**

Embrace the ELCOC Code of Conduct.

When you pass the peace, mean it.

If you are in a conversation in which you are hearing gossip, interrupt and say something like, “Please stop. That diminishes them in my eyes.”

Look for something to affirm in what people say and do, and affirm it.

Give people the benefit of the doubt.

**Taking steps to give hope to others**

When someone confides with you that they are going through a hard time, offer to pray with them.

If you think about visiting with someone who is going through a hard time, act on it.

Practice not saying something until the person you are talking to is finished speaking.

Send a card to someone who has lost a loved one.

Attend funerals.

Visit friends who are in hospital.

Participate in the Prayer and Care group.

Share particular Bible verses that give you strength.

**Take a step in mentoring**

Become a “grandparent” to a child or youth in the congregation. Learn their name, look for them each Sunday, and ask about their lives.

Become a volunteer in the Youth Group.

Volunteer with BLAST and get to know the children.

Offer to mentor students in reading, language or studies.

Become a Big Brother or Big Sister.

Volunteer to be a Confirmation Mentor.

Coach a sport in which you have experience and skills.

Find ways to share your passions and gifts with a younger generation.

As with every mark of discipleship, the pastors are available to meet with you for prayer, consultation and guidance as you take new steps. Remember that taking these steps in inviting others is an act of spiritual growth and deepening discipleship. May God bless your growth and your encouraging.

1. Judith Spindt, “Encourage: Living Faith in Daily Life.” Copyright © 2004 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, (ELCA), 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631. 800/638-3522, p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)