

## The life of the Early Church Session 2



### Devoted to fellowship (Acts 2:44, 46; 11:19-26)

#### ENGAGE - activities to set the scene

- **Food together** (*You will need some simple snacks, fruit and drink*)

Divide people into small groups and ask them to take some food and eat together. As they do so, encourage them to share stories of times when they felt they were in deep, healthy unity with other fellow believers. What were the best moments of fellowship they have experienced within the corps/church setting?

- **Things in common** (*You will need paper and pens*)

Form two groups, each of between two and five people. Give each group a pen and paper and two minutes to write down ten things that they all have in common (excluding body parts, clothing etc). Once the time is up, ask each group to read out their list of commonalities and see if any are similar to each other.

- **Dinner host**

Ask people to think of someone in the wider corps/church to invite to dinner. However, instead of simply hosting, challenge them to choose together what they'd like to eat, to shop for groceries together and/or to prepare the meal together. This ensures that people spend a good amount of time with one another. If they eat at one person's house one week, they could agree to eat at the other person's house the following week.

As they eat together, encourage them to ask the Lord if there is someone else that they should invite to the table the next time (and perhaps consider making this a weekly practice!). Or even begin to expand their 'table community' to other believers, especially to those who may be lonely, who feel left out or unwelcome, who do not have the regular opportunity to eat with others. Nobody in our faith communities should have to eat alone.

Once people become accustomed to eating with one another, consider inviting others who might not yet know the Lord. The beauty of fellowship and hospitality is one of the best forms of witness that we have.



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### PRAY - prayer activities for different contexts

- Ask someone to pray the following prayer from *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, with pauses for everyone to repeat: ‘Creator God, we give thanks.’

‘Lord God, Creator of all, in your wisdom you have bound us together so that we must depend on others for the food we eat, the resources we use, the gifts of your creation that bring life, health and joy.

***Creator God, we give thanks.***

Holy be the hands that sew our clothes so that we do not have to go naked; sacred be the hands that build our homes so that we do not have to be exposed; blessed be the hands that work the land so that we do not have to go hungry.

***Creator God, we give thanks.***

Holy be the feet of all who labour so that we might have rest; sacred be the feet of all who stand with the oppressed; blessed be the feet of all whose bodies are too weary to stand.

***Creator God, we give thanks.***

Holy be the sound of children laughing to take away our sorrow; sacred be the sound of your living water that causes us to thirst for justice; blessed be the sound of your people singing to heal our troubled hearts.

***Creator God, we give thanks.***

Holy be the bodies of those who know hunger; sacred be the bodies of those who are broken; blessed be the bodies of those who suffer. Creator God, bless our hands for the work of building your Kingdom. Bless our feet for the long journey ahead; bless our voices with courage for truth-telling; bless our bodies, our broken bodies, our whole and holy bodies, for the work of loving one another. In your mercy and grace, soften our callous hearts and fill us with gratitude for all the gifts you have given us. In your love, break down the walls that separate us, and guide us to work for the liberation of all, that we might humbly worship you in Spirit and truth.

***Creator God, we give thanks.’***

- **Jigsaw (You will need cut-out copies of Attachment 1)**  
Consider running a day, weekend or week of 24-7 prayer. Having a devoted prayer season and space can help refocus our attention on the things that we say are most meaningful to us. Prayer rooms are great for creating time and space for worship, prayer and the reading of Scripture. You can find tips and tools for setting up a prayer room here: <https://www.24-7prayer.com/prayerrooms>



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### TEACH - content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

#### Introduction and context

- In this passage we see the new community of believers, fresh from the filling of the Spirit at Pentecost, devoting themselves to fellowship with one another. 'Fellowship' is an odd word in our current experience of church. We sometimes use it to refer to the time after a Sunday service when we drink coffee and catch up before heading home. This is part of fellowship, but surely it must mean something more?
- It certainly did mean something more for the fellowship of believers in Acts. This was a brand-new community, gathered around the very recent death and resurrection of Jesus and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost.
- They were soon to face serious pressure and persecution. They needed to know that they were united with one another, not just around certain ideas, but in actual relationship and commitment.

#### Exploration

- They met together daily and ate food together. Eating food together should never be underestimated as a way for building unity. It is, or at least it is meant to be, a deeply intimate act to break bread with one another. Rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, and (eventually) Jew and Gentile, the early Christian community had its identity formed daily around the table.
- But it went even further than this. Verse 44 tells us that the believers 'held everything in common'. The English language misleads us a little here. This is a phrase that has come to mean 'having the same interests, ideas or experiences'. But, as we will see in more detail next week, for the believers to 'hold everything in common' meant that they shared their possessions with one another.
- They were committed to one another, not just in theory, but in very costly practice, more like a family than a social club. And this fellowship intentionally included those who were very different from one another. Church fellowship is not designed simply for those with similar backgrounds and socio-economic statuses.
- This passage reveals a very significant devotion to each other in the Early Church, one that we tend not to be familiar with in our modern, Western expression of Church. But it is of vital importance because it is one of the key ways for us to grow and bear fruit in our discipleship.
- **1 John 4:20** warns us that if we cannot love our brother or sister whom we can see, then we should not claim to love God whom we cannot. As we devote ourselves to one another in love we help produce 'healthy branches' in the Church.



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- Henri Nouwen said that Jesus sent his disciples into the world in twos because ‘together, they could maintain the spirit of peace and love and the affirmation they found in his company, and they could share these gifts with everyone they met’. They could bear fruit together that they could not do alone.
- There are many examples throughout the book of Acts, and the rest of the New Testament, that speak to this devotion to fellowship. After the community in Jerusalem was scattered by persecution, new communities started gathering in other cities such as Antioch.
- **Acts 11:19-26** shows a new community of Jesus-followers, which included Jews and Hellenists (Greek culture) fellowshiping with one another and being encouraged by Barnabas to ‘remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose’ (v3). Barnabas and Paul met together with this community for a year before heading out on mission, and it was here that the name ‘Christian’ was first applied.

### Conclusion

- We catch a glimpse of how important common meals were to this community in **Galatians 2:11-14**. A group of Jewish Christians that included Peter (Cephas) and even Barnabas was convinced that they should separate themselves and not eat with the Gentile Christians.
- Paul viewed this as an offence to the gospel, an attitude that endangered the very foundations of grace, freedom, reconciliation and fellowship upon which the Church had been built. So Paul publicly rebuked Peter for his hypocrisy.
- Fellowship, often expressed through the breaking of bread together, is central to the way Christians are to live out their discipleship together.



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### REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

Read **Acts 2:42-47**, and then read out verses **44** and **46** again.

- What are the believers devoted to in these verses?
- Why are these two things - holding everything in common, and meeting and eating together daily - considered so vitally important to the early Christian community?
- What does it mean to 'hold everything in common'? Does it just mean to have the same ideas, preferences and hobbies? Does it mean there are no disagreements? Or is it something deeper than that?
- How does fellowship with other believers bring us into closer union with Christ? How does it help us bear more fruit as disciples?
- Is this devotion to deep, daily fellowship part of the regular Christian life today as you know it? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Is there a time when you have practised this kind of fellowship in a consistent way? If so, what was the fruit of it? What encouraged and helped this practice? What were the obstacles?

Read **Acts 11:19-26**.

- How does this story of the Early Church in Antioch show the importance of fellowship and common purpose?
- How is fellowship important in the face of persecution?

Now read **Galatians 2:11-14**.

- Why was Paul so upset that Cephas (Peter) and Barnabas were separating themselves and refusing to eat with the Gentile Christians in Antioch?
- How did this endanger the gospel?
- What does all of this suggest about what our fellowship should be like? About how we should eat together?
- How can you practise this in your setting?



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ATTACHMENT 1

