

FRIENDSHIP AND FELICITY

THE JOY OF LIVING IN COMMUNITY

Insights and conversation starters
for the Epistle to the Philippians
in five sessions.

A resource for the *Book of Faith* initiative
within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



book of faith
Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.



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THE JOY OF LIVING IN COMMUNITY

Five Short Studies in Philippians

We have become good at doing things alone, by ourselves. Independence, personal autonomy, individual responsibility—these are among the qualities we value most highly. The downside, however, is that we risk losing the ability to work interdependently, and as a result our sense of community erodes and we diminish our capacity to function together as family.

This is a common complaint about life in America in the 21st century. One popular study entitled *Bowling Alone* notes that more people go bowling now than ever before, yet the number of teams that bowl in leagues is on the decline. More people are bowling solo or as couples or with small groups of friends, but fewer are committing themselves to participate as teams that will compete for several weeks in a row.

The author of the study takes this as symptomatic of much of our culture: We have become a nation of Lone Rangers who have lost the practices of living together and of being responsible for each other.

Our churches are not immune to such trends, and neither are our families. A generation or two ago, people experienced their churches almost as part of their extended families. They shared a high degree of loyalty both to the congregation in which they worshiped, and to the denomination in which they were raised.

Today we risk treating our churches like supermarkets; we shop around for the one that provides the best service for our families, and as our needs change so does our church membership.

We are not likely to switch our family allegiances so quickly, of course. But **most of us miss the experience of living within an extended family.**

Today the idealized norm is a nuclear family of parents and children, even though nuclear families count for fewer than one in five households. Single-parent homes and blended families and homes without children easily outnumber the households with the proverbial father, mother, and 2.3 children.

Furthermore, the experience of living with an extended family—parents and children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, if not under the same roof at least in close proximity—is little more than a distant memory for most of us.

It is no surprise, then, that **people yearn for a sense of community.** We long to belong, to participate in a group whose members will value and care for each other, where we will be valued and appreciated—perhaps even loved—and where we will be able to reciprocate by nurturing and sustaining others.

Such a desire to be joined in meaningful togetherness can be lived out in many ways. One of the most promising venues is by entering into the life of a small group within the context of the fellowship of a Christian congregation.

One helpful resource for cultivating such fellowship is **the short letter** which St. Paul wrote **to the church at Philippi.** The city of Philippi is located in northeastern Greece, about ten miles inland from the northern shore of the Aegean Sea.

Its name comes from Philip II of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, who annexed it to his kingdom in 356 BCE. Two hundred years later it was conquered by the Romans and became a major stopping place on the *Via Egnatia*, which led westward to the ports on the Adriatic Sea and from there to Italy.

After Mark Antony and Octavian (who later became Emperor Augustus) won decisive battles near Philippi in 42 and 31 BCE, Roman soldiers were stationed and settled there, and the colony was refounded as a Roman provincial municipality and governed by the *Jus Italicum* or “Italian Law,” the highest privilege of provincial citizens.

The apostle **Paul visited Philippi on one of his missionary journeys** in the early 50s CE and founded a Christian congregation. The letter itself does not indicate exactly when or where he wrote it. The majority of scholars assume Paul was not far distant when he wrote, perhaps from Ephesus, and probably sometime during the midpoint of his career in the mid to late 50s.

Careful readers of Philippians will note several abrupt transitions and changes in tone. This has led some to speculate that the canonical text may be a conflation of portions of several letters.

Such an extended correspondence might have included a first letter which served as a receipt with thanks for the gifts Paul had received from the Philippians (Phil 4:10-20), a second letter with encouragement for the future (1:1-31, 4:4-7, 4:21-23), and a third letter warning them about Paul’s opponents (3:2-21, 4:1-3, 4:8-9).

However, like the majority of commentators, this study will assume that the version of Philippians we have in our Bibles is indeed a unified literary document.

Two facts in particular give this letter its special quality and account for its usefulness for us today. First is the fact that **Paul was in prison when he wrote.** We don’t know exactly why he was incarcerated, other than that it had

something to do with his missionary work. But we do know that he was not entirely sure that he would get out of jail alive.

Yet in spite of such negative circumstances, this is clearly the happiest, most optimistic letter we have from Paul’s hand! The apostle’s repeated calls to rejoice and be joyful strike a positive and upbeat note for us, too.

Second is the fact that **Paul had accepted financial support from the church at Philippi.** This was contrary to his usual practice, for he did not want to be indebted to any of the congregations he founded. But for whatever reason he had established a close friendly relationship with the Philippians, and this letter reads in part like a typical “letter of friendship” common in the Greco-Roman world.

These two characteristics—joyfulness and friendship—combine to make Philippians a valuable resource for us today. This epistle is valuable not just because it gives us such a clear insight into the relationship of Paul and the Philippians, but especially because **their relationship was rooted in the example of Jesus himself.**

The famous “Christ Hymn” (in Phil 2:6-11) provides the best model for living as God’s people both then and now. The fact that we are all compelled to acknowledge Jesus as Lord gives us a centering point in our personal lives and in our interpersonal relationships.

In a culture where we have too few opportunities to live together among friends in significant communities and therefore are deprived of much joy in living, we may find that Paul’s interaction with the people at Philippi nearly 2,000 years ago offers us insight and encouragement. As we study this letter in our homes and in small groups, let us pray that Christ’s Spirit will nurture friendship and felicity in our midst.

— *Dr. Mark I. Wegener*
revised, September 2011

FIRST STUDY — PHILIPPIANS 1:1-26

A MATTER OF DEATH AND LIFE

O most loving God, you want us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing except losing you, and to lay all our cares on you, knowing that you care for us. Protect us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and grant that no clouds in this mortal life may hide from us the light of your immortal love shown to us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [LBW, prayer #204]

Read Philippians 1:1-2.

These two verses make up the *salutation* of the letter, which typically names the writer and the recipients, and which includes a short greeting. Paul and his companion greet the Christian community at Philippi.

- (1) The titles are revealing. Paul and Timothy are really “slaves” (not merely “servants”) of Christ Jesus; the Philippian Christians are called “saints,” that is, “holy” or “special” people; their leaders, the “bishops and deacons” or “overseers and ministers,” receive special mention. If you were writing to members of your church, what titles would you give to them? To yourself?
- (2) “Greetings (*chaire*) to you in the name of the gods” might have been the opening of a typical Greek letter. Paul modifies this to “Grace (*charis*) to you and peace (*shalom* in Hebrew),” combining both Christian and Jewish forms of greeting. Pretty clever, isn’t it?

Read Philippians 1:3-11.

This is the opening *prayer of thanksgiving* typical of almost all Paul’s letters. Most Greek letters usually start with a short prayer for the health or welfare of the recipient. Paul follows this custom, but changes it somewhat. His opening prayers are longer, and they often introduce some of the key themes he will develop at greater length in the body of the letter.

- (3) First, in 1:3-6, Paul gives thanks (*eucharist* in Greek) for the relationship he has enjoyed with the Philippians **in the past**. Have you ever enjoyed this kind of fellowship (or *koinonia*) with a group of people, the kind you would remember with gratitude in your prayers?
- (4) Second, in 1:7-8, Paul mentions their relationship **in the present**. The Philippians are sharing with him—and he with them—during the time he is in prison. Perhaps you can name some difficult times when you were glad for the support of friends who were there for you. Perhaps you are in one of those times right now, and are thankful for someone who is keeping close to you.
- (5) Third, in 1:9-11, Paul prays that the Philippians will continue to grow in grace and love **in the future**, all the way to the End. This is sometimes called an “eschatological” perspective, which is a view for the long haul. When you look all the way into eternity, what are your hopes for you and your friends?

Read Philippians 1:12-26.

Now Paul jumps into the *body* of his letter. The outlines of his epistles tend to follow this general sequence: (a) opening salutation and prayer, (b) personal reflection, (c) doctrinal discussion, (d) ethical exhortation, (e) travel plans, and (f) closing greetings. So, true to form, he now narrates in autobiographical style the circumstances in which he finds himself: He is in prison, and he is not sure he will get out alive!

- (6) The up side of this situation, according to 1:12-14, is that instead of being frightened off, other missionaries are preaching more boldly than ever before. In fact, even his jailers realize he is “in Christ.” Have you noticed how opposition often increases the determination of those who are being opposed?
- (7) The down side, according to 1:15-18, is that some of them, instead of being sympathetic to Paul’s plight, are ministering out of motives of rivalry and envy. In any event, concludes Paul, the gospel is being preached. Have you noticed how some people who are on the good side of an issue sometimes seem to work out of less-than-good motives?

Having explored the motives of his fellow missionaries—some preach as genuine colleagues, some as mere competitors—Paul examines his own motives. Will he be executed? Or will he leave prison a free man? In 1:19-26, he seems to be hoping for the former (death), but he seems to be anticipating the latter (life). It is all summed up in 1:21, a verse worth underlining in your Bible: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”

- (8) For Paul—and for us—what would be the advantage of dying?
- (9) What would be the advantage of living? And to whose advantage would it be?

Most amazing is the fact that in the midst of this conflicted situation—the motives of supporters *versus* opponents, the prospects of life *versus* death—the apostle raises the theme of rejoicing! In fact, this is clearly the most joyful letter Paul ever wrote. The words “joy” and “rejoice” are basically the same word in Greek; the words “grace,” “give,” “gift,” and “thanksgiving” are all built on the same verbal stem as “joy” and “rejoice.”

- (10) Now would be a good time to check all the verses where these words occur and to mark them in your Bible:

1:2	1:4	1:18*	1:29	2:9	2:18*	2:29	4:4*	4:10	(* twice in these verses)
1:3	1:7	1:25	2:2	2:17*	2:28	3:1	4:6	4:23	

Under the circumstances, such felicity—that’s the fancy word for happiness—seems almost too good to be true, doesn’t it?

SECOND STUDY — PHILIPPIANS 1:27-2:11

MUTUAL SUPPORT

O God, we thank you for your Son who chose the path of suffering for the sake of the world. Humble us by his example, point us to the path of obedience, and give us strength to follow his commands; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [LBW, prayer #95]

Read Philippians 1:27-30.

After discussing his own situation in the preceding section, Paul now deals with the Philippians' situation. Basically, in 1:27-28, he hopes to hear that they are united under the Gospel and not intimidated by their opponents—a situation that would be evidence of their salvation.

- (11) What do you think of his suggestion in 1:29 that faith (or belief) and suffering are both gifts from God?

Read Philippians 2:1-11.

Now we are getting to the heart of this letter. Here Paul outlines the basic attitude he wants his followers to adopt; he wants them all to be like-minded, to serve each other in mutual humility. And he grounds all this in the example of Jesus himself.

- (12) Make a list of the positive motives and virtues Paul compiles in 2:1-3. Which of these are most attractive to you?
- (13) In a society that likes to boast “We’re Number One,” how relevant is the advice in 1:4-5 that we promote the interests of others and regard them as better than ourselves?

The “Hymn to Christ” in 2:6-11 is perhaps the most important poetic passage in any of Paul’s letters. It summarizes the ministry of Christ as part of the divine plan and then uses it as a model for Christian ethics. It appears that the apostle has taken over a piece of early Christian poetry and expanded or altered it to fit his particular message for the Philippians. Scholars have discussed how the verses would have lined up originally, and the extent of Paul’s modifications. In the following overly literal reconstruction, the lines of the supposed original hymn contain many words not otherwise found in Paul’s writings; presumably this untypical vocabulary is a clue that he was quoting an already existing poem. The other lines, printed in italics, contain numerous terms frequently used by Paul; presumably these would have been his additions to the hymn.

Although existing in the form of God,
he did not regard it as a prize
to be equal with God;
rather, he emptied himself
and took the form of a slave.
So being in the likeness of humans
and found in shape as a human,
he humiliated himself,
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also exalted him;
and granted him the Name,
the one above every name,
that at the name of JESUS
every knee should bow,
whether in heaven or upon earth or under-
ground,
and every tongue should acknowledge
that “JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!”
to the glory of God the Father.

Like many pieces of poetry, the images and ideas in this hymn are fluid and multidimensional; they can be interpreted in more than one way. Most traditional interpretations have gone like this: In his pre-existent heavenly state Christ was equal with God, but instead of hanging on to his divine status he “emptied” himself and became a human being. In this human state he suffered humiliation and crucifixion. Because he was so obedient to the divine plan, God raised him from the dead and exalted him to heaven. Now everyone and everything in the universe—above, upon and below ground—must worship Jesus as Lord. According to this understanding, the heavenly Christ descends to the earthly realm, and then the human Jesus ascends to the heavenly realm.

Another way of interpreting the hymn begins not with a pre-existent heavenly Christ but with a truly human earthly Jesus. This Jesus, like Adam before him, did exist in the form or likeness of God, but unlike Adam he did not try to be more than human and grasp at divinity. Instead he was content to remain in his human shape and likeness, and submitted totally to the human condition. In fact, he became “less than human,” adopting the status of a slave and embracing death itself, even the worst form of death by crucifixion. Consequently God has now exalted him to the point where all peoples and powers—whether subterranean, earthly or heavenly—do obeisance to his name and honor his lordship. According to this understanding, Jesus’ name has been exalted in the universe precisely because he was content to be truly human and embrace the status of an obedient, mortal creature.

- (14) We can afford to spend a significant amount of time focusing on this hymn. Which of the lines seem most problematic or difficult to understand?
- (15) Which lines offer the most encouragement, or resonate well with your own experience?
- (16) How agreeable are you to the idea that Paul may have adopted and adapted a hymn or poem that was already in use in the church? Do you think the Philippian Christians might have sung a version of this hymn in their worship services?
- (17) Two lines of interpretation have been offered for this poem. How do you understand the differences between them? If you are studying this letter in a small group, can you reach a consensus on the meaning of Paul’s hymn?

The hymn itself is “Christological,” that is, it describes the nature and purpose of Christ himself. But in this context its function is “ethical,” that is, Paul uses it as a model for Christian behavior. The key is in 2:5, where “think the same thing” or “have the same mind” is the phrase that conceptualizes how the Philippians are to be like Christ Jesus, whose example is then recounted in the hymn.

- (18) Paul uses the same phrase, or a variation of it, ten times in this letter. Now would be a good time to check all the verses where it occurs and to mark them in your Bible:
1:7 2:2 2:5 (twice) 3:15 (twice) 3:19 4:2 4:10 (twice).
- (19) People who are friends are people who tend to think alike. What do you think about that?

THIRD STUDY — PHILIPPIANS 2:12-3:1 PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Lord God, our stronghold and our salvation, give us such strength of love that we may reach out to our neighbor without counting the cost, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[LBW, prayer #296]

Read Philippians 2:12-18.

These verses do not really begin an entirely new section; rather, they continue the thoughts of the previous paragraph. The model pictured in the “Christ Hymn” of 2:5-11 must now be worked out in the lives of the Philippians. Their humility and obedience, mentioned in 2:3 & 12, match the humility and obedience modeled in Christ’s crucifixion, in 2:8, a verse that seems to be Paul’s own composition.

- (20) “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling” in 2:12 is a striking phrase; at first glance it almost seems to contradict Paul’s usual teaching that we are saved by God’s grace, not by our own works. But if we keep the phrase connected to 2:13, we will realize it is really God working in and through us. Nevertheless, we are not passive or idle; there is still work to be done. What kind of work, in our lives, today?
- (21) The warning against grumbling and arguing in 2:14 may be a hint at a problem in the Philippians’ congregation. If we live in a contentious and litigious society, the church can hardly shine brightly if it, too, is full of quarreling and bickering. From your own experience—and without besmirching anyone’s reputation—can you tell about your “favorite” church dispute?

Once again Paul returns to the thought that he might die by the executioner’s sword. He pictures this possibility by comparing it to a temple liturgy. If the Philippians’ faithfulness is like a sacrifice offered on an altar, he suggests, his death would be like a cup of wine poured out as a libation.

- (22) Strikingly, the result of his death would not be grief or disappointment. The result would be mutual joy! Can you believe that?

Read Philippians 2:19-3:1.

- (23) Without reading any further in this study guide, list everything you can learn about Timothy from this paragraph.
- (24) Again, without reading any further, summarize everything you know about Epaphroditus.

Timothy, who is the co-sender of this letter according to 1:1, was such a close companion that Paul could call him his son in 2:22 (see also 1 Thessalonians 4:1-6 and 1 Corinthians 4:17), and the Philippians would have known him well. Epaphroditus, who is not mentioned in any other New Testament book, was a member of the Philippian community who had brought their gift of

money to the apostle. While he was with Paul he became sick and almost died. And the Philippians had heard about his illness and were worried. So Paul planned to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi *with this letter in his pocket* to assure the Philippians and to thank them for their gifts. Later, after a legal verdict could be pronounced in his case, Paul planned to send Timothy to Philippi with the news, and he hoped to hear a favorable report about the Philippians when he returned. Soon thereafter Paul himself intended to visit the Philippians, assuming of course that he would be released from prison.

- (25) Look at the titles Paul piles upon Epaphroditus in 2:25—brother, co-worker, co-soldier, messenger or apostle, minister—and reflect on how this must have made him feel. And on how this must have made the Philippians feel about Epaphroditus.
- (26) This is one of the few passages in the New Testament letters that talk about sickness. Paul tries to gain a larger perspective on Epaphroditus' illness by suggesting that he had in effect gambled his life to serve the apostle on behalf of the Philippians. How do we talk about our diseases and medical problems when we want to place them in the larger picture of our lives?
- (27) Notice how the theme of “joy” returns in 2:28-29. But also notice that the word “rejoice” in 3:1 is also the word for “farewell.” Can you see why some would think this was the original ending of Paul's letter? What do you think? And what difference does it make?

FOURTH STUDY — PHILIPPIANS 3:2-4:1 ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE FUTURE

O God, the Lord of all, your Son commanded us to love our enemies and to pray for them. Lead us from prejudice to truth; deliver us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and enable us to stand before you, reconciled through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [LBW, prayer #180]

Read Philippians 3:1b-11.

Because 3:1a could be construed as a conclusion to the joy-filled words that precede it, and because the abrupt change in tone at 3:1b seems so harsh and negative, some have wondered whether much of what follows might be from a separate letter intended to warn against opponents who are trying to require the Philippians to accept circumcision as a sign of authentic Christian faith. Clearly this issue brings out some strong and angry feelings. We find the same strong emotions about the same subject in Galatians 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 5:12, & 6:13-15.

- (28) In 3:2-4 Paul insults his opponents by calling them “dogs,” “evil workers” and “mutilators.” Note the play on words between “mutilation” (*katatomē*) and “circumcision” (*peritomē*). Why do you suppose the apostle felt so strongly about this? And was it right for him to be so vicious?
- (29) Circumcision is obviously a mark on a man’s “flesh.” List the items in Paul’s “fleshly” pedigree in 3:5-6. If we were making a similar list for ourselves, what would we brag about?
- (30) Yet according to 3:7-9 all of those credentials are as worthless as garbage in comparison with the chance to know Christ as one’s Lord. This leads easily into one of Paul’s favorite themes: righteousness through faith in Christ. Take a few minutes to unpack that phrase. What does it mean to be made righteous/justified through faith/belief/trust in Christ?
- (31) Be careful how you read 3:10-11. It’s not as though Paul is in doubt about the resurrection; rather, he is wondering exactly how he will share in Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection. How do you imagine you will be called to share in Christ’s experience?

Read Philippians 3:12-16.

- (32) In 3:12-14 Paul uses an athletic figure of speech and compares himself to a long-distance runner rushing toward the finish line and the victor’s prize. It is one thing to think of our life as a journey or pilgrimage; it is another thing to think of it as a race. Does the urgency of the sporting metaphor reflect your own experience of life?

Read Philippians 3:17-4:1.

This summary section contrasts those who are with Paul and those who are against him, those who are “earthly” *versus* those who are “heavenly.” He picks up on the “thinking” vocabulary in

3:15-16 (see also item #18) and in 3:17 encourages the Philippians to imitate his own example, just as earlier in the “Christ Hymn” he had implied that they should imitate Jesus.

- (33) List the ways Paul denigrates those who are opposed to him in 3:18-19, and compare that to the way he characterizes those who are on his side in 3:20-21.
- (34) Notice how once again the apostle returns to the theme of “joy” as he concludes in 4:1.

FIFTH STUDY — PHILIPPIANS 4:2-23

THE BLESSING OF FRIENDSHIP

Lord, where two or three gather in your name, you promised to be with them and share their fellowship. Look down upon your family gathered in your name, and graciously pour out your blessing upon us; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [LBW, prayer #412]

Read Philippians 4:2-3.

Once again the abrupt change in tone for this exhortation to two quarreling women seems to intrude into an otherwise joyful passage. (If you were to read from 4:1 directly to 4:4, you would not guess that you had skipped something.) So some have wondered whether this, too, might be an excerpt from a separate letter. In any event, the argument between Euodia and Syntyche was not some minor misunderstanding. They were long-time co-workers with Paul and leaders in the church, so the apostle enlists the aid of other church leaders such as Clement (and perhaps Syzygus) to help these women reconcile their relationship.

- (35) Do you think it would be good for congregational leaders today to help their friends in church patch up their quarrels? Or should they stay out of other people's affairs?

Read Philippians 4:4-9.

The exhortations continue on a note of joy, and both paragraphs end with benedictions that grant “the peace of God” (4:7) or “the God of peace” (4:9) to the readers.

- (36) If you were to follow the apostle's advice in 4:4-7, *exactly* what would you do?
- (37) Once again Paul says “finally” (see 3:1), and then he invites his readers to consider a list of ethical virtues—truth, reverence, justice, purity, loveliness, beauty, virtue, praise-worthiness—commonly commended by Greek Stoic and Cynic philosophers. Which one is most appealing to you? And what, if anything, makes it distinctively Christian?

Read Philippians 4:10-20.

This section is a masterfully composed self-contained *financial receipt* thanking the Philippians for their monetary gift to Paul during his imprisonment. But it sounds almost as though he were damning them with faint praise. For instead of simply being grateful to them for their generosity and praising them for their loyalty and friendship, Paul acts as though he didn't really need the Philippians' money in the first place. And, in the second place, he suggests that their gift is like a worshipful offering, for which God will fulfill *their* needs.

In the ancient world, however, the matter of giving and receiving gifts was more complex. Gifts were to be exchanged on an equal basis. Those who received gifts, and could not reciprocate, were indebted to and socially inferior to their benefactors. Extravagant thanks for a generous gift was a thinly-disguised plea for another gift. True friends treated each others as equals, and did not have to go overboard in their thanks. Against this background, Paul's seemingly restrained

thank-you is actually evidence that he thought of them as genuine friends, sharing as equal partners in their common mission.

- (38) In 4:10-14 Paul recognizes that the Philippians' concern for him has "blossomed," even though he has learned to practice "self-sufficiency," an admirable Stoic virtue. He has been initiated into the secret of living with both more than and less than enough. In this context, how would you interpret the slogan in 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"?
- (39) Numerous commercial terms and phrases are used in 4:15-18. The Philippians "shared an account for debits and credits" (4:15); Paul was not looking for "gifts" but expected to "profit from the increase in your account" (4:17); so he declared that everything had been "paid in full." What do you think of Paul's attempt to interpret the Philippians' financial gift as an offering or sacrifice to God?

Read Philippians 4:21-23.

These verses make up the typical *closing* of a letter, in which greetings are shared all around, even from "Caesar's household," that is, slaves and employees in the imperial civil service. This detail shows how wide the circles of Christian friendship were drawn.

- (40) How wide is our circle of Christian friends?

We have spent our time together discussing Paul's letter to the Philippians. Our goal has been to appreciate more clearly the joy that comes from experiencing friendship within a Christian community. Obviously the apostle thought of the Christians at Philippi as his friends. He was the missionary who had founded their congregation, and they were the ones who sent him financial support when he was in prison. Their friendship was based in part on the way they had learned to think alike; their thinking was attuned to "the mind of Christ." His style of self-giving, outlined in the famous "Christ Hymn," was the model of their own mutual service.

- (41) Now, how can we continue to embody that style of living in our own pattern of friendships? How can this be nurtured within our church community? How can it broaden out into a wider circle of friends?