

# Missing Community?

By Lisa Hart

For most, if not all, of us, our lives changed abruptly seven months ago. As COVID-19 took hold across our state, our country and the globe, schools, businesses and churches closed their doors. We found ourselves confined to our homes, perhaps for days seeing no one or just those we lived with. A simple trip to the store became both a competitive effort to acquire needed supplies and a collaborative effort to help friends and neighbors. People brushed up on their culinary skills, pulled out the board games and jigsaw puzzles, and settled in for movie marathons and Netflix binges. At times, it felt a bit like a surreal, extended snow day. The difference? Snow melts or is cleared and, within a matter of days, we are back to our normal lives. Not so during this pandemic time. Instead, we are learning how to navigate life in this liminal season which seems to stretch out before us for the foreseeable future.



One of the difficulties of this time is the loss of what we have known. We are forced to be community in a different way, and because we have lost the way we once knew how to be community, we may feel as though we have lost community. We may find ourselves focused on what is missing ... gathering with family and friends to celebrate milestones, collaborating in person with colleagues, worshipping with our church family in the same space, or simply meeting a friend for coffee. We grieve these losses. This is to be expected; this is normal.

There is, however, **opportunity for discovering new ways to experience community**. This should not surprise us, as community is central to our faith. God calls us into community and does not limit us to what we have known and done in the past. God presents us with a myriad of new possibilities, we just need to be open to seeing these possibilities. *Look, I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness. (Isaiah 43:19 CEB)*. We are certainly going through a wilderness experience. Imagine what is possible if we are open to this new thing God is creating.

Sometimes, we need new tools or skills in order to open ourselves to new possibilities ... new ways of being community. Sometimes we need help. We need others to guide us through the uncertainty ... to lead us to new possibilities. Sometimes we need a structure or process to follow. Sometimes, we just need a conversation partner to listen and ask good questions.



In mid-April, I invited faith formation and youth ministry leaders to a Zoom gathering. I sensed that they were feeling isolated and out of their element as they worked tirelessly to offer faith formation and youth ministry experiences during this extraordinary time. The Zooms are a way to come together to share frustrations and joys, to ask questions of each other, and to make connections. My original plan was to meet weekly until the end of May and then would reevaluate. Truthfully, I wasn't sure the group

would want to meet for that length of time. We are now nearing the end of October and this weekly online gathering continues to grow. We not only share ideas and resources, but have become a brave space where spiritual and emotional support are freely offered and received. **During this unusual time, we have formed community. We share connection that did not exist prior to the pandemic.**

Just as these faith formation and youth ministry leaders across the country have connected and formed a new community, our congregations are also finding ways to create and strengthen

community in new ways. In her book, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*, Susan Beaumont suggests that it is in these liminal seasons that *communitas* might emerge. **Communitas refers to an unstructured community where old hierarchies are eliminated and people come together as equals.** Old expectations and assumptions are discarded and there is freedom to discover new ways to be in community. Beaumont compares it to the experience of going on a mission trip or a pilgrimage. The group is bound together in a new, unknown experience and must, together, figure out how to be in community. It is much the same for us in this extraordinary time.

The ways in which we have known how to be together in community do not work for us in this time. We must learn new ways to be in community, even when we cannot be together. For some, technology is the answer, but we must also acknowledge that this is not an option for all. We must find new ways to be in community with those who cannot connect via technology. What might this look like? Phone calls? Letter writing? Care packages dropped off at the door? In this new way of being community, whatever it may be, we open ourselves to new ways of experiencing God.



The Church has a unique advantage when it comes to forming community. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*, Timothy Beal suggests, **“The Bible creates community by providing space for community to happen.** It offers storied worlds and theological vocabularies around which people can come together in conversation about abiding questions. It calls for creative, collaborative participation.” Note, nothing is said about needing to be in the same space, or even in the same time zone. Instead, it calls for creativity and collaboration.

The Church has the capacity to create community across what, in the past, might have been seen as boundaries. We have the opportunity to strengthen connections with those who have been unable to come to our buildings, to reconnect with those who have moved to distant places, and establish new connections with those who we have yet to meet in person. We can strengthen partnerships with other congregations and within our ecumenical circles.

“We’re in this together” has become the mantra of this pandemic. We hear this from public officials, we hear it in commercials and in public service announcements. This mantra underscores the importance of community. At a time when we may feel disconnected, it is critical that we remember we are part of a larger community. **The Supportive Ministries Team of the Wisconsin Conference UCC connects clergy and congregations to resources that support and enhance community. We invite you to explore the resources available and to reach out to us if you have questions or need support.** [wcucc.org/tending-the-soul](http://wcucc.org/tending-the-soul)

#### **Questions for personal reflection or group discussion:**

- Where do you find community?
- How do you define community? (Has your definition of community changed during the pandemic?)
- What do we need to be in community?
- Are there different ways to BE community?
- What real or imagined boundaries has your faith community crossed during this liminal season?
- Where do you see hope in your community?