



# Early Church Present Church

NAYIRI KARJIAN, GENERAL MINISTER, LIVING WATER ASSOCIATION, OHIO NORTHEAST, UCC • MARCH 18, 2021

In his book *In Search of the Church* Keith Russell lists several characteristics he believes early church communities share with our 21<sup>st</sup> century churches today.

1. The early, first century church, was an **Alternative Community** that was sectarian. The church was not part of the “dominant” culture where everyone was Christian. It did not grow because it was protected or favored by the state. It was not tax exempt or nonprofit. It was a sect existing on the edge of the polytheistic Roman Empire. In the midst of political turmoil and power struggles, diverse ethnicities and classes, the early church provided an alternative community, a community that followed a different way, the way of Jesus. This alternative way was not popular nor was it a comfortable status quo. It was radical, even revolutionary as a way of grace, love and compassion.

2. The early church was a **Household of Mercy and Justice**. It included those who were poor and those who had plenty. Its primary task was to share gifts, to feed the hungry, to give to those in need. It seemed the early church wrestled with the question – who are the least? Who are the poor and the marginalized? Who are the first and the last? And they wanted to create a community in which there were no such categories or ranks.

3. The early church was a **Household of Hospitality and Courage**. As the church grew it became a more gentle sect rather than just a branch of Judaism. It received members from the gentile Roman Empire of the time. It lived on the edges of society and was periodically persecuted. The church had to learn to stand on its own feet and take charge. It had to find the courage to stand against the dominant culture of segregation and power. It

had to struggle over issues of wealth, power and inclusion. It practiced hospitality for all. It was inclusive and expansive as it endeavored to shape God’s realm on earth.

4. The early church grew to become a place of **Reconciliation, Justice and Peace**. Being a Christian meant that something astonishing and amazing was happening in one’s life. That people who were lost and broken, living in pain and despair, were finding the way. They were being healed and transformed. This transformation moved them to reach out to others, offer reconciliation and peace, and build relationships in social communal settings. In this alternative community those who had no status, no place in society, found a safe place of peace, grace, reconciliation.

5. The early church was a **Community of Resistance**. Since the church was not part of the “dominant” culture and experienced minority status and persecution, survival was on the agenda. The Emperor was called *Lord*, which the church found abhorrent and unimaginable. For, only God was *Lord*. The church resisted conforming to the Roman Empire, becoming a community of resistance, an alternative to the status quo and the norm.

I believe that Keith Russell is right. Our world is increasingly pluralistic, diverse, multi religious and secular. We cannot assume that the people we meet, with whom we work or to whom we relate are Christian. Our world is continually bearing resemblance to the pluralistic, multi-faithed and secularist Empire of the past. Recognizing the similarities helps us learn from the early church, especially as we emerge from this COVID season of isolation to re-discover what God is calling the church to be and do in this day.