

Is There Hope for Fellowship of Hope?

Fifty some years ago I sat with about 10 other folks in Dave and Cindy's little dining room in their rented house across from the seminary. We were discussing what we would name our little group that had come together. Our commitments were simply stated: to follow Jesus, to care deeply for each other, to discern together God's direction for our lives. We discussed various name possibilities as we thought about our desires to move into the same neighborhood and be "church" in a way that none of us had experienced before, including sharing our resources, our money and our debts with each other. Pondering this deep commitment of community, we liked the word "Fellowship", and with this came a deep sense and desire for hope. From I Peter 1:3 *We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* Together we wanted to experience this living hope. I didn't really know what I was getting myself into, none of us did, but we were ready to surrender to what we sensed as God's call upon our lives.

We believed God's spirit at work and calling us to take risks. Joining the common purse was not an easy decision for me. My parents were very opposed to this, and I had mostly been an obedient daughter. Right out of college (which my parents paid for), my father helped me purchase a new little Toyota car, which I was about to surrender to my new little community. I actually became a member, without joining the common treasury. Out of love my brothers and sisters, wanted to accept me without any financial obligations and cared about my relationship with my parents. In a few months, however, I decided without any pressure from others, I could take this step of surrender of giving over my income. I felt God's leading and felt secure in this decision. In time my parents were accepting of my decisions and came to appreciate my other family at FOH.

We embraced the idea of ministry households and living together to share our lives more fully and with those in need. Over time Verlin and I lived with at least 25 various adults and 10 other children than our own. When asked what was it like living in a communal arrangement, my reply has always been, I have no regrets. God was with us in this unique experience. So much learning about one's self and others, and so much journeying together. Times of deep sharing, and caring for each other. I feel our ministry with Bev, a single mother who was delivered from prostitution, was God given, and remained until her recent death. I think God gave Bev and many others the spirit of Hope while they walked with us and lived with us. I can say this now as I am looking back. It was not always easy then. What was the Spirit calling me to do and could I do it in a good way? I can remember when we made the decision to leave our little honeymoon house on Cleveland Ave to move into shared living, I went through every room sobbing my heart out, knowing my life was about to change. The future was unknown as it is for us today. I felt the call to detach and surrender then as I do now.

Some of us long-termers do talk about the glory days of FOH. That is not to minimize all the goodness of the more recent years. However, I go back to the charismatic movement across the country of the late 70's-early 80's. Our worships were filled with praise songs and waving of hands as we surrendered anew to God, as we listened to what God might be saying to us. Our meeting spaces were filled with visitors. We attended conferences of our sister communities, and sensed God at work. Visiting our son, Jesse, and family currently at Reba Place is a reminder of those blessed relationships we still have with God's people there.

As you know, not all of the past was glorious. There was pain, and plenty of it. We experienced this in different degrees and ways. Our common life changed. Some of us moved physically further away from each other. Some folks left us. However, even in these difficult times, I can say that God has been with us, and even blessed us again more than we could have imagined. There have been many more Spirit filled worship times over the years and reminders of being beloved children of God. Our deep sharing and caring for each other has continued in so many ways, as we experienced last weekend with Cindy's funeral and Karl and Karen's move. As many former members returned for Cindy's funeral, we were reminded of the love and commitment that remains in our hearts.

I often think of the many, many friends and brothers and sisters that have passed through our lives here at FOH. Some made very significant impact on us. I remember an evening service where we lit a candle for everyone that we all could think of who had spent time with us over the years. Our room was ablaze and it was a reminder that God's spirit was among us and around the world. Our time last summer in Switzerland with our dear friends, Christoph and Cornelia, who were here while they attended seminary was a tremendous gift from our life together. I believe that each presence among us has blessed us, whether in our long ago past or the more recent members who have come and bring their gifts to us.

Next weekend Verlin and I celebrate our fifty-first anniversary. Ours was the first wedding within this congregation, with many more to follow. We met and said our vows within this church context, both feeling the Spirit's presence and hope for our lives together. To now feel the unknown future of this group that has been so significant in our lives, is a bit sobering and disturbing. This has been my/our Fellowship of Hope. When we began, there was the dark cloud of the Vietnam war going on and the fear of nuclear holocaust. Today we again have many uncertainties and could be overwhelmed with fears for ourselves and our children and grandchildren with climate change and a dysfunctional democracy. Most of us are no longer young. We wonder how the aging process will affect us personally and together. Many of us experienced the joy of raising our children in this context, but they have moved on with their lives. Our numbers in this congregation have dwindled, and there remains some unresolved conflict. I believe

that the same Spirit that brought this church together a number of years ago, is still at work to restore our sense of community, of fellowship, of hope. Perhaps our structures will change, maybe we will no longer own or meet in this building, or even have a pastor. **Or** perhaps this congregation will grow in other new ways that I can't imagine. I hope to embrace the change that will come. Somehow, I hope that no matter the future we can remain a group of committed people to Jesus, with bonds of love for each other. I want to claim again without fear that we have been born anew into a living Hope! From Romans 15:13: *May the God of Hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in Him/Her, so that we may overflow with Hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* With these words, may we all relax, release and surrender – and believe, yes, there is Hope for Fellowship of Hope.

Written by Elaine Guengerich Miller, Sept 13, 2023