More Than a Simple Coffee Hour:
The Therapeutic Role of Christian Fellowship and Congregational Care[1]

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In creation we see clearly that humans are social beings, designed to live in community, called to relationship with God and with each other. Our social nature is heard in God's decree that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18, NIV) and it is seen in God's communion with Adam and Eve as they walked in the Garden. Yet, all too often in our postmodern society, people move from one place to another in anonymity and loneliness. A sense of community does not develop.

The church of the living God should be a model of mental and relational health in community. Paul wrote that since we have received encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion from God, we should respond by offering the same to others in the church. He wrote to the Philippians:

> Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.[2]

The New Testament contains many "one another" passages that describe the characteristics of true community. We are to love one another (John 3:11), be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10), live in harmony with one another (Romans 13:8), accept one another (Romans 15:7), comfort and instruct one another (Romans 15:14), care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25), honor one another (Philippians 2:5), submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), and so on.

Recent research findings suggest that the believer would do well to follow these directives not simply because they are commands, but because they actually contribute to physical and mental health. Current studies show that people with strong social support actually live longer, experience fewer stress-related disorders, have better work outcomes and better educational outcomes than those without such support.

Social Support

Weiss,[3] in introducing his theory of social support, proposed that interpersonal relationships offer the individual an attachment in which he or she experiences a personal commitment, social integration involving the sharing of ideas, opportunity for nurturance and nurturant behavior, reassurance of worth, and a sense of alliance that overcomes a sense of vulnerability. All of these experiences of relationship are also analogous to the construct *social support*.

Early studies on social networks revealed that psychiatric patients had smaller, more loosely connected networks that control subjects.[4] Studies began to focus on the stress-buffering effects of social support.[5] These studies identified positive correlations between depression

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[1] Originally presented at The Society for the Study of Psychology and Wesleyan Theology
Annual Meeting – Rochester, NY   March 4, 2003

[2] Phil. 2:2-4, NIV.

[3] Weiss, R.J. "The Provision of Social Relationships." In Z. Rubin, (ed.) *Doing Unto Others*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall).

[5] For a full history of these studies, see J.S. House, D. Umberson, and K.R. Landis, "Structures and Processes of Social Support," *Annual Review of Sociology, 14* (1988): 293-318.

and the lack of an intimate relationship with one's spouse. Persons with clinical diagnoses of depression reported less contact with friends, fewer friends nearby who could help, less satisfaction with friends and relatives, less confiding in one's spouse, and less marital satisfaction.[6]

About the same time (the early 1970s) researchers were exploring the relationship between physical health and social support. Much of the literature focused on whether social relationships benefited health primarily through buffering of stress (and was therefore only salient in times of stress) or via main effects on health. After a thorough review of the research literature on social support, House concluded:

> Evidence that social support can reduce morbidity and mortality, lessen exposure to psychosocial stress and perhaps other health hazards, and buffer the impact of stress on health is now available from diverse types of studies: laboratory experimental studies of animals as well as humans, cross-sectional and retrospective field studies of human populations, and growing numbers of longitudinal or prospective field studies as well. Although the results of individual studies are usually open to alternative interpretations, the patterns of results across the full range of studies strongly suggests that what are variously termed social relationships, social networks, and social support have important causal effects on health, exposure to stress, and the relationship between stress and health. [7]

In these early studies, the terms "social network," "social relationship," "social support," "social ties," and "social activity" were used interchangeably to mean the existence, number, and frequency of social relationships. House, Umberson, and Landis called for a clarification of terms. They defined social support as *one* of the important contents or qualities of social relationships, "the positive, potentially health promoting or stress- buffering, aspects of relationships such as instrumental aid, emotional caring or concern, and information." [8]

A popularly accepted definition of social support was given by Carolyn Cutrona: "responsiveness to another's needs and more specifically as acts that communicate caring; that validate the other's worth, feelings or actions; or that facilitate adaptive coping with problems through the provision of information, assistance or tangible resources."[9]

While social psychologists focused on the relationship between social support and positive health outcomes, another stream of convincing literature developed which indicates that involvement in religion is associated with good health throughout adult life.[10]

Church-based social support, especially in the form of spiritual support, increases the individual's coping abilities.[11] Religious support has also been linked to improved physical and mental health outcomes. Frequency of prayer and church attendance were shown to have a significant positive effect on religious coping.

The quest to understand *how* religious involvement impacts health led researchers to explore social support within the church. Unique aspects of church-based social support were identified:

> Although social support may bolster the physical health status of individuals in secular settings, there are two reasons why these effects may be especially pronounced in the church. First, there is some evidence that people who are more involved in their faith

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[6] Billings, A.G. and R.H. Moos, "Coping, stress, and social resources among adults with unipolar depression," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46* (1984): 877-91.

[7] House, J.S. "Social Support and Social Structure,"*Sociology Forum,2(1)* (1987): 136.

[8] House, et al.

[9] Michael R. Cunningham and Anita P. Barbee, "Social Support." In C*lose Relationships: A Sourcebook*, Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000) 274.

[10] For a review of this research, see H.G. Koenig, M.E. McCollough, and D.B. Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[11] Neal Krause, Christopher G. Ellison, Benjamin A. Shaw, John P. Marcum, and Jason D. Boardman, "Church-Based Social Support and Religious Coping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 40:4 (2001).

tend to receive more support, and evaluate this assistance more favorably, than individuals who are less religious. . . . Second, there may be important qualitative differences in the nature of assistance that is provided in religious settings. The Christian faith extols the virtues of altruistic or selfless helping behaviors. Because church members are likely to subscribe to these basic religious tenets, assistance that is exchanged in religious settings may be especially efficacious.[12]

Many aspects of church-based social support are primarily secular in nature.[13] Coreligionists often exchange emotional and tangible support just as people outside the church do. However, fellow parishioners also help each other in ways that are uniquely religious. Such "spiritual support is assistance that is aimed specifically toward increasing the religious commitment, beliefs, and behavior of a fellow parishioner."[14] This may involve sharing of religious experiences with one another or showing someone how to apply their religious beliefs to their daily life.

Krause and colleagues asked church attenders to evaluate the availability and the effectiveness of both emotional support and spiritual support by fellow parishioners. Participants also rated their use of helpful religious coping methods. This was done by asking them to identify the most recent major problem they had faced. Then they were asked how often they thought about their lives as part of a larger spiritual force, looked to God for strength, support, and guidance, tried to find a lesson from God in their problem, or sought help from God in letting go of anger. Emotional support was defined as making them feel loved and cared for and listening to them talk about their problems and concerns. Spiritual support was defined as sharing religious experiences, helping them live according to their religious beliefs and helping them to know God better. Emotional support was found to have no significant relationship to the use of religious coping methods. Alternatively, spiritual support was significantly associated with greater use of religious coping responses.

Some social scientists have attributed this link between spiritual support and coping to Lazarus and Folkman's cognitive appraisal model of stress and coping methods. This model predicts that people's appraisal of potentially stressful situations mitigates their reactions to stress. This appraisal occurs in two stages. In primary appraisal, the individual considers the nature and degree of risk inherent in a situation. If the person determines that a risk exists, a secondary appraisal is made of available resources and coping methods. Thus, the risk is determined to be either a challenge or a threat.

> If there are sufficient and available resources to deal with the risk-filled situation, the person makes a *challenge appraisal* and addresses the event without experiencing a crisis. If, however, the individual perceives that risk exists and sufficient resources for coping with the stress are not available, a *threat appraisal* is made. Challenge appraisals typically result in adaptive responses, successfully meeting a difficult situation head-on, whereas threat appraisals typically lead to an intensification of the feelings of peril or even menace, to maladaptive behaviors, and to immobilization of coping abilities. A crisis occurs.[15]

Based on this model, persons who receive high levels of social support would perceive a greater level of resource and would cope more easily with stress-full situations. Church members who had recently experienced a crisis event were asked to rate a list of potential

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[12] Neal Krause, Christopher G. Ellison, and Jack P. Marcum, "The Effects of Church-Based Emotional Support on Health: Do They Vary By Gender?" *Sociology of Religion,* 63:1 (2002): 23.

[13] Neal Krause, Christopher G. Ellison, Benjamin A. Shaw, John P. Marcum, and Jason D. Boardman, "Church-Based Social Support and Religious Coping," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, (40:4)* (2001): 637-656.

[14] Neal Krause, "Church-Based Social Support and Health in Old Age: Exploring Variations by Race," *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences, (57B:6)* (2002): S334.

[15] Howard W. Stone, David R. Cross, Karyn B. Purvis, and Melissa J. Young, "A Study of the Benefit of Social and Religious Support on Church Members During Times of Crisis," *Pastoral Psychology, 51:4* (2003): 329.

sources of support as to their helpfulness in coping with crisis.[16] Personal religious beliefs and participation in religious activities such as prayer and knowing that others were praying were rated as the most helpful resources, more highly rated than instrumental, tangible forms of support.

Participants in this study also reported that the available support from weekly Shepherd Groups in their church also led to a greater use of adaptive coping responses. The logical extrapolation of the cognitive appraisal model is that the more an individual views an Almighty God as a resource in time of trouble, the more likely they will be to view the stress as a challenge than as a threat. Spiritual support that would build one's relationship with God would consequently increase coping responses as well.

Wesley's Class Meetings

John Wesley called believers to relationship in a Christian community organized by societies and small class meetings. The society was a group of 50 or more people who would gather for singing and preaching or teaching. The primary function of the society was cognitive instruction. Classes were groups of twelve who met weekly to give an account of their spiritual growth and Christian conduct. The primary focus was on behavioral instruction, on developing an "accountable discipleship among the society members."[17]

> The format of the class meeting began with a short hymn . . . followed by the leader stating the condition of his or her own spiritual life. The leader would then give a short testimonial concerning the previous week's failures, sins, thanking God for progress and honestly sharing any failures, sins, temptations, griefs, or inner battles. In this sense, the leader was "modeling the role" for the others to follow. By following this example, the tenor of the session was controlled and directed.[18]

The class meeting exemplified what Krause defined as spiritual support. Wesley's intention in establishing classes was to help believers to persevere in their faith and to prevent them from "falling away." The words of a Methodist minister a century later and a continent away reflect that Wesley's goals were accomplished:

> Myriads of souls in heaven, and multitudes still on their way, bless God and his Church, and will forever bless them, for the benefits derived through these nurseries of piety. No system affords so many helps to a godly life, so much aid to holy living, as Methodism, nor yet such numerous checks to lukewarmness, or lifeless formality.[19]

The establishment of the class meeting had several other indirect, yet highly significant, results. The first of these results was evidenced on a larger, societal scale. D. Michael Henderson asserted:

> Methodism enabled a large number of England's lower classes to cope with the social and spiritual chaos of the industrial revolution. The traumatic transition from a medieval and agrarian culture to a modern and industrial one was eased for the urban masses by the class meeting and its wider instructional system. Not only did vast hordes of urban laborers find personal salvation through the Methodist "method," but many historians believe that this same movement spared England from the kind of bloody revolution which ravaged other nations on the continent.[20]

Henderson's assertion reflects the language of recent studies showing the positive relationship between spiritual support and religious coping. To integrate the two streams of thought, we might suggest that the early Methodists experienced spiritual support which enabled them to access strengthened religious coping methods. Their heightened awareness of spiritual

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[16] Stone, et al.

[17] David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources 1992) 95.

[18] D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples*. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House 1997) 99.

[19] Rev. John Miley, *Treatise on Class Meetings*. (Cincinnati: Poe & Hitchcock 1866) 11.

[20] D. Michael Henderson, 12.

resources and coping methods allowed them to view the social chaos of their day as a challenge, rather than as a threat against which they must revolt.

The second related indirect outcome of the class meeting was the intimacy that developed among the members. Emotional support and spiritual support appear to be separate but closely related constructs. Krause, et al., maintained that one could offer emotional support without offering spiritual support. The experience of class members in Wesley's day – and of modern-day communities as well – suggests that we cannot give religious or spiritual support without also providing emotional support.

Rather than becoming harsh, judgmental times of self-examination, class meetings became times of the "commingling of soul with soul which is the very spirit and life of Christian Communion."[21]

> The members of a class often stayed together for years, cultivating the most intimate and helpful of friendships. In this circle of companionship, it was difficult to be evasive or hypocritical. Deep levels of trust and affection were engendered: an optimum environment for the cultivation of personal character. Hearty thanksgiving and praise to God accompanied and affirmed every step of progress; loving and understanding sympathy and encouragement bolstered personal failures. These Methodists were people who believed that the real joy of human life was spiritual fellowship and moral growth.[22]

A key figure in the success of the class meeting was the class leader. Although all members participated, the leader was responsible for convening the class, directing weekly meetings, and guiding members in their walk with Christ. Class leaders effectively fulfilled a pastoral role.

Class leaders and members were also charged with the responsibility to do "works of mercy" and to provide "such spiritual advice, reproof, comfort and exhortation as might in each case be needed."[23] This directive is remarkably similar to Cutrona's definition of social support: "responsiveness to another's needs and more specifically as acts that communicate caring; that validate the other's worth, feelings or actions; or that facilitate adaptive coping with problems through the provision of information, assistance or tangible resources."[24]

Wesley stated that God united believers together in the Church in order that they might "more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works."[25] Experience suggests that when believers experience spiritual support within a small group setting, emotional support and intimacy will develop. As intimacy and emotional support develop, group members are motivated to good works and acts of tangible, instrumental support. The research cited previously in this paper suggests that emotional support does not *necessarily* entail spiritual support. Thus it appears that this developmental pattern must begin with spiritual support to ensure that both emerge and to maximize discipleship and growth in the individual believer and in the church.

The Church Today

In our increasingly mobile society, great distance often separates individuals and nuclear families from their extended families. Sociologist Linda Wilcox addressed the rapid social changes that serve to isolate people from their natural sources of social support in her recent book, *No More Front Porches*. She challenged believers to reverse the trend of fragmentation and isolation and to build emotional closeness and community.

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[21] Miley, 173.

[22] D. Michael Henderson, 102.

[23] Wilson T. Hogue,. (Chicago, S.K.J. Chesbro 1907) 68.

[24] Michael R. Cunningham and Anita P. Barbee, "Social Support." In C*lose Relationships: A Sourcebook*, Clyde Hendrick and Susan S. Hendrick, eds. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2000) 274.

[25] Albert Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley, vols. 1-4, The Sermons.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1984) 3:314.

In an address to the Wesleyan Theological Society, Larry Shelton suggested that the class meeting model has potential for reaching the postmodern culture.

> There have been few more effective models for evangelism and pastoral development than the various forms of cell groups and communities in the entire history of revivals. Because of the opportunity for dialogue, nurture, pastoral ministry by other laity . . . It is particularly well suited to the development of social relationship networks which appeal to postmoderns, and has much potential for becoming the interpretive community upon which they depend for their formation of values and identity issues.[26]

Given our scriptural mandate, the church today should lead the way in building community and providing social support. Indeed, research suggests that for "nonrelative support providers, most relationships began within formal social institutions, for example, at school, work, and church."[27]

Watson[28] pointed out that in North American society and the church in the United States, small groups play a role in a wide variety of activities and settings. Many people participate in these groups to meet their social needs. They may find social support in these groups. He suggests that if the dynamic of the class meeting is to be recovered today, attention must be given first to revitalizing the office of class leader. This person must assume the role of leader in discipleship and in the basics of Christian living in the world for the group to achieve the purpose of encouraging and helping one another to persevere in the faith. The group leader must set an example in providing spiritual support which will eventuate in many forms of social support.

One additional area of research may be helpful to church leaders as they consider programs or structures through which to provide spiritual and emotional support for parishioners. A few studies have explored gender differences in regard to the need for, provision of, and effects of social support.

Research conducted in secular settings reveals that women receive from and provide to their social network members more support than men do.[29] This can become counterproductive for women with extensive social ties, becoming emotionally demanding and leading to an increased level of psychological distress. Spiritual support and encouragement to use religious coping methods may be particularly restorative for women in this situation.

Men, on the other hand, receive less support in secular networks. As one man said, "For us this means being vulnerable with each other, and for men this is not easy to do."[30] If the church offers support in a way that makes a man feel comfortable, great benefit can result. The literature on gender role specialization suggests that men tend to feel less comfortable than women about asking for assistance. Small group formats which encourage formal Bible study, prayer, and accountability may facilitate sharing of personal problems and mutual social support.

The very nature of Christian worship services, with shared rituals such as singing, taking communion, and tithing communicates to participants that those around them share their beliefs and values. The resulting sense of having much in common with others builds trust and can facilitate social support. As the church seeks to provide spiritual and emotional support, we fulfill Paul's directive to "do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."[31] In contrast to the isolation of modern society, believers will be

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[26] R. Larry Shelton, "A Wesleyan/Holiness Agenda for the Twenty-First Century" paper presented to the Wesleyan Theological Society, (November 7-8, 1997) 25-26.

[27] Griffith, James, "Social Support Providers: Who Are They? Where Are They Met? And the Relationship of Network Characteristics to Psychological Distress." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 6(1)* (1985): 41-60.

[28] David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders: Rediscovering a Tradition.* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources 1991).

[29] Neal Krause, Christopher G. Ellison and John P. Marcum.

[30] William Winterrowd, "Being God's Family." *The Living Pulpit* (October – December 1994) 22-23.

[31] Gal. 6:10.

drawn into community with other believers and with God. Men and women will find that they are

> . . . no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.[32]

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[32] Eph. 2:19-22.

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