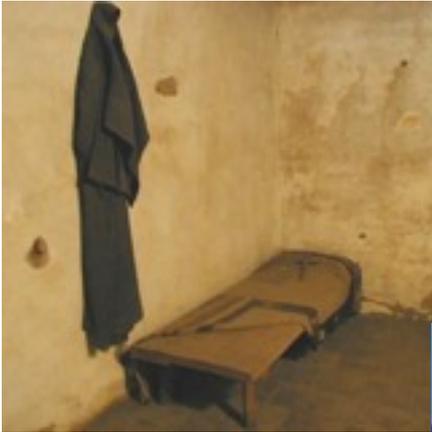
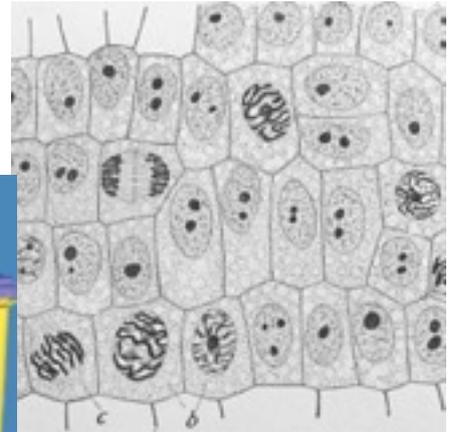


Sacred Ground 3 – Cell Prayer

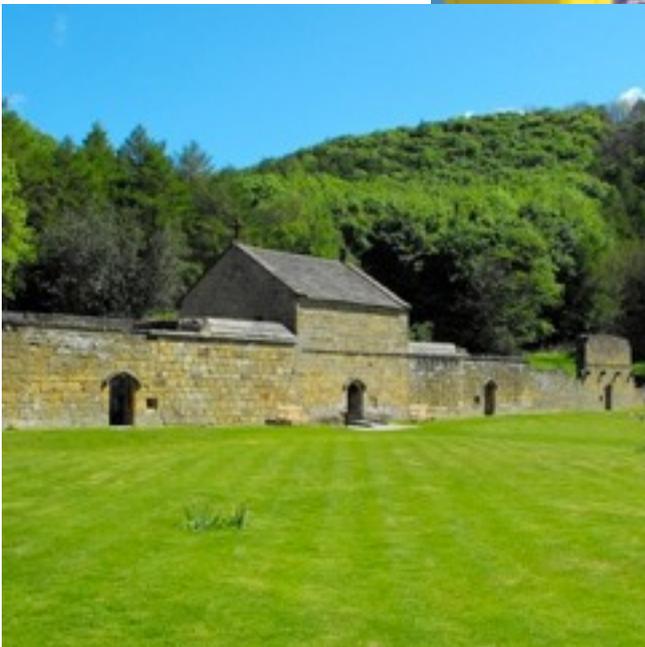
Today is the third week of our Lenten emphasis on the spiritual discipline of prayer, and our focus this week is cell prayer. Where does your mind go to when you hear the word “cell”? You might be thinking a prison cell, or perhaps a room in a convent where a monk or nun might sleep.



Or perhaps you're thinking biologically, of the smallest structural unit of a living organism.



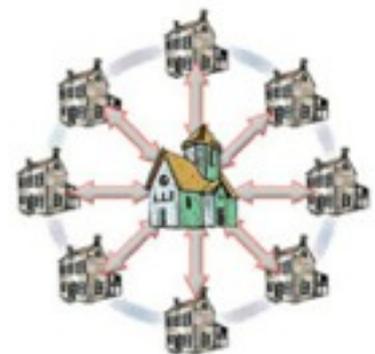
Or perhaps it might be something that converts chemical into electrical energy, a battery.



I think the definition that best fits our context and which comes from the history of the church, is this: a cell is “a small

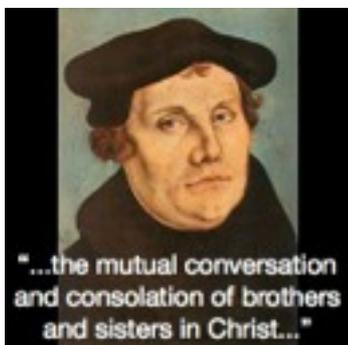
religious house dependent on a larger one, such as a priory within an abbey.” A cell is a living community of Christians who gather together to support one another. In the life of St Paul's this looks like groups of people gathering together, usually in homes, to read God's word together, share their insights, pray for one another and offer support and pastoral care. This is our small group ministry.

The Bible does not know of the concept of the individual Christian.



From the creation account we see that we were created to live in community with God and with other human beings. So it is with the church. “A body, though one, has many parts, but all its parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

The primary expression of our unity in Christ is seen in what we are doing this morning. We following in the footsteps of Christians who have, for 2000 years, gathered in community worship, where together we celebrate the goodness of God and receive the gifts he has to give us. This is where God gushes grace, firstly, through the spoken word, the Scriptures, “through which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world”; secondly, through Baptism; thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; and fourthly, through the power of the Keys, confession and absolution. All of these are present in our weekly worship.



And there's one more way that God gushes grace: “through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters in Christ” as Luther puts it. He directs us to Jesus' words in Matthew 18 to confirm the point he is making: “For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.” God's grace gushes out of the gathering of God's people in small groups, as they share the Scriptures together, as they speak through the Holy Spirit's direction about what this word is saying to them, as they share the journey of life together, with its twists and turns, and as they pray for each other.

The formative small group for many of us is the family. Many of us will remember being taught about God through the stories read by our parents, or devotions around the dinner table. We first learnt to pray by listening to our parents. I remember praying for each of my family members by name: “God bless Mum and Dad, Leanne, Grandma and Grandpa, Nanna and Grandpop,” and then I'd launch into the list of aunties and uncles and cousins. Fortunately, I only have 4 aunties and uncles, and four cousins!

This first small group taught me many things: that God is the head of the house, and of my life; that God's word shapes life and gives insight and direction; that there's a deep connection between God's word and the people, the places and the circumstances in my life; and that prayer is the rounding off of this conversation by placing all of this under God's gushing grace and love.

Today we've given these faith actions the name Faith 5:

- **Share** with one another
- **Read** the Scriptures
- **Talk** about the Word
- **Pray** for one another
- **Bless** one another.

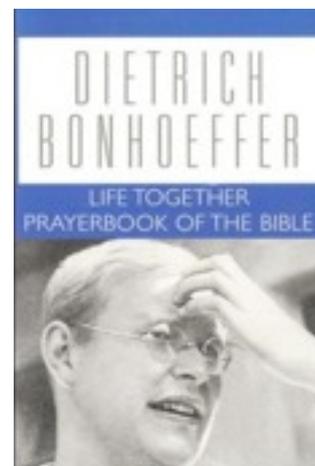
As we've grown older, some of us may have been able to incorporate these elements into our own family life. Others of us may be searching for this kind of safe place, where we can listen to God and to others, and be listened to, and prayed for. This is what a cell, or a small group, looks like. It's a place where we encounter God through word, prayer and each other, and where we mutually converse with and console one another, as Luther wrote.





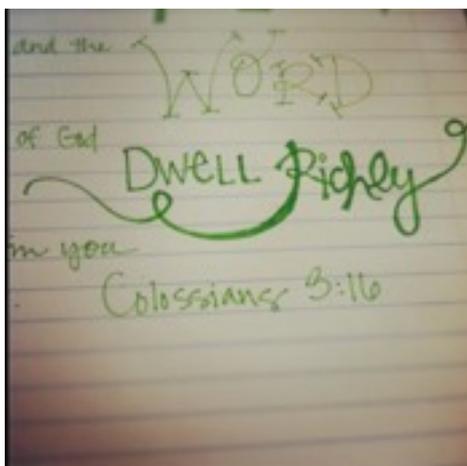
The way we live today is often so surface level. In the busyness of our lives, we bounce off one another rather than engage deeply as persons created in the image of God. We become restless and dissatisfied, and it doesn't matter how much stuff we get or how many wonderful experiences we have: if we aren't known deeply and valued deeply by others, we're on our own. The gift of becoming part of a small group is being able to stop and see in one another people in whom God's Spirit dwells, and through whom God grows and nurtures us.

The Lutheran pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote one of the foundational books about Christian community, *Life Together*. What makes this book so powerful is that he didn't just write about it, but he lived it, as the head of a clandestine seminary community operating in Hitler's Germany. He knew both how valuable Christian community is, and also how difficult it can be to maintain.



His book begins with Psalm 133: "Behold, how good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" It's a privilege, he says, that Christians can live in visible fellowship with other Christians. He reminds us of "the imprisoned, the sick, and the scattered lonely" who suffer the absence of an incarnate reminder of God's love. Why would Christians refuse the opportunity to express their unity in Christ?

What is the goal of gathering together in small groups? Bonhoeffer says that it is "to meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God permits them to meet together and give them community. Their fellowship is founded solely upon Jesus Christ and his alien righteousness." In other words, we meet because we are connected in Christ, not because we necessarily share the same backgrounds, interests or even life stage. The fact that we are united in Christ is our starting point. In small groups, we learn how to love one another, especially people who grate with us, or whose personalities rub us up the wrong way.

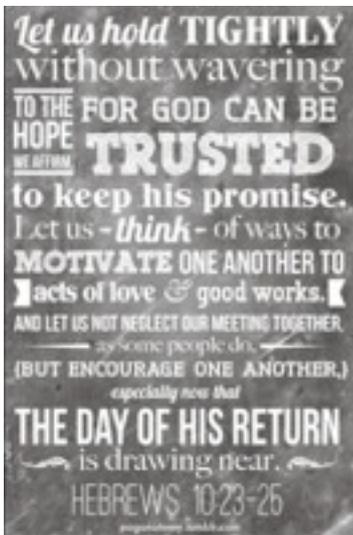


Because each cell is a subset of the body of Christ, it stands to reason that his word shapes small group life. Paul writes to the church in Colossae: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom..." God's word is read, studied, dissected, mulled over, heard through the words of others. Bonhoeffer says, "What we call our life, our troubles, our guilt, is by no means all of reality; there is the Scriptures is our life, our need, our guilt, and our salvation." We interpret our lives and experiences against the backdrop of God's grand plan to reunite all creation under Christ.

"God's word, the voice of the Church, and our prayers belong together", Bonhoeffer reminds us. And so we pray together. The Apostle James says: "Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray... Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord... And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up... Pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

Small groups, like families, are a great school of prayer. Prayer is our work of love for the others in our small group, and for the world beyond. Praying with and for one other means that we need to know them deeply; their cares and needs, their joys and thanksgivings. Bonhoeffer also advises us to relate our prayers to the Scripture that we have heard, so that what we pray doesn't just become an exercise in telling others what we are interested about.

He also counsels us not just to pray other's prayers, but to be bold enough in Christ to use our own words: "The church's tradition of prayer teaches us how to pray, but nevertheless it cannot take the place of the prayer I owe to God. Here the poorest mumbling utterance can be better than the best formulated prayer."



In the book of Hebrews we hear this challenge: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

What value do you put on meeting together with other Christians? How can you support others and be supported in the call to love others and serve God in the world? How can you do these things without the support of your brother and sisters in Christ? In the back of the pew in front of you you'll find a message card or a piece of paper, and a pencil. Can I ask you to do the following, during the reflection time or later before the service ends.

Write your name and email address

Are you in an active small group?

Answer Yes or No.

If not, would you like to be in a small group? Answer Yes or No.

Are you a small group leader?

Answer Yes or No.

Please place this in the offering bowl as it goes around or in the message box as you leave church today.