

Why I Love The Church!

Paul Koch, summer 2023

Thousands of Disciples, including hundreds from our region, gather in Louisville and proclaim that *The Kingdom of God is Within Us and Among Us*. While many Christians' expressions of faith focus on a future heavenly reward, Jesus is clear that God's realm, the Beloved Community, is present here. Our sacred endeavors are to build up each other and all of God's creation now. As my pastor-mentor often said from the pulpit of our very integrated and diverse church, "Since we will be together in heaven, we might as well start loving each other now."

Though attending Assembly requires a lot of energy, effort, and expense, I find that the pure joy of being surrounded by trusted friends who join to sing, worship, celebrate, educate, support, and praise is rare and beautiful. Love for my church community fills my heart and sustains me many months afterward. Love for the Church is a Love that keeps on giving in many ways!

Recently, I was able to spend a week in a safe and sacred space for people of faith from many denominations, religions, and some of no or severely wounded faith, to dialogue, care, and even love each other. Thirty-five souls were new to the gathering and found themselves outnumbered by 40 who came precisely to help and support them wherever they were in their journey, and still 20 more came and surrounded on the last day to welcome them and acknowledge all the hard personal inner work they accomplished. Do you think there were many dry eyes?

While there, and during a day of fasting, silence, and sitting alone in the wilderness, I was greeted by the noisy majesty of all of God's creation near a glacial lake. I pondered deeply if this sojourn away, or possible *escape* from a demanding daily life, was indeed the standard for reality or was the less-safe, less-loving existence *real* - God's intention for humankind. A deep existential quandary, I know.

I even drew out a schematic in my prayer journal.... Is a detached world with detached people in it, reality? => Is a Christian ideal of meeting in *one accord* (Acts), just that, an ideal - or at best, a bubble? => Dreaming does not equal detachment (MLK) => Idealism IS reality => Idealism IS the Kingdom of God => The Kingdom of God is Within Us and Among Us.

I pray for you and all people to experience the Beloved Community at General Assembly and that you find yourself and seek frequent opportunities to gather with others in equality, love, trust, and support. This is a Love That Will Not Let Me Go!

