

What I Learned In San Juan

In April I preached for several days at Casa del Padre, a small but growing church near San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The congregation meets in a rented facility with tile floors and folding chairs. They don't have a worship leader yet, so a CD player provides accompaniment for the singing. The pastor, a gentle guy named Luís, keeps a second job to pay his family's bills. Up until a few weeks ago, the church's office was in his garage.

Casa del Padre is not a fancy place. But its lack of sophistication is overshadowed by an amazing level of love.

When I ministered on Sunday morning, the meeting began at 10:30, yet I didn't leave the building until 5 p.m.—not because I preached too long, but because nobody wanted to go home.

I know what you're thinking: *That's just the way Puerto Ricans are. They're very relational.* It's certainly true they love to party and that their food—especially the rice, beans, pork and *mofongo*

(mashed plantains)—keeps people coming back for more. But the authentic

fellowship I experienced in San Juan can't be trivialized as an

expression of Latino culture. No, this Puerto Rican church understands a

biblical secret many of us have forgotten.

The book of Acts tells us that after the

first disciples were baptized in the Holy Spirit, they were “continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42, NASB). The Greek word for “fellowship,” *koinonia*, appears here for the first time in the Bible and then is used 18 other times in the New Testament.

Koinonia, which can be translated “partnership,” is a supernatural grace that causes Christians to love one another deeply. It was not possible before Pentecost because it is a manifestation of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Just as *dunamis* power enables us to heal the sick or work miracles, *koinonia* unites our hearts so we can work together.

Koinonia is what connected Paul, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Priscilla and Aquila as a team. It is what held the early Christians together in the face of persecution. *Koinonia* makes us feel like a family. It knits our hearts to one another. It also motivates us to pray for one another, bear one another’s burdens and share with one another materially.

I saw a vibrant example of *koinonia* in Puerto Rico, so I know it’s alive and well. But it seems that in many parts of the church we have forgotten about the essential need for fellowship and try to build the church without it. We have developed a sterile church model that is event-driven and celebrity-focused rather than genuinely relational. We build theater-style buildings

where crowds
listen to one guy talk. The crowd is whisked out of the
sanctuary to
make room for the next group. Many of these people never
process with
anyone else what they learned, never join a small group and
never
receive any form of one-on-one discipleship.

The apostles' teaching of Acts 2:42 is crucial, but teaching
without *koinonia* becomes dry and clinical. The church should
be more like a family room than a classroom.

Our lack of relationships has created a
void that we fill with technology. We figure if we create a
"wow factor"
with cool video clips, 3-D sermons and edgy worship bands, the
crowds
will scream for more. I don't think so. Trendy can quickly
become
shallow.

As I travel I find that Christians are
starved for meaningful relationships. Pastors often tell me
that they
don't have friends. This is sometimes because they felt
betrayed in a
previous relationship. Meanwhile, many Christians in the pews
have given
up on church altogether—not because of doctrinal issues, but
because
they were wounded by someone at church.

What we need is a return to *koinonia*—but
you can't download it. There's no app for it. And you can't
fake it.
(If you want a concrete example to copy, I can give you the
address of

Casa del Padre.) This love comes from the Spirit. Let's reclaim relational Christianity.

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