

# Lessons from a Sister ECC Community

Art Maines, LCSW

Recently Frank and I visited a couple of sister ECC communities in another state. We naturally received the usual warm welcome that is such a strong tradition in our Communion, and everyone was eager to connect and share stories. Even though we hadn't met most of the people, it was like being among longtime friends.

I was quite taken with the story of one community in particular. They had been through a very tough time recently, and some people had left the community. Still others were hanging in there but felt burnt out and depleted from the struggles.

I spoke with several of the survivors about their journey, and I heard the rumblings of new birth for their church family. Intrigued, and connecting this to my psychotherapeutic interest in post-traumatic growth and resilience in individuals, I began to see how communities and the people who create them choose to rebuild and emerge stronger from hard times.

First of all, they had to admit the difficulty of the situation and be willing to face it head-on. Avoidance wouldn't have permitted them to really know the full extent of what they had been through and attend to the immediate needs of the community members who were left with bushels of anger and loss to process. You can't pretend it didn't happen and move forward in healthy ways.

Instead, they practiced healthy self-care and reached out to their sisters and brothers to offer support as they could. They took care of themselves and turned toward each other rather than away, finding the balance through a combination of self-awareness and trial-and-error. There aren't formulas for this, just a willingness to stay present and attuned to themselves and others.

Then, at some point, they reconnected to what mattered most to them about being in community. This was different for different people, and some mentioned the importance of praying together, others spoke about the deep friendships they had formed, and still others said their love for what the community had been before the troubles was the drive for healing and renewal. In essence, they were describing the greater vision or deeper meaning for the community, the charism.

Frank did a beautiful job in his role as Presiding Bishop when he met with the community. He was wearing the hat of Presiding Healer, or Presiding Listener, as he invited people to tell their stories and share their pain as well as their hopes for the future. I heard many folks say that meeting with him was a profound experience of restoring hope and energy for moving forward. Then, in a masterful stroke, he provided the final, crucial piece: He told them that their suffering would help form a path for other ECC communities who are navigating hard times in the future. In that instant he provided a way for their pain to have meaning beyond their church, engaging

the drive for contributing to others' wellbeing and inspiring them to an even deeper mission arising from their travails.

I'm eager to go back to visit these lovely, courageous people and see how they're doing in the times ahead. I predict great things for them, and we can all learn so much from what they've been through.

As one writer puts it, it's not just about bouncing back after a setback, it's about bouncing forward.

May they (and we) bounce forward with grace and heart.

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