
Essentials and Idiots

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

What are essential businesses, or essential organizations, or essential gatherings, in this pandemic season?

Though I understand the necessity of making such decisions, I regret that leaders have gradually assumed that some of our country's businesses are not as essential as others. Are some people's vocations, and sources of livelihood, not so essential as others? How do we even place a value on such things?

In particular, however, I worry that churches, or at least church gatherings, are not deemed as essential as other gatherings. I hear, for instance, that church gatherings are not of the same essential nature as school gatherings.

Well, maybe not at first! At first, of course, we good citizens desire strong and regular school systems for our young people. Information and history and science are transmitted there. That substance is good for all of us, no matter what age we are. Older people, for instance, always need a new generation to be as educated as possible.

Over time, however, I claim that church gatherings are just as essential. Church gatherings—mature and seasoned gatherings of spiritual community—are just as essential to a well-developed and healthy commonwealth. By church gatherings, however, I do not mean merely the transmission of our teaching or our latest social ethic. Teachings and social positions vary, from generation to generation.

What is essential about church gatherings is our practice of gathering spiritually with people who are different from us! Church members gather in order to acknowledge something – or Someone—greater than any one of us! Church gatherings – or mature religious gatherings (not cult ones)—teach us the habit of sitting and singing and praying and praising with people who are different from us.

In this season of social anxiety, church gatherings are as essential as any other gathering – and maybe even more so. For instance, many of us are presently watching, or reading about, our country's two major political parties as they gather in their usual partisan conventions. There is nothing wrong with that custom, of course. Political party conventions are supposed to be partisan! Sometimes, Christians, too, are meant to proclaim clear messages that stake a current political position!

However, Christians gather for an even deeper reason, a reason that is more foundational than that of a current political platform. Christians gather to acknowledge a higher power, outside of ourselves. We gather to acknowledge and worship God. Worshipping God immediately teaches us that we are not the be-all and end-all of life. Our positions, and our opinions, are not the only good ones around. The opinions of others, some praying right beside us!—are part of the community. Forgiving others, and being forgiven, are also part of the community.

When we begin to lose this sense of community, our voices become more random and untethered. In fact, we become idiots. Do you know what an idiot is? An idiot is not someone who is dumb or stupid. Instead, the true meaning of the word "idiot" (coming from the Greek, meaning "one's own") is someone who can think only within his or her own mindset, unable to see the world from another's perspective. One older definition of "idiot" is "a private person, a person lacking skill or expertise." For instance, we consider "idiosyncracies" to be distinctive characteristics of single individuals.

I believe that when people lose community, we become “idiots.” When we lose community, we lose the capacity to experience and understand people who are different from us; instead, we experience only our own selves, only our own opinions, only our own perspectives. One of the great features of church gathering, and church community, is the practice of gathering in unity with people who do not share our idiosyncratic characteristics!

Thus, church gatherings are essential in our season of social isolation! Without church gathering, each of us tends to speak only idiosyncratically, without the “give and take” of community conversation. This may not happen immediately; but, after being cooped up in our own isolation, and in our own echo chambers, for six months, such idiosyncratic –and idiotic—outbursts can be quite debilitating. They can also seem absolutist, authoritarian, tyrannical, and puritanistic.

I am biased, of course. But church community is what I have committed my life to. I believe the world needs good and healthy spiritual community. Healthy church community is not simply being able to make some absolutist proclamation. And, healthy church community is not even producing a polished video liturgy online! Healthy church community is the Body of Christ, with MANY members! Not just a head, and not just a political platform, and not just a whiz bang technical assistant (though we at the Cathedral are glad to have several such excellent assistants!). The Body of Christ is all of us, partisan and non-partisan, conservative and liberal, democrat and republican, young and old, rich and poor.

The Body of Christ resembles what the keystone on our Cathedral Overlook says, “The rich and the poor meet together. The Lord is the maker of us all” (from Proverbs 22). I understand that we are in a season that requires us to be distanced from each other; I accept that we simply cannot gather together safely in large groups right now. However, I also know this: The essential work of the Church is to gather together, and not just to hear one person speak. We gather together so that all of us can speak and be heard. That conversation is essential to our spiritual lives, and it is essential to our world! We do not want to be idiots; we want to be gathered together, essential members of the Body of Christ in the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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