

"Church Growth: Then and Now"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
Lectionary Year A
April 13, 2008
Text: Acts 2:42-47
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In certain circles of the Church today, we hear a lot about church growth. In fact, sometimes that's about all we hear about with respect to the Church. In my years of ministry I have attended several seminars on church growth and have been exposed to countless articles on how a church can increase in size—through worship, through the Sunday School, through youth and children's programming. I get the feeling that entire forests of trees have been sacrificed to make the paper to print all the suggestions that have been made in the last few years about how to help our churches grow. No stone has been left untouched, no leaf has been left unturned, and no gimmick has been left untried in this area. Church growth has become our obsession as a denomination. It's about all we seem to talk about these days.

We talk about growth here at Schreiber Memorial United Methodist Church. In Church Council meetings we discuss how we want to and need to grow in order to do the kind of ministry in our community we are called to do. We also know that churches, like all institutions, either grow or decline. Nothing stays the same. For these reasons, we want our church to grow as well. It is not because we want to have a huge congregation, however. Hopefully we want to grow because we want to reach as many people as possible for Christ and minister to their

needs.

In our passage of scripture for this morning from the New Testament book of Acts, we find a description of a growing church, in this case, the first and earliest church. Look at the last sentence in our reading for this morning. It says that "day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." It sounds to me like church growth was going on in a big way back then.

If we turned the church growth experts loose on this passage of scripture, they would probably develop for us the traits of the first church that contributed to its growth. Church growth experts just love to make lists of traits; that's what makes them experts. I recently ran across six common traits of growing churches that our own experts in Nashville have come up with. Just in case you are interested, they are the following: 1) a strong, dynamic worship service with an emphasis on preaching; 2) a heavy emphasis on music, with a variety of musical styles and approaches; 3) the perception by the membership and visitors of the church as warm, friendly, and welcoming; 4) the members of the church sense a developing personal spiritual life; 5) a hands-on program for missions outreach; 6) an awareness of the importance of children's ministries. I think our own church does pretty well in these areas, which explains why we continue to grow as a congregation.

If we were church growth analysts, what might we say about the first church? I would like to suggest the following four things for us to consider about the earliest church, as it is described for us in the second chapter of Acts:

In the first church, **there seems to have been a devotion to**

Christian education. As the passage states, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching . . ." What was the apostles' teaching? It was the words and works of Jesus that later were incorporated into the Gospels. No doubt there also was constant exposition of Old Testament prophecies which had now been fulfilled in Jesus [*New Century Bible Commentary*, p. 81]. There was a lot of studying going on in the first church. Apparently, the early Christians were eager to learn about Jesus and what he meant for their lives. Christian education was extremely important in the first church.

Perhaps there was so much devotion to what the church was teaching because the people realized what we should: that there is nowhere else to receive this kind of instruction. *It is the apostles' teaching, and it is unique to the church.* You can't get it in the schools, at the movies, on television, on the radio, in best-selling books, or from the magazines you pick up at the grocery store. Not the apostles' teaching. It represents an insight, a perspective, an approach, a point of view, an understanding that is different from the world outside the church. Maybe this is why there was so much devotion to Christian education in the first church. Does this same kind of devotion to study characterize our church? Have we realized yet that the apostles' teaching is unique to the Church, to be found here and nowhere else?

In the first church, **there seems to have been a devotion to one another in the community of faith.** There was not only a devotion to study; there was also this devotion to one another going on. The text refers to it as fellowship, but their kind of fellowship was much more intense than having pot luck dinners every once in a while. Look at all

they did together. They shared common meals all the time. They shared their possessions with each other. They went to the temple together every day. It sounds like they were almost inseparable. Now *that* is togetherness.

The name for this kind of fellowship in Greek is *koinonia*. One translation [NASB] of verse 46 of our passage says, "And day by day continuing *with one mind* in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart." The people were of one mind, and it is no wonder that there was this kind of harmony and unity among the early Christians. People who spend that much time together start thinking alike and reading each other's minds, kind of like couples who have been married for a long time.

This kind of togetherness is radical stuff. It is like being in a family, the way family life is supposed to be experienced. Unfortunately, as some of you have admitted to me, our own families don't eat together this much and spend the kind of time together that characterized the early church. Maybe that's a part of our problem with family life today.

As a church, we need to spend real time together, and when we do it shows up in the kind of attitudes we have toward each other. As my sister routinely asks, "How do you spell love? T-I-M-E, that's how." If we love each other, we want to spend time together. We know that is true. However, the other side of that is true as well. The more we spend time together, the more we learn to love each other. Churches grow when there is this kind of devotion to one another.

In the first church, **there also seems to have been a devotion to public and private worship.** The Christians in the first church seem to

have worshiped all the time. They worshiped daily in the temple, but as if that weren't enough, they worshiped in the breaking of the bread at home as well. As you know, the first Christians were Jews, so they continued to be faithful to temple worship, but they added to it their own Christian worship outside the temple. They were also devoted to "the prayers." These prayers included participation in the public prayers in the temple as well as family worship in their own homes.

How much worship goes on in your home? We may be devoted to public worship, but how devoted are we to the personal spiritual disciplines of prayer, silence, Bible study, and fasting? Perhaps if worship, the praising of God, took place for us more than just one hour a week, we would be more full of a sense of awe concerning God and God's work than we are. Perhaps we have lost some of our sense of wonder about God because we are not as engaged in the worship of God on a daily basis as we should.

In the first church, **there seems to have been a devotion to others outside of the community of faith.** The Christians in the first church were popular. The text says that the church enjoyed "the goodwill of all the people." The early Christians were involved in their communities. They were held in high regard by all their friends and neighbors. They were not cloistered together all by themselves. They were not some separate clique that had nothing to do with the world. They were engaged in the affairs of the world on a day to day basis. They were active in things besides the church.

The members of the first church reached out to the community and to others in need. They were even willing to sell their property and

possessions, not just to share among themselves within their own congregation, but also to share with others outside the church. Are we that unselfish? Do we care that much about the needs of others?

So far, we've looked at the early church from a rather cold, cognitive, objective, analytical, and overall pragmatic perspective. We've looked at it as church growth analysts might, from a "bottom line" approach, the bottom line being growth. How does a church grow? It grows by being like the first church and doing the things the first church did. If we want the Lord to add to our numbers daily, we need to be devoted to Christian education, authentic fellowship, public and private worship, and the needs of the community around us.

Now let's put on another hat. Instead of being objective, let's be subjective. Instead of being cognitive, let's be affective. Instead of taking an analytical approach, let's take a more emotional one.

Here's what I want you to do: Close your eyes and let me read this passage to you again very slowly. Imagine what it feels like to be a part of this group. How does it feel to be in the church being described here? What are your emotions? As I read the scripture passage another time, ask yourself, "How does it make me feel to be a part of this church?"

The truth is that the early church grew not simply because the members did certain things. They didn't make it happen; it was the Lord who added to their number day by day. They didn't do it; *God* did it. Growth didn't happen because they followed certain principles of church growth. Growth happened because a community developed under the lordship of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit that made people

want to be a part of it. *People joined this group called Christians because it felt good to be with them.* Their physical needs were met, they gained knowledge and insight for living, they experienced personal spiritual growth and development, they felt accepted and affirmed, and they were able to be in service to others.

As you have figured out, I want our church to be like the first and earliest church. I want us to be devoted to Christian education, to authentic fellowship, to public and private worship, and to ministry to others. But I want us to be like this not simply so that we will grow. I am convinced that if we are like this, we *will* grow.

But that is not what I am primarily concerned about. I want us to be like the first church so that we can feel about the Lord and feel about each other the way these early Christians must have felt. I want us to feel that sense of awe for God and what he is doing all around us. I want us to feel the level of compassion that leads to radical sharing with each other and with the world. I want us to feel the fulfillment that comes when that kind of fellowship and togetherness is experienced.

Yes, I want us in this church to grow like the first church grew. But more than that, I want us to feel the thrill, the excitement, and the utter joy of what it must have been like to be a part of a community such as that. And with the Lord's help, I believe we can!