

CHURCH GROWTH
Acts 2:42-47
May 3, 2020
Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

A young man is coming out of a Sunday church service in one of those big, evangelical mega-churches, and he approaches the preacher, who is standing at the door shaking hands (or, maybe bumping elbows). The preacher calls the young man aside and fairly shouts at him: "You need to join the army of the Lord!"

The young man replies: "I'm already in the army of the Lord, preacher."

"You are?" shouts the preacher. "Then how come I haven't seen you here before?"

And the young man whispers back: "I'm in the secret service."

Now, ordinarily - and hopefully – I might hear a chuckle or two from you folks gathered together to worship in this place. So I guess I'll just have to chuckle to myself in this "virtual" worship service we are presenting in these trying times. I tell that little story as an introduction to my sermon this day, which is based upon Acts 2:42-47 – for I want to say a few words about church growth – and the difference between what many people today regard as ways of bringing about church growth – and the ways in which the early church, the first church, apparently went about doing the same. And I would like to campaign for the early church's methods.

Consider, if you will, those big, evangelical, mega-churches that seem to dominate the religious television landscape – and produce endless pop materials that promote their growth and their way of doing church and interpreting the Bible – and make "stars" out of their preachers. Many folks look at these

churches and assume that main-line denominations, like ours, need to imitate their ways if our church wants to grow.

So, more and more “church growth specialists” appear on the horizon – writing books, doing workshops, giving speeches, writing articles about church growth. Some of them recommend strategies that the mega-churches use: like catering to the everyday needs and desires of contemporary people – providing black and white answers to complex religious questions – promoting and glorifying financial success – engaging in aggressive evangelism efforts, sometimes with militant themes – like grabbing people and telling them they need to join the army of the Lord!

Well, here is how the early church, the first church, brought about church growth – according to Luke, the author of Acts, and I quote: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Four practices: (1) Teaching; (2) Fellowship; (3) Breaking of bread; and (4) Prayers. As a result of these “church growth principles,” as it were, “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved,” as our text from Acts puts it. In other words, the church grew.

Please note two things about this statement of growth: First, the phrase, “being saved,” means awakening to the real presence of the risen Christ as the indwelling Holy Spirit and transforming and living their lives on the basis of that awakening. This “being saved” is not about things like going to heaven or hell. Secondly in this early statement of growth, note that it was “the Lord” who added to their number. In other words, it is God who gives the growth – as Paul points out in his first letter to the Corinthians. We participate – we plant and we water –

hopefully, we engage in these four practices in our Acts passage – but God gives the growth.

So, the first church growth principle – teaching. Now, teaching includes a number of things. It includes preaching – preaching based upon “the apostles’ teaching,” as our text puts it. This is the kind of preaching we try to carry out in this church – interpreting the Bible with intelligence and integrity, examining context, concept, and contemporary application of texts from the Bible, and presenting the same in sermons and meditations. Teaching also includes, of course, Bible teaching, ethical teaching, life practice teaching, discipleship teaching. The goal is to help transform lives and stimulate folks to imitate Christ and serve and love each other and others outside the church with the love of Christ. The goal is to help bring about the peaceable kingdom of God.

The second church growth principle is fellowship. The word that Luke uses for this fellowship is the Greek word, “koinania.” This “koinania” in this early church in Acts is primarily a fellowship of mutual sharing and caring for the poor. They were “together and had all things in common,” says the text. In other words, in God’s kingdom all people are equal – and all things ultimately belong to God. So apparently these early church people even sell what they have in order to share with others. Our fellowship often takes the same tack, as we often gather together in order to help others through various programs. Of course, fellowship also refers to the many “social” gatherings we have at this church – a practice that surely goes a long way in helping to grow the church – but a practice in short supply in these days of “social distancing.” Kind of a “catch-22” – we need fellowship, but we need to stay apart.

The third church growth principle is breaking of bread. This “breaking of bread” in our text does not only refer to celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. It also refers to everyday, joyful eating in the church or in the home. “Day by day,” says the text, “as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.” These early disciples, who are Jewish, still go to the temple, as well as meeting in house churches, and they enjoy the breaking of bread – for the breaking of bread is a personal and communal encounter with the risen Christ. In a few moments I intend to offer a “virtual communion” in this service. It certainly will not replace our communal Lord’s Supper; and it certainly does not replace the theological and spiritual meaning of our ordinary practice; but our church – the PCUSA – has recently offered a ruling and guidance regarding virtual communion – in which the Session must approve it (they have), and the congregation must understand that this virtual communion is an anomaly, not to be standard practice for sure. Anyway, I intend to recite the communion liturgy and model the taking of communion, and I will invite you to serve one another, however you choose, and “sense” the real presence of the risen Christ with you – noting the symbolism of the whole thing.

Finally, the fourth church growth principle is the prayers. These prayers include traditional prayers – spoken or silent. They include “centering prayer,” about which I wrote in the last newsletter, the Guidepost, if you care to take a look. The prayers include all forms of meditation. They include all kinds of music! They include the concept of “praying without ceasing,” which Paul recommends for everyone. Praying without ceasing is being aware of the real presence of God in every present moment of your life. Praying without ceasing does not require words – or even thoughts – just awareness.

Well, there you have it – four church growth principles that brought about an explosion of growth in the early church. And I believe the same principles still apply in our modern church – in this church, Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. I believe – I hope – that if we focus upon and diligently practice teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers – God will give the growth we all desire. For we are not an “army of the Lord” – we are the Body of Christ.

Let us pray: Give us growth, O God, according to the will and the way of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives in us. Help us to be faithful and hopeful disciples – transformed by your presence and your love. AMEN.