

SEE HOW THEY GREW!

ACTS 2:37-47

AUGUST 31, 1986

Page 1

How does a church grow? What creates a vital, dynamic, growing church? What are the characteristics of the church God is calling us to be? Our church is being blessed with growth: our children's classes and choirs are growing; worship attendance is increasing; people are visiting us and staying with us. On September 13, you are invited to gather in Fellowship Hall and help create the future of our church. This is a time when we pause, try to be objective, and sharpen our image of the ideal church.

Six persons were arguing about the characteristics of a dynamic, growing church. They were discussing the passage from Acts which was read to you this morning. Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost and 3,000 people were baptized and came into the church. You might like to turn to the passage in your Bible as the remainder of this sermon will be based on these verses. The passage describes the early church, and ends in 2:47 with the sentence, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The six persons agreed that the Lord does the converting. The Lord does the growing. The church's task is to be faithful to the vision of what a church is.

At this point the six persons differed considerably, and like many committee members, were not afraid to speak. Shall we say they were opinionated and quite vocal with their opinions. The first one to speak was Billy Evangelism. He was neatly groomed, wore a three-piece suit, leather shoes, silk tie, dressed right out of Nordstrom's. He said, "It's obvious why the church grew. The chief characteristic of a dynamic church is obviously evangelism. The early church was evangelistic. When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they went out into the streets and witnessed. They were able to speak in a language that their hearers understood. Then, Peter preached an evangelistic sermon. Look at verse 38. Peter told them to repent and be baptized. He was clear in his message and his call."

Billy Evangelism continued, "The First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when it is aggressive in evangelism. We must care about people. We must reach out. The sermons should be evangelistic. Every member should be an evangelist, sharing his/her faith, inviting others to church, inviting others to faith in Christ. We need a strong visitation program."

Billy Evangelism was getting quite fervent until he was interrupted. "Just a minute, Billy," said Laura Liturgy. "Evangelism is necessary, but evangelism must not be the primary focus of a church. When evangelism is the chief characteristic of a church, when church growth is the primary goal, then a church is tempted to use psychological manipulation to attract numbers of people. Madison Avenue advertising techniques are used. People are pressured. The gospel, then, is distorted."

Laura Liturgy continued, "I'll tell you why the early church grew. Look at verse 46. They worshipped together. They broke bread together. People were baptized. Celebrating the sacraments was the focus of their church. A worshipping church is a strong, dynamic, growing church because it is God-centered, not gimmick-centered. A church focuses and centers on God through worship. Through worship, God moves among his people. The First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when the Sunday worship

SEE HOW THEY GREW!

ACTS 2:37-47

AUGUST 31, 1986

Page 2

service is central, when the entire congregation gathers faithfully and conscientiously to worship, led by the best preaching and the best music we can do, with vocal choirs, bell choirs, and an orchestra. When God is worshipped with our best, the church will grow."

By this time, the third speaker was quite agitated. She was trying to speak, raising her hand, bouncing up and down, trying to get Laura Liturgy's attention. Finally, Sally Study interrupted, "No, no. Neither evangelism nor worship are the primary characteristics of a strong church. Worship alone can become deadly. If the church only worships, and the people are not stretching their minds and keeping up-to-date in their thinking, the church becomes irrelevant. Look at Europe. The beautiful cathedrals are empty. Look at the magnificent worship services in England and only 13% of the population worship. Look at Russia. The Orthodox Church was worship-centered, irrelevant to people's needs, and a fertile ground for the Communist revolution."

Sally Study continued, "Education is the key. I'll tell you why the early church grew. Look at verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. They gathered in classes. 1500 years later, the Protestant Reformation was born through Luther's sermons and his commentary on the Bible. The Bible again became the property of the common people, and through Bible study, the church was dynamic and growing. The Methodist movement was predicated on study. Wesley organized his followers into class meetings for study, discipline and support. The First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when we emphasize education and all our children, youth and adults studiously study theology and the Bible."

The fourth one to speak was Joe Activist. He was young, wore a beard, jeans, and lots of buttons. "Hey, man, that is not where it's at. What good does it do just to train people? More classes, more meetings, more committees. The Methodist Church thinks it can save the world through classes and committees. We think a dynamic, growing church is when the members are involved in committees--let's study that, let's appoint a committee. We don't need more study or more committees. We need action."

Joe Activist continued, "I'll tell you why the early church grew. It addressed itself to the needs of people. Look at verses 44 and 45. They had all things in common. They sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. They supported each other. They sacrificially cared for one another, that none should hunger or want. The early church began correcting the injustices of society. Slaves were welcomed into the church and were treated as equals. Slaves were even given positions of leadership. Women were treated equally. It was revolutionary in that time and place for women to be given authority; but, women became leaders of churches. The early church reached out to people and ministered to their hurts."

Joe Activist applied this observation to our church. "First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when it gets outside its walls, ministers to people, addresses human hurt, changes bad laws, and overcomes injustice in society. God has called the church into being to do his work. When the First United Methodist Church does God's work through its

SEE HOW THEY GREW!
ACTS 2:37-47
AUGUST 31, 1986

Page 3

individual members and through the church's programs, then the church will be dynamic and growing.

"All well and good," said the fifth speaker, Spiritual Sam, the Charismatic. Or, I should say, Spirited Sam, the Charismatic. "But, people in mission soon run out of steam unless they are fed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. There are many burnt-out activists in our society and in churches today who have lost their zeal because they extended themselves without developing the inner resources to sustain them. Social action--doing God's work on behalf of Christ--is indeed the church's task, but we must be directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit."

Spirited Sam, the Charismatic, continued, "I'll tell you why the early church grew. They prayed. They waited on the Lord. After the resurrection, Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and pray. They met together for fifty days, praying and waiting on God. Then, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Then, they were empowered to be the church. Verse 43 tells us that many wonders and signs were done through the apostles, not by the apostles, but through the apostles. The Holy Spirit provides the growth. The Holy Spirit creates a dynamic church. People don't create a dynamic, growing church. The Holy Spirit creates a vital church."

Spirited Sam applied his conclusion to our church. "The First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when we pray, when our people take the nurture and development of their inner lives seriously and pray. Prayer and meditation keep us on God's wave-length so that we do not follow fads of evangelism, or provide formal, boring worship, or study classes that lead nowhere, or burnt-out social action."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said the sixth speaker, "But, Sam, how does the Holy Spirit empower people?" Phyllis Fellowship had a winning smile, warm and loving. She usually had a plate of cookies in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. In fact, Phyllis Fellowship was shaped like a coffee pot! She said, "I'll tell you why the early church grew. Read the passage again. Verse 42 says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship. Verse 46 says they broke bread in their homes and partook of food with glad and generous hearts. They had potlucks! They found God through fellowship. God sometimes speaks to individuals, but usually the Holy Spirit comes to groups. They gathered together in the upper room to wait for the Holy Spirit. They were together. They fellowshiped. God works through people when they gather together in love, share with one another, support one another, and care about each other."

Phyllis Fellowship continued, "The First United Methodist Church will be a dynamic, growing church when our people fellowship in small groups. We need 100 small groups in this church, groups of 10-12 persons who gather together, potluck, laugh, cry, share, pray, and study together. Persons in our society are lonely. They are often separated physically or emotionally from their own families and desperately need to belong to the family of God. In a small group they can find fellowship, a sense of belonging and caring. When our church emphasizes fellowship and provides opportunities for persons to fellowship, then we will grow."

SEE HOW THEY GREW!
ACTS 2:37-47
AUGUST 31, 1986

Page 4

Which of the six speakers is right? Which characteristic is the chief component of a growing, dynamic church? Evangelism, worship, study, social action, prayer, or fellowship? They are all right, aren't they. All six characteristics are essential. All six ingredients are necessary or the recipe flops. If you leave out the yeast, or the water, or the flour, you can't make bread. If we leave out any of these six characteristics, we will have a crippled church--a limping, listless, dying church.

If our people are not engaged in evangelism, if we are not concerned about people and are not inviting and welcoming new people to our church, then our church will be stagnant, ingrown and stinky!

If our people neglect worship and are not gathering regularly--weekly and faithfully--to worship, our church will be people-centered rather than God-centered.

If our people are not studying and challenging their minds with theology and the Bible, our church will be shallow, superficial, repetitious, and stale.

If our people are not praying, our church will be materialistic, powerless, out-of-touch with the Holy Spirit.

If our people are not engaged in mission to the community, society and the world, our church will be pietistic and irrelevant, so heavenly minded, it is no earthly good.

If our people are not fellowshiping in small groups, our church will be cold and impersonal.

All six components are essential! According to this passage, a church will be dynamic and growing when we worship God regularly and beautifully, when we reach out and welcome the stranger, engage in serious study, prayer and fellowship, and minister to people who are hurting because of society's injustice and neglect. First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, let's be that kind of church!

SEE HOW THEY GREW!

ACTS 2:37-47

DOUGLAS NORRIS

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 31, 1986