

Back to the Future

How does a church grow? How does the church not only grow, but how do the people also grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ? These questions have been around for as long as the church, but for quite some time the church hasn't been growing, it has been in decline.

Nationally, church rolls have been thinning since the 1960s and one has to ask the question why? There are many answers to this question and I'm not going to detail them here, but rather I'm going to focus in one area in particular; the church has forgotten to really love one another. It's that simple and I would like to say that I've been above all of that, but that wouldn't be the truth. All of us have allowed our petty grievances to get the best of us and this has given rise to anger, resentment and what can best be described as ministerial tribalism. In other words; we've become like the world we live in and have nothing special to offer anyone.

In chapter 13 of John's Gospel there is this golden nugget from our Savior:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I truly believe that this is to be our first witness to those who are not followers of Christ and is the key to the success and explosive growth of the early church. The love that they had for one another must have been infectious to the world around them. Those small cells of believers gathering in homes must have appeared as a warm haven or safe sanctuary to the non believers within the communities in which they lived. Those early disciples cared for one another by lifting each other up and encouraging their brothers and sisters to live victorious lives in Christ and the historical record shows how effective they were at transforming their world. Within 300 years a small group of about two hundred people had grown to millions and the church was everywhere.

I've had a fascination with the early church for some time mainly because its early growth really can't be attributed to an institution; just small cells of people gathering and sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ by demonstration and word.

Within our heritage as Methodists we have a similar story. Methodism grew from a small group of people to become the religious force of the 19th Century. The primary reason for this incredible growth can be attributed to the Methodist Class Meeting. The Class Meeting was not really a bible study or a social gathering. Wesley referred to it as a "means of grace" and it was a gathering that allowed people to share their burdens, build one another up, practice forgiveness and work out one's faith within a group. It appears that John Wesley too was fascinated with the early church.

For the past decade there have been many books written about "Small Groups" as a means of evangelism and church growth and the history of the church universal gives credence to this idea. Small groups, church cells or Class Meetings are an excellent place for recognizing gifts, building up and training leadership as the church moves forward. They also foster a warm and loving environment where the new believer can find others who will disciple him/ her. It's also a non threatening place where a non believer can see the Christian life being lived out among a community of believers.

Starting in January the Evangelism Team will be starting three new groups. We have 3 people who have been led to lead and one of our leaders needs a place to hold the meetings. Maybe you would like to offer your home for an hour once a week or every other week. The vision is to expand the numbers as the year unfolds and to have at least six by January 2014. We'll be having special services once a month to bring the groups together for sharing, prayer and communion. Every other month we hope to provide a meal. If you believe that you are being led to join a group, lead a group or offer your home as a meeting place please contact me or the church office. We'll also be making personal invitations in the upcoming weeks.

Please keep the Evangelism Team in your prayers as we move forward. Pray that we are guided by the Holy Spirit and that our efforts are of Him.

In Christ,
Greg