

Sermon from 10/21/2007

Holistic Small Groups

Text: Acts 2:45-47

[Sixth in a series of sermons on the 8 Quality Characteristics of Natural Church Development]

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“Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.”

Francis Bacon

According to our NCD Survey taken last May, ‘Need-Orientated Evangelism’ was considered to be the weakest part of our congregational life.

In other words, we’re just not engaging in evangelism—and where there is no evangelism there is no (what?)—growth!

The next weakest part of our congregational life, “according to the Survey” as Richard Dawson (of Family Feud) would say, is Holistic Small Groups.

Before we get into the biblical justification for Holistic Small Groups—and the direct benefit they have for congregational life...

...I first want to commend the leadership for their willingness to address this weakness within our church family.

It was back in February of this year, at our leadership ‘Away Day’, that I first invited the Consistory to develop Holistic Small Groups at Zion Church.

This has been hard work.

We have had many conversations related to the planning and purpose of Holistic Small Groups (hereafter HSGs) and at the end of last August, your Consistory participated in a Training Day to begin the journey of learning how to more fully facilitate their HSGs.

Most groups have now met at least once with successful results being shared.

I am proud of the facilitators and I am proud of those that have said ‘Yes’ to joining an HSG.

That being said, some of you may still be asking, “What is a Holistic Small Group since we’ve already had several small groups at Zion like ‘Hilltoppers’, THEOHNS, ‘Roaring 20s’ etc.?”

Why is having HSGs so important?

The importance lies in having groups that gather not primarily as a social group—although having a social component is very significant to HSGs.

Rather, the Holistic Small Group gathers to focus on Jesus, processing our faith through God's Word, and being open to the transformational experiences of fellow believers as the Holy Spirit leads them.

The reason that HSGs are so necessary is because of this truth: you will never, truly become changed people on a diet of Sunday Services alone.

Why?

Because there is very little that a congregation can put back into the Sunday Service.

Bare with me on this: I put the bulletin together; I pick the hymns, I preach at you, you listen thoughtfully.

The Chancel Choir sings and you are blessed—but, for the most part, it's pretty much a one-way exchange.

Other than singing three hymns...your job is to show up, sit down, be quiet and receive.

I'm not sure if hand-clapping is allowed at Zion yet or not—the congregation seems a little ambivalent about that—same with 'Passing the Peace'—'Heaven forbid' if we have to engage in movement.

Shhhh! People aren't supposed to move in church—unless you're under 10 years old.

Yes, it's what the Modern Era calls a linear approach to life and learning.

Our pews are in a straight line and we are experts in what the backs of one another's head looks like.

But we no longer live in the Modern Age, but the Postmodern Age where linear approaches to life and faith are dead—and participatory, interactive approaches to life are alive and kickin'.

Often, people will genuinely question, *"Why does the 'First Church of the Such and Such' have growth and we do not?"*

"Why does 'All-Souls Church' have a thriving number of youth in attendance and we do not?"

At the risk of being overly honest, most mainline churches are still driving at the wrong speed.

Ever get behind someone driving 35 mph on the Interstate—in the fast lane?

I mean, in their mind, they obviously think they're doing the right thing, don't they.

They think that playing it safe is really good and that going extra, extra slow will benefit other drivers.

They drive down the highway thinking: “It’s good to drive slow...it’s good to drive slow...it’s good to drive slow.”

All the while they are backing up traffic and causing the potential for several accidents to occur simply because others drivers can’t properly pass them.

You know what I’m talking about.

Most mainline churches are like this driver: wrong speed...wrong lane!

The right lane and the right speed, however, for the church involves these truths: interactivity, participation, and engagement.

Do you wish to know why the Assemblies of God denomination has grown 346% between 1960 and 1995 while the United Church of Christ, for the same period has declined 24.3%?¹

Three words: interactivity, participation, and engagement.

Postmodern Theologian, Dr. Leonard Sweet, used the acronym: EPIC (Experiential, Participatory, Interactive and Connective).

When Zion was growing in the 1950s and 1960s, it will have had all of these elements, but now it does not and it’s up to us (and only us) to change that.

You see, you cannot reasonably expect young people to be here week after week making a commitment to this fellowship when week after week, we serve up is the same old, re-heated modernistic approach to worship.

It just won’t happen.

For several weeks, I have asked, in the bulletin, for people to share their testimony—like Irma Schuster did!

Where are the people of our congregation who are willing to say, “*This is what Jesus did for me*” and then to share that with others?

You want to make worship attractive to others—share your faith.

Give people something to come to church for other than sitting, soaking and souring.

You know, we just recently had someone who was a member of our church and who was very faithful in attending Zion leave and become a member of another church.

¹ See: <http://www.demographia.com/db-relig.htm>

Think deeply about why someone would be a member here and then leave.

Friends, anyone who is 20 years old or younger, thrives on gaming, cell-phone texting and any medium that is interactive and participatory.

Where do you think, “text us what you think of this story on the news” or “vote this person off the island” reality shows came from?

That’s right, the postmodern generation.

Oh, you might not like it—as in many instances I don’t—but it’s reality for the youth you so desperately wish to reach.

If you really want to understand postmodern approaches to life, start with renting movies.

Rent *The Matrix*, and *The Last Mimzy*. They are loaded with postmodern themes.

But just because one participates in an interactive environment does not always mean that one becomes transformed.

It is completely possible, friends, to stare blankly into a gaming monitor and have your brains turn completely to mush!

So here’s how one really becomes transformed—in relationships!

And this is where your Holistic Small Group becomes so important.

I’m sorry to say it, but you have no relationship with your cell phone.

You have no relationship with ‘Reality TV’ ‘cause the actors are all scripted.

You have no relationship with your favourite video games—it’s wires and circuitry that has no pulse!

But you have a pulse!

I have a pulse!

And Jesus has a pulse!

And that’s called having a relationship.

You, Jesus, and I, sitting down together—now that’s a real relationship.

We needn’t look far for the truth of this: it’s in the Bible.

Jesus gave us the idea.

Jesus is the originator of the first HSG: the disciples.

You see, God designed the Church not on crowds and congregations, but upon small groups and relationships.

Is worship important?

Absolutely!

As Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching." [The Message]

But worship, alone, is only half of what Jesus had in mind for His followers.

He wanted people relating to one another about Him outside of just the synagogue service.

Why?

Because Jesus knew that you cannot confine...or define...the sum total of one's relationship with God with what happens in here.

In fact, several of Jesus' experiences in the both the synagogue and the temple were quite negative.²

But for Jesus when He looked at the lilies of the field, no church could compare.

But for Jesus when He smelled the cooking in Martha's kitchen, no Potluck could compare.

For Jesus, the sweet sounds of the water lapping upon the rocks on the shores of Galilee, no choir could rate.

The formation of our HSGs is our first step in decidedly saying that we need to—we must in obedience to the Great Commission—express our faith beyond 2332 Sherwood Lane (which nobody can ever find anyway).

Jesus took out no charter of incorporation that located His headquarters at 1073 Vineyard Street, Galilee.

Jesus had a portable Church...because His Father was constantly on the move.

Wherever people were...that's where the Father was working and Jesus knew this. And so did His disciples: in Judea, in Galilee, in the towns, on the sea fronts, in the desert, by the ocean; in Antioch, in Corinth, in Philippi, and in Rome.

² See Luke 4 and John 2.

And in every one of these locations there was usually someone's home where the early church met.³

When Jesus met to share so many of His powerful parables, it was often in the setting of someone's home over a meal.⁴

Houses are also where He preached, healed and raised the dead—not in churches!⁵

And someone's home is where the very first communion service was ever held.⁶

The correct assumptions then behind what properly constitutes the legitimate formation of the church is found in Acts 2:45-47.

Here is what church looks like:

One, they worshipped in both the temple AND in one another's homes.

Two, they ate together in one another's homes.

Three, they praised God together (in the temple and at home).

Four, God grew them.

Somewhere within Christian history, probably around the legalization of Christianity in 313 AD,⁷ Christians began to focus on building buildings, which became great places to gather, but poor places to build relationships.

There is a clear connection, then, between the demise of mainline Christianity with its focus upon buildings and its lack of growth...

...and there is a clear connection between churches that are growing and churches that intentionally have Holistic Small Groups.

Of all the Natural Church Development (NCD) eight quality characteristic, the research says, this is the one—Holistic Small Groups—that churches cannot do without if they wish to grow.

If you are not in an HSG, I may be inclined to seriously question your understanding of what truly being a biblical Christian is all about.

³ Acts 16:15, Acts 18:26, Acts 21:16

⁴ Matthew 9:10, Matthew 26:6, Mark 2:14ff, Mark 14:3.

⁵ Mark 6, Luke 4:38, and Mark 5:38ff, respectively.

⁶ Mark 14:15.

⁷ I prefer to use A.D. (Anno Domini—"Year of our Lord,") rather than the secularized, more liberal, designation of C.E. 'Common Era' which conveniently sidesteps the theological importance attached to the Incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, we have no faith, but a biblical faith.

There is no such thing as “designer Christianity.”

The Bible declares that the only way for you to really live your faith and to grow as a Christian is if you are in a HSG.

Now most churches want growth the easy way, yes?

They want to either bring in the paid expert (the consultant who usually soaks the church with a big fee and who really doesn't have an ongoing stake in whether we live or die)...or they pay for an extraordinarily expensive program that a few of the faithful in the congregation throw their whole weight behind—while the rest of the church just snoozes.

But Holistic Small Groups do not offer growth with either a paid expert or an expensive program, rather HSGs offer congregational growth by encouraging YOU to own the direction of this fellowship and for YOU to become transformed.

It is then that OUR church will grow.

No shortcuts—not quick gimmicks, no shot-in-the-arm programs...just the dogged commitment of every single person of this fellowship to join a Holistic Small Group.

Amen.

Questions For Reflection:

1. What level of importance do you attach to the development of Holistic Small Groups at Zion Church?
2. What is your understanding of the difference between a small group and a Holistic Small Group?
3. How do the demographics of growth relate the existence of Holistic Small Groups?
4. I constructed an image of mainline Protestant churches as driving in the wrong lane too slowly. What kind of image do you have of mainline Protestant churches that are declining?
5. How does sharing your experiences of faith impact the lives of others? How does this make a difference to the growth of our church?
6. How can Pastor Daniel assist you to share your ‘testimony’ with the congregation?
7. What biblical evidence do we have for the existence of Holistic Small Groups in the ministry of Jesus and in the Early Church?
8. What is your opinion about why Jesus conducted so much of His ministry in people's homes?
9. How has the development of Christianity been hampered by a “worship at church only” mentality? Do we suffer from this mentality today, even though it is largely unbiblical? What do we do to perpetrate this mentality?
10. How are Holistic Small Groups the necessary corrective to Question #9?
11. What are your plans to enrol in a Holistic Small Group?