

Series: “The Church: 21<sup>st</sup> Century or 1956?” (Part 3)  
“Why Are We Meeting?”

In this sermon series I’m sharing what I believe the Church needs to be and do to be more relevant to how people really think and live in this first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the first message we looked at how crucial it is that churches be open to change, in a world that is changing at breakneck speed. Last week I talked about the excitement and power generated in churches where *everyone* is involved in ministry, and the church gives *permission* to people to follow their God-dreams and do the things God lays on their hearts.

Today let’s look at the kind of *meetings* we have in the church, and what we do when we meet together. (You’re probably thinking: this ought to be boring!). But it’s something worth checking out.

***The typical church today has a lot of committees and a lot of meetings.*** Now there may be a few people who *love* church meetings (“CMJ’s” – church meeting junkies)…but most people would rather be at home, or doing something else! Why? (1) Because many people today are busy and run hectic schedules; and (2) In a lot of church committee meetings, not much happens. Often there’s a lot of talk, but little action! I think back over hours and hours and hours I’ve spent at church meetings, where we would *talk a lot* about ministry, but *do little* as a result.

***So, one important thing churches can do is to streamline the organization.*** Cut down on the number of administrative, or standing, committees. Only have the number of boards or committees you need to get the job done. Don’t meet and take up peoples’ time unless there is a valid reason to meet.

I look back at a time when I served a three point charge – three small country churches. Each church had an Administrative Board, Council on Ministries (I think), Children’s Coordinator, Youth Coordinator, Adult Coordinator. Committee on Evangelism, Committee on Worship, Committee on Missions, Committee on Social Concerns, Committee on Education, Committee on Stewardship and Finance. Then we had Trustees, a Staff-Parish Committee, a Committee on Nominations. Did I miss any? My word! In two of the three 3 churches we only got maybe 35—50 people in worship. We barely had enough warm bodies to fill all those committees! Frankly, some on the committees were not committed Christians, many had little interest in the work they were expected to do. But we tried to organize the congregations as the United Methodist Discipline said we had to do! I used to dread when the fall season came around, and the Nominating Committee met to try to fill all those positions! It was like pulling teeth getting people to serve! I had to attend meetings because, as the pastor, I was required to be the chairperson of the Nominating Committee. I hated it!

Contrast that scenario with the structure and organization of a large church I served, where we had over 1100 members. In that congregation there were not nearly as many committees as those little churches had. As I recall, we only had five administrative committees – that was it. We had no *evangelism committee* – yet evangelism was taking place and the church reached many new people and grew. We had no *missions committee*, no *committee on church & society* – yet outreach was happening spontaneously through Sunday School classes and small groups,

because people were encouraged to pursue the ministries God placed on their hearts.

*Now please understand and hear me: Some administrative committees are important to the church!* Trustees, for example. We need willing, dedicated people to take care of the church property. And some governing body like an Administrative Board: where people who love the church, and have a leaders heart, can meet to guide the congregation in a wise and godly way. But, we don't really need many committees for *ministry* to take place! We don't have many committees at all here at Community church. In a way that's good. We don't have the problem of having to jettison a lot of unnecessary administrative committees. Fortunately, the United Methodist Discipline now gives much more leeway to congregations on how they organize!

Sometimes we hear the complaint, "People today, they're just not committed. You just can't get people to come out to a church meeting!" *But that's not true!* Busy people today don't want to come to meetings where there's a lot of talk but nothing gets done. But I've found people *are* willing to meet with others in the church if (1) what's done there is meeting their needs or helping them grow, or (2) they are *doing* something that's making a difference in the world.

***What does the Bible say about all of this? What did people in the New Testament church do when they met together?*** I don't know of any Scripture passages that say believers met to draw up an annual budget, or to approve the minutes of the last board meeting, or to sit around and just *talk about* some programs the church might do. I'm not saying the first churches didn't have administrative, business type meetings. But apparently this was not the number one priority, because we don't have any record of that in the New Testament. Someone has pointed out: "In the Bible, very few people are called to church management."

***But they did meet to worship, to pray together, to encourage and support one another in the faith, and to mobilize for their mission and ministry to the world!*** Let me repeat that: they did meet to worship, to pray together, to encourage and support one another in the faith, and to mobilize for their mission and ministry to the world.

How do we know? Because of passages like this: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:41-42). You may remember, we looked at this passage a few weeks ago when I spoke about small groups.

Peter preaches at Pentecost. Over 3,000 people come to Christ! What did they do to follow up on this initial commitment to Christ? Note: "they *devoted*" themselves. It's not like they did these things "if they had time", or "if they felt like it", or "if they didn't have anything else planned." They poured themselves into four things.

***The apostles' teaching.*** They had a hunger for Christian teaching. Remember, this was a new faith – Jesus followers. They didn't have the Bible as we have. They relied on the teaching of the apostles to get them grounded and growing in their faith!

I've discovered that when the church offers things that will help people grow in their faith and experiences that will help people them be better persons, many will come (even if these same people wouldn't sign up to be on church board or committee). It can be a *Bible study*. Or the study of a Christian book, or some spiritual topic. We are so blessed today to have wonderful study and learning tools. All kinds of Bible study books and study guides, DVD presentations on Christian topics. Through DVDs we can bring some of the most renowned Christian teachers and leaders into our church or into our homes.

There are other types of opportunities to learn and grow that the church can provide: marriage enrichment courses...courses on parenting...financial stewardship and budgeting...grief care groups for those who've lost loved ones...divorce care sessions for those going through divorce. So, the church can offer many different types of learning opportunities to help people grow. And when we do, people will come. I love something Mahatma Gandhi said: "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

We're thinking about church meetings, and how to have *meetings that matter!* These first followers of Jesus also met for *fellowship*. The Greek word for fellowship is "koinonia". It's a word hard to translate into English. It means a deep, intimate sharing of our life with Christ and with one another.

Perhaps the best expression of "koinonia" in the modern church is the *small group ministry*. (Since I preached a message on small groups a few weeks ago, I'll say just say a few things on this point. Small groups are providing for many followers of Jesus today a place where they can be loved, understood, appreciated, encouraged on a deeper, less superficial level. A number of studies have been done on growing churches, and why they are growing. Almost always, one of the reasons for growth is that these churches have an active small group ministry.

When I talk about small groups I'm referring to groups of 8-12 people who meet usually every other week or twice a month to share with one another the joys and struggles of life, and to pray together. Many small groups study the Bible or other Christian material. Other small groups are organized around a common interest like golf or aerobics or cooking. Many church leaders are discovering that people will *make* the time to be a part of a small group that meets in homes.

The early Christians *devoted themselves* to spending time with one another in a deeper, more intimate sharing of life. This was an essential part of growing in their faith.

These first followers of Jesus also met to *worship*. Acts 2:42 says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, *to the breaking of bread*, and the prayers." "Breaking of bread". This was sort of a combination fellowship, and worship experience. The first Christians didn't have communion like we have today. They met for a fellowship meal, sort of like a covered dish supper, where people brought food, then shared their food with all in the group. But as part of the meal, they would take the bread and wine as their communion. This was a "fellowship" time, but it was also *worship*. Taking the Lord's Supper.

In the first sermon in this series, I talked about worship, and the kind of worship that will more

likely reach people today. I won't repeat that sermon, but I will remind us that when worship is "indigenous" - which means it is similar to the culture of the people you want to reach - people are more likely to come.

Then, these first Christians, when they met together, would meet for *prayer*. Here's a question: generally speaking, when church people meet to pray, are people willing to come? I've got to be honest and admit, this is where even many strong churches fall short. It is hard to get people to come together to pray. However, some of the strongest, fastest growing churches, are built on a foundation of serious, intensive praying. I have read the testimonies of many pastors of large, thriving churches who say that prayer was and is at the heart of their growth. In our adult Sunday School class we are using a DVD featuring Mark Batterson, author of books like *The Circle Maker*, and *Draw the Circle*. Mark pastors a large congregation on Capitol Hill in Washington, a church that also has birthed other churches in that area. From day one, his vision and dreams for a ministry in our nation's capital were bathed in prayer. Miracles have happened in his ministry through prayer. In one of the DVD's he mentions that their congregation has a pastor of prayer on the staff!

Another powerful example of prayer being at the heart of a church's growth and vitality is the Brooklyn Tabernacle. Pastor Jim Cymbala is a man of prayer. One of his DVD series we used in our adult Sunday School contained thrilling examples of what happens when people pray. Their weekly prayer meeting at the Brooklyn Tabernacle gets hundreds of people out!

***What about church meetings? Why do we meet?*** What kind of meetings are more likely to grab people's time and attention today? Church board and committee meetings are important! Thank God for those willing to do the administrative work that keeps the church functioning as an organization. But there are other important reasons for the church to meet. And people today are more likely to meet together if (1) their time together is helping them grow in Christ and helping them be better persons, and (2) if they feel their coming together is really making a difference in the world and in someone else's life.

Church consultant Tom Bandy sums it up well. He says, "Declining church systems are marked by meetings focused on administration and managing ministry. Thriving church systems are marked by people *doing* ministry."

If we read on in Acts 2, that chapter closes this way: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b). They reached out, they shared the gospel, they were in mission to the world. I want to talk about that in my next sermon.

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