

**Building A Church – Part 4**  
**“Bigger Church, Better Church?”**

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Acts 10: 34-48

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When pastors get together who don’t yet know each other—like at a retreat or conference or some kind of continuing education event—you know the question’s coming. You meet a new colleague... you share general introductions—like names, where you’re from, where your church is located. But you know it’s only a matter of time until you’re asked it. “How big is your church?”

To be clear, they’re not talking about physical size, but how many members or worshippers the church has.

Much of the time, the question is innocent. If you visit enough churches or talk to enough pastors, you’ll soon see that you can estimate quite a bit about a church just by knowing the size of its membership, as membership totals correlate with things like the church’s budget... the size of its facility... the number of programs it runs... the number of missions it supports.

“How big is your church?”

It’s not just pastors who ask this question of each other, of course. I’m sure Jenness has already been asked more than a few times by colleagues, “So how many kids are in your church school program?” Just like Stephen’s been asked, “How many choirs do you direct?” And, “How many are in your adult choir these days?”

In fact, Joel and I were talking about this just a few days ago. He said he got that question ALL the time as a youth director. As soon as people learned he worked with youth, almost inevitably the next question out of their mouth would be, “Really. How many youth are in your program?”

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“How big is your church?”

It’s an honest question, asked for some obvious reasons. But let’s also not pretend there isn’t a whole lot more wrapped up in it. Implications that aren’t named, but come out every time that question is asked.

For starters, by its very nature the question is comparative. “How big is your church? Is it bigger than mine? Are your programs more developed? Are you touching more lives, making a bigger difference?”

Dig a bit deeper and the question can sometimes become, “Are you better at ministry than me, or am I better at ministry than you?”

And in many ways, it’s unavoidable. Pastors are human. So believe it or not (and I know... this will be shocking... but believe it or not), with pastors egos are often involved.

But there's another assumption that, I believe, exists really at the foundation of this question. Namely, that when it comes to church... bigger is better. That bigger is somehow more successful. That bigger is more desirous... more prestigious. I mean, the bigger the church... the bigger the program... the more people within it... the better it must be, right?

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“How big is your church?”

Now, part of this fixation on membership size is undoubtedly tied to the ongoing decline within the greater church. It's been occurring across the last 50 years, as every denominations and most local churches report fewer members today than they did 10, 20, 30 years ago. And if you draw the plotted graph out for each church, what you'd find is that, if your church is 60 years or older, it extremely likely that it has fewer members today than it did a few decades ago.

Now, there's a ton of reasons for this, to be sure. Reasons I've preached on before and will again, no doubt.

But the point I want to make here isn't *why* the greater church has been in decline, but that churches such as ours—the vast majority of them—they can look back at a time in their past and remember what it was like when they were bigger. When there were more people at fellowship dinners. More children in the church school class. More members on a committee. More people at the Christmas and Easter services...

And while I can share that our numbers have been going up here and there, TPC, overall, we're still one of those churches. Forty years ago this church just about twice as big—membership wise—as we are today.

But does that mean we used to be twice as good? Or twice as successful? Or twice as prestigious? Did we used to do twice as good a job of going out into the community and touching lives and sharing grace in Jesus' name? Are we really twice as bad as we used to be?

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“How big is your church?”

Now, some would say that at the heart of this question is Jesus' ultimate charge to his followers in Matthew's Gospel—“Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations.” “Go, embrace the outcast. Go mend the broken. Go forgive the one who wronged you. Go share the grace of God and spread the kingdom,” he said.

Which, as we've been exploring in this “Building a Church” sermon series, is exactly what those first followers did.

Last week, we heard about Philip baptizing a eunuch from Ethiopian, as the kingdom spread from Judea and Samaria all the way to Africa.

And this week... this week we read of Peter taking a sledgehammer to the dividing wall that had forever separated the Hebrew people from the rest of the world—as he baptized Cornelius... a Gentile. A Greek. Heck, Cornelius was a Roman soldier to boot—one of the people the Empire used to subjugate the Hebrew people.

But Peter had been given a vision from God that not he—nor anyone else—is to call profane what God has blessed. And as people of God's creation, Peter realized that the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ needed to be shared with Gentiles—with non-Hebrews—as readily

as he had been trying to share it with Israel. Something that would've been utterly incomprehensible just a few months earlier.

So clearly... *growth* is important to the gospel. Make no mistake. Disciples are called to bring the light and love of God to new people... in new places all the time. So growth—both qualitative and quantitative—is something disciples are called to strive for.

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And you, Towson Presbyterian Church, you want growth. I know you do. You said so. Remember the interviews that Session offered—part of a process called Appreciative Inquiry? In these interviews and Cottage Meetings, folks were invited to share some of their thoughts on who TPC is and who we're called to be?

Well... the results are in. And Session will be examining them at a retreat later this month. But here's a little snapshot.

While Appreciative Inquiry interviews all entailed a series of the 5 same questions, perhaps my favorite question asked members to share their number one greatest hope for the future of our church.

And while all of the answers we received were enlightening... Do you know what TPC's greatest hope for its future is?

By far and away the most commonly shared hope for TPC's future is... *growth*. Some say they desire that we grow our mission programs more. Others hope that we increase our presence in the greater community more. Still others hope for continued growth in our children and youth programs. But in general, the majority of respondents dream of a future where TPC is simply bigger.

Where we have more members. Where, when asked how big our church is, Joel and I will have to say... "Oh, 750." Or one day, we'll again say, "we're a thousand member church."

And I'm not gonna lie. I hope for that, too. I think that'd be wonderful!!!!!! Quantitative and qualitative growth. I'm in!

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But here's a vitally important question we can't lose sight of. Why?

Why do we dream of growth the way we do?

Why is growth so valued?

If it's our community's greatest hope... we need to understand what's driving it. Why?

Is it because bigger is better?

Is it because we believe that with more members comes more prestige?

Is the motivation financial? With more people comes more money... in theory, at least?

Is it the 80:20 principle we're concerned about? With more members, they're more people to lead in ministry?

Is it that we believe bigger churches are more successful churches? That they're somehow doing ministry... better than smaller ones?

All those are tempting motivations, to be sure. Who wouldn't want a bigger budget... more volunteers... more mission programs? Society teaches us all the time that bigger's almost always better!

Except... *except*... I don't think Jesus gives one iota about the size of a church's membership. I really don't. I don't think Jesus cares if our rolls say 100, 500, 1000, or 5000.

I realize how strange that might sound, but as we've been exploring how those first followers began forming the early church not once did Jesus actually ask his followers to go out and build a church! Have you noticed that? Not once did Jesus instruct his disciples to go and form a lasting institution in order to teach his story and reveal his love and grace. Rather, as we explored... the Church just sort of bubbled up. As disciples testified to what they'd seen and experienced... as they shared their stories and tore down the dividing walls that had been separating them from people different from them.

For the truth is, those early followers of Jesus weren't trying to build a church. Rather, they were trying to grow the kingdom. After all, *that's* what Jesus had charged them to do. To go and make disciples. To go reveal his kingdom. To spread his love and grace, and make his peace known to all the world.

So while you and I share this church, and we want to see it thrive... the ironic truth is that, if we want to grow this church, our first and primary motivation must always be not to build the church for the church's sake, but to grow God's kingdom for Jesus' sake. Not to simply get more members, per se, but to grow more disciples... to grow more ministries that equip the community around us to uncover and experience a transformational relationship with God as we have... and so discover that life isn't measured by size or beauty or dollar bills or first place trophies or academic degrees. No... bigger isn't necessarily better.

As Jesus has shown us, life is measured simply by two things—love and grace—two gifts Jesus promises we'll never run out of.

Two things revealed right here... at Jesus' table... where again Jesus meets us as and where we are... offering us himself to us, that we might go forth and share his gifts with a world in desperate need of them.

So friends, let us prepare ourselves to come, receive the gifts of Christ, that we might go forth and boldly, joyfully grow His kingdom. Amen.