

“Running the Numbers”
Acts 2:42-47
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There is a lot of talk about church membership lately and the decline of the mainline denominations in the United States. Meanwhile the United Methodist Church continues to grow exponentially in Africa and in Europe. As a pastor we are constantly being told that we need to reverse our trend of declining membership in this country. We have to find ways to do that. We have played these numbers games thinking that it is an effective way of measuring how effective our ministry is.

As we read the book of Acts something was happening of great importance. The church was being formed and through the power of the Holy Spirit more and more people are being added to those who are being saved. Thousands we are told in some places. What is happening in the church in America that we are so distraught about membership?

Stanley Hauerwas my Christian Ethics professor from seminary made a bold statement that it was clear to him that God was killing the American church. He paused and said, “Isn’t that wonderful! Aren’t you excited? You should be because that means when it gets small enough we can actually get back to being relevant again!”

Stan has a point. But I don't think it is about size necessarily, it has more to do with spirit. That is what was happening to the church in Acts. Note what is not said here and what is emphasized. The points that were emphasized were that they shared in common with one another all that they had; they ate with one another, in their homes; they enjoyed being together, praising God. The Lord added to their number daily. What we are not told is how many at least not here. Nobody was running any numbers to see if they were in proportion with the denominational average, if their giving was on par with their income, or if the person was for circumcision or not, today that would be (conservatives and liberals). It was not a numbers mentality it was a spirit mentality that drove the church in its infancy. A spirit mentality that we have proven today does exist and can be recovered as it has been in Europe and Africa.

Mike Selleck, Director of Connectional Ministries for the North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church made this observation in an article entitled "Are We Losing Our Class." He asks the question "Is there a link between the vanishing social middle class and the mainline denominations that relate to them?" In the same article he points out that "John Wesley did his preaching amid the working folks of the day, which was a different audience than the one that populated the pews of the church he was ordained to." That being the Church of England. He also points out that today "When we speak of wealthy patrons, United Methodist don't jump to mind."

"Likewise we are not the first denomination that pops into head when talk of the poor comes up, a distinction normally given to the Pentecostal churches."¹ Is it time to rethink who we are? Again the numbers are not indicative of success rather of perhaps our inability to be able to continue to follow where the Spirit is leading.

The choices are simple we can lament about the way things used to be and continue to look at our dwindling resources as a church and wait until the numbers are so small that we just vanish. Or we can reclaim that Spirit of living as people of the resurrection and follow the example of the early church. No church growth expert, no financial expert will ever remedy the work of the Spirit that continues to call to us. Rather we are called to live in the times that we do for sharing that message of hope. When we are clear about who we are, Children of God, through the grace of Jesus Christ, and who we are called to be, to make and reach disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, then the numbers become less important. If we follow the Spirit in our giving, of our treasures, if we welcome the stranger, love one another as Christ has loved us then the Lord will add to our number daily. Not because we are after big numbers, but because we seek to follow where the Spirit leads us, and allow ourselves to be transformed by that grace. The numbers take care of themselves, as we seek to care for one another, because God has cared for us.

¹ *Wesleyan Christian Advocate* Feb 15th, 2008.