

July 14, 2013
Church Planting

Growing Pains
Acts 6:1-7

Opening words: After a one week absence we return to the Books of Acts. You know the story. Jesus was executed on a Friday. Everyone thought it was over. However, everyone was wrong. (I love it when everyone is wrong!) It was just the beginning. On Sunday morning a few women showed up at his tomb to pay their final respects. They made a discovery that changed the world. Jesus was alive! For forty days he walked the face of this world in his resurrected state. During that sacred time period, he did two things. First, he proved his was a bodily resurrection. In other words, he wasn't a ghost. Second, he taught about the Kingdom of God. As Jesus ascended into heaven, he entrusted the ministry to the disciples. On their own, the task of evangelizing the world seemed impossible, but when the Holy Spirit arrived, everything seemed possible. The church was created and the Divine Helper was changing lives. For example, on a single day 3,000 people claimed the name of Jesus and were saved. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings, to the fellowship and to worship. The apostles were changing too. They were learning how to trust the Holy Spirit. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter healed a man who had been crippled from birth. For this act of kindness, Peter and John were arrested and interrogated by the Sanhedrin. Upon their release, the church prayed. As we learned two weeks ago, the one thing the early church would not accept was hypocrisy. That leads us to today.

We are in the sixth chapter. The church continues to grow, forcing the group dynamics of the church to change. You know it is true. Everyone says they want church growth but not everyone likes change. How do you feel about church growth? How do you feel about change? I will warn you now. This message hits close to home. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 6:1-7. Let me call this message *Growing Pains*.

Acts 6:1-7 ¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

How do you feel about church growth? How do you feel about change? About a year ago I purchased a brand new picnic table. It replaced our old picnic table that has serviced my family for over a decade. There was nothing wrong with the old picnic table. It looked just like it did when it was new. It was round with a frosted plastic top. Her four chairs were comfortable and secure. Time had not changed it. My wife, Kathryn, ruled that it had to go for one reason, change! In October of 2011 my daughter Sarah married Vic, and the four seated picnic table wasn't big enough for our new five-person family. The old picnic table, that was just fine, was donated to a local rummage sale and the new one now sits in my backyard. Listen to what I am about to say. The new picnic table seats eight! It is like the old picnic table, except for one thing, you have to sit on a bench. There is no support for my aging back. The old picnic table had seats with backs. I am not sure I like this change. I will admit it. It sounds selfish. There are some days I sit there and wonder if it was worth it. Maybe Sarah should have never have married and died an old maid so I could have a back on my seat? How do you feel about change? I am not so sure I like it. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Today, I want to talk about one of my favorite topics in the ministry, church growth. There is no topic in the church today more relevant then church growth. I have never met a pastor who didn't want to experience it. I have never met a church that didn't want to experience it. In the text for today the early church is growing. Everyone should be happy, but there is conflict in the church. It is the first recorded conflict in the early church. I have been in the ministry for over thirty years, so I am qualified to make the next statement. That conflict was predictable. In my opinion, the conflict is not about feeding widows. That is only an excuse. The conflict is really generated by the changing dynamics of the early church. Have you ever been part of an established organization which added new members? The answer is YES! With a little editorial work, their story is our story. I hope we find ourselves in their story. I have prepared my thoughts around three statements:

- 1. Everyone wants church growth!**
- 2. Everyone dislikes change!**
- 3. Church growth creates change!**

My goal today is to help you understand our present situation. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Everyone Wants Church Growth

In March of 1994, I received a phone call from my District Superintendent. I was being moved to the Youngstown area. I was pleased with that information, because my parents were aging and I wanted to get closer to home. A few hours later, I was told I being appointed to Western Reserve. Over the next few days, we set up an interview with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee.

United Methodist interviews are really an introduction. The committee got to know me. I got to know a little more about the church. The committee really only longed for one thing, church growth! Like many other churches, attendance was low and the congregation was aging. One of the saints on that committee asked me after the meeting, "Is there anything you can do for us? Our church is dying!" I answered, "Yes!" I have spent the last nineteen years of my life trying to keep my word. I will admit it. You may have had smarter ministers. You may have had better looking ministers. However, you have never had a pastor who is more passionate about this church. You have received my best. In my opinion, in the face of staggering death we have had some limited success.

In the top left hand drawer of my desk is the 1994 East Ohio Annual Conference Journal. It contains all the facts and figures of all the congregations in that year. I saved that journal for one reason. It acts as a baseline. I want to know if we have made any progress since that year. It also acts as a baseline for the other churches in our district and Annual Conference. Do you know what I have learned from studying those old figures? In nearly every case, the numbers are down over the last nineteen years. In other words, our churches are dying. It isn't just true in the world of United Methodist. It is true in the entire mainline church in this section of the country.

This is statement number one: **Everyone wants church growth.** We want church growth because we don't want our church to die. We want church growth because new members bring new money. We want church growth because we need help with all that church work. Everyone wants church growth. Look at verse one with me. It says, "*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing.*" The church is growing and that is a good thing. Everyone should be happy. However, this is not a story about happiness. It is a story about conflict. If you are ready to look at the second statement, say, **"Amen!"**

Everyone Dislikes Change!

Earlier this week, Kathryn and I were in Virginia. We were finishing our American Revolution tour. After Christmas we went to Valley Forge and Philadelphia. Over Memorial Day we went to Boston. This week we went to the homes of United States Presidents Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Washington. We finished on Thursday in Mount Vernon. I learned a great deal about Washington. He thrived at nearly everything he did during his sixty-seven years of life. He was extremely popular after the Revolutionary War. His popularity united the young country and propelled him to the office of president. He served two terms and walked away. John Adams became the second president. That transfer of power was one of the most pivotal moments in American history. Many wanted him to stay in office. Many wanted to make him king. Their desire for Washington to stay in some form exposes the human condition. They didn't want him to leave because they were afraid of the unknown. After all, the safest thing to do is nothing. Have you ever refused to change something in your life because of the fear of the unknown? You know it is true. Everyone dislikes change.

We value stability. We value longevity. People are always proud they have lived in their home for decades. They are always introducing me to a friend they have had since kindergarten. This is the problem.

Our society is changing all the time. We will tolerate changes in certain areas. We will tolerate change when it comes to communication or transportation. We embrace change when it comes to medicine. Did you turn your cell phones off because the service began? Have you checked your email since this message began? Have you received a text in the last 30 minutes? Did everyone tie their horse up securely in the parking lot before you walked into the church? Would anyone here like to have heart surgery using 1920 methods? On the day George Washington died, his doctor tried to heal him by giving him a good bleeding. When was your last good bleeding? We will tolerate change in certain areas of our lives, but not every area of our lives. The more personal the issue, the less tolerant we are of change. Religion is such a personal thing. This is statement number two: **everyone dislikes change**. As a matter of fact, studies tell us 80% of Americans hate change. It isn't just true in church. It is true in life. You can admit it. If you hate change say, "**Amen!**"

Church Growth Creates Change!

On the night I was interviewed, we talked about all the ways we could get new members. We could promote the church in a different way. We could start new worship services. We could get involved in the problems in our community. We all wanted to welcome new members through the front door, but we never talked about the back door. People come through the front door. People leave through the back door. Have you ever left a church through the back door? Why do most people leave a church? They don't leave because the halls are dirty. They don't leave because the sermon is boring. They don't leave because the minister is too handsome. They don't leave because of the number of mistakes in the bulletin. They leave because they don't feel welcomed. If there are a million ways to say, "I love you," then there are a million ways to say, "I don't want you. Get out!" How many people do you think we have lost through the back door?

This is statement number three: **Church growth creates change**. Look at the text with me. The church is growing, so the church is changing. When we began this study on the Book of Acts, everyone related to the city of Jerusalem. They were the Hebraic Jews. For them, the Golden City was the center of the universe. Look what has happened by the sixth chapter. The church is expanding. The church is growing. It has grown to the point that the newest converts don't really relate to Jerusalem. The newest converts relate to the Greek world. They are Hellenistic Jews. It doesn't sound like a big deal to us, but it was a big deal to them. The growth of the church has changed the church itself. There is conflict between the old members and the new members because the new members have changed the church. Everyone wants church growth. We want our church to continue. We want their hard work.

We want their money. We don't want their opinions or ideas. Change is a difficult thing. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

Last Sunday afternoon, there was a picnic at my house. There were seven of us. There was Kathryn and me. There was Anna. There was Sarah and Vic. There was Aunt Sue and Dan Tucker. (Who is Dan Tucker? He is my sister-in-law's ex-live in boyfriend, who only shows us at significant family experiences. He is an expert on everything!) Because of my new picnic table, there was room for all of us, even Dan Tucker. It has eight seats and the old one only had four. There was even a seat to spare! Can I tell you the truth? I am starting to like that new picnic table. When everyone left, I sat there at my picnic table and looked at all the empty seats. I began to wonder, who in my future will sit in those seats? Down the road, I am confident I will have another son-in-law. Down the road, I am confident I will have grandchildren. Who knows, down the road, Aunt Sue may show up with someone new and Dan Tucker will be gone. Maybe someday I'll have to get a bigger picnic table to hold all the people in my life? Wouldn't it be great if we needed a new church building to welcome all the new people? How do you feel about church growth? How do you feel about change? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**