

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
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Embracing Our Mission – Embracing the Community of Believers

Matthew 18:15-20

EMBRACING THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

Allow me to share with you something that compels a pastor to his knees and to give thanks to his Lord and Savior... it's when the leaders of the congregation say, "We don't need brick and mortar right now. We need more means of grace" (meaning, Word and Sacrament).

That is not to say the desire to build a new church building is not a wholesome desire. But such a comment does reflect a particular spiritual maturity

Allow me to elucidate. As a congregation, we fully moved into this facility in August of 2018. Guess how many new members we have gained since then. 359! Yes, 359. Isn't that astounding! That's not change. That's upheaval. It is one half of our total membership.

One half of our total membership, and yet our total membership still numbers between 750 and 800. And that's where it has been for the last twenty years. So we might wonder, what gives? If we gained 359 new members, why hasn't our total membership changed? How come it's not over 1000? Well, since 2018, many people have moved away and transferred to other WELS congregations. Some have died. Some have been removed for being inactive.

But many still remain. Of those 359, 106 are adult confirmands. How many families does that 106 represent? I didn't crunch those numbers but I think we could safely assume between 200 and 250 if you count spouses and children.

We are eternally grateful for every soul the Lord has brought to us. To me, one of the happiest parts is that many of our new members are not only new to Peace or even new to the WELS. Many of them are new to the Christian faith. Isn't that awesome? Isn't that what we've always prayed to God for?

This is where the compelling need of the moment arises, the one that our congregation's leaders are recognizing. Believe it or not, it's not so much about outreach. Rather, when God have given us such an influx of new Christians, folks without a lot of background in things we might take for granted, how can we spiritually nurture them? How can we disciple them? How can we more effectively integrate them into the body of Christ?

One way is to BE the body of Christ, to be a communion of saints - that is a community of believers - which we believe small groups will help to facilitate. It's about cultivating and building relationships with each other. That's the reason for today's Gospel Lesson from

Matthew chapter 18. Did that reading strike you as a little odd on a day like today? Did you wonder, why are we hearing the part where Jesus talks about church discipline and people being excommunicated?

But that whole reading takes on an entirely different tone if you see it through the lens of Christian relationships. For Jesus to say, *If your brother sins against you...* doesn't that premise presume a relationship? How can my brother sin against me unless we have a relationship with each other? Jesus goes on to say, *...go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.* Doesn't this shout "relationships?" Considered in this way, it really is a tender, intimate and dear thing Jesus is describing. Not threatening at all.

This reading is one of the few times Jesus mentions the word "church." He says that if your brother refuses to listen *...tell it to the church.* Believers are the church. We are a community, a family. We have an accountability to each other. Our goal is to help each other remain ever more firmly on the path to heaven. We owe that to each other for Jesus' sake. Otherwise, what's the point of belonging to a congregation? If you want to be left alone, the worst thing you could do is belong to a church.

Then Jesus seals it with this declaration: *Wherever two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* What is Jesus describing but a small group?

We need Christian community. We need Christian relationships. Not only did God design us for human connection, but also our Jesus knows that we are broken people, broken with sin, hurting, flawed, damaged, struggling – in need of forgiveness and grace and love. Jesus died on the cross to atone to God for our guilt and our brokenness and to win for us God's healing forgiveness. He has given us each other to communicate that forgiveness and experience that grace.

Have you ever noticed in the Creed – God has couched His forgiveness in the Church: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...* It is within the Church that God's forgiveness is embraced, administered, shared, experienced, demonstrated – person to person, person to person. God's forgiveness and grace is not out here, out of thin air, but here among the believers.

It sort of blows my mind to think of 359 new members – and many therefore who have also left us. For each membership change there has to be some level of a relationship cultivated with a pastor for it to happen. But there is no way two pastors can maintain a relationship with 359 people on the level needed truly to disciple them. I don't know how Pastor Arndt and I have been able to keep track of who's coming and going.

Longtime Peace members, how many times have you thought, "I hardly know anyone on Sunday mornings anymore."

So you see, this proposal, “Embracing Our Mission,” this idea of small groups is not merely about starting up a few extra Bible studies. It’s a very bold proposal for a cultural change for Peace congregation, the kind of tectonic shift that will require the all-out energy, training, coordination and sheer will-power of a full-time pastor. This third pastor would not be visiting shut-ins or teaching Confirmation Class or coordinating a trunk-or-treat or attending School Board meetings or planning worship services. He would be devoted to making Peace into a culture of small groups, groups gathered around God’s Word, small groups where Peace members of all walks, including you, will be integrated to influence and bless and disciple each other.

Our prayer and our confidence is that the Holy Spirit will work through His Word which we are sharing together and the Spirit will increase our spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity will translate into more fruits of faith – spiritual maturity that will not only be reflected in our offerings, but also in our capacity for leadership, for service and for carrying on the Great Commission of Christ. With God’s blessing it will even ground us so that we are in a better position one day to build a new church building. Means of grace first (gotta water the roots of the tree first), then brick and mortar.

That is the proposal. We’re not commanded in the Bible to start small groups. So no sin if we don’t. But we are the body of Christ and a community of believers. That part is not optional. It just is. And God has blessed us with many new believers who, along with us, need to be disciplined. With God’s help, your pastors and congregational leaders are convinced that small groups will bless the future of this congregation.