

Vital Signs of a Vital Church

Some of you may know that last year I published a book on church growth called *Culture Shift: Leading a Growing Church in Uncertain Times*. At our February retreat, every priest in the diocese received a copy of the book. These are challenging times for churches. Less than half the population in the United States are members of any church, and the percentage of people who call themselves Christian or even believe in God is declining.

I am not going to address the reasons the church is in decline, but I do want to point a way forward. Or, should I say, a way backward – to the day of Pentecost and the amazing growth of the early church. What did those early Christians do that we might do today?

On that first Pentecost Peter quotes the prophet Joel who declares: “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:17, 21). Peter then tells the crowd, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.” (2:38). According to Acts about three thousand people were baptized that day (2:41).

Acts then describes the quality of the Christian community that resulted from these baptisms, indicating just what makes a vital church. At the end of the second chapter of the Book of Acts we find the vital signs of a vital church.

Acts 2:42 reads: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Then in Acts 2:44 we read, “All who believed were together and held all things in common.” And Acts 2:47 concludes by saying, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Here you have four vital signs of a vital church – what I characterize as Spiritual, Social, Pastoral and Missional.

Most basic is Spiritual. The newly baptized Christians at Pentecost “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

At the heart of the Christian life is an encounter with God. It is not enough to know about God; we need to experience God – to know God as a personal, powerful presence in our lives. After all, the Holy Spirit dwells in each of us, drawing us to God and guiding us in the Christian life. I am glad that here at Advent Episcopal Church so many of us value the Eucharist and practice the discipline of daily prayer. Knowing Jesus personally comes as we grow deeper in our relationship with him.

In addition to the Eucharist and daily prayer, we need to keep learning. John Stott says in his commentary on Acts that after Pentecost there were 3,000 Christians in kindergarten. They were learners. They were preparing themselves. The reality is that all of us are always growing spiritually, seekers after truth, learners. The Christian life is not a one-time event. It’s a

continuous journey. We must always be growing, because if we quit growing, stagnation comes to you, to me, and to the church.

Growing Christians need to be drinking deeply from the springs of the spiritual life – regular reception of Holy Communion, Bible study, EFM, Daughters of the King, Brotherhood of St. Andrew, Cursillo, prayer, study, ministry, and support groups – those things that make us the church.

The vital signs of a vital church require discipline, hard work, spiritual growth and being learners.

Second, a vital church also must be a loving community of faith that includes a vibrant social life. I like the way the verse in Acts captures it: “They devoted themselves...to the fellowship” – in Greek, the word is *koinonia*.

Koinonia means “common” – it speaks to their common life together. I remember the English Bishop Michael Marshall saying that the church is a group of people who have nothing in common except Jesus Christ in whom they have everything in common. No one in this church lives for themselves alone; we are in this fellowship together. We work together, we pray together, we cry together, we help each other together.

None of us can manage alone. We need each other. To be effective in sharing the Gospel today, we need to bring together our spiritual gifts, our strengths in ministry, and our passion for the work God has given us to do.

That’s why I am delighted that lay ministry is such a vital part of Advent Episcopal Church. Think, for example, of our Pastoral Ministers, our Music Ministry, our Altar Guild, our Vestry, our Lay Eucharistic Ministers and Acolytes, and the ones who oversee our finances and administration – what wonderful work they do. We know that the church at its best is members ministering to members – caring for one another is what we do – it is who we are as a church.

Do you know what is the most meaningful part of the Eucharist for me as a priest? It is in administering the Body of Christ to each one of you. When you approach the communion rail and hold out your hands to receive the consecrated bread, I see so many different faces, personalities, each with their own life experiences and backgrounds, with their own problems, pains, joys, and sorrows. You are the same and yet different. Together we are united in Christ. Together we are brothers and sisters in the Lord. Together we are the church.

The church at its best always demonstrates the willingness to welcome and accept others, whoever they are and wherever they are on their journey of faith. Everyone has a place at the table. No one is excluded. All are welcome.

This is what it means to be the church.

Vital signs of a vital church is our subject. The church is a place where people are always learning and growing. The church is a community of the common life because none of us as Christians can go it alone.

Third, a vital church is a place that is very pastoral. This is closely related to the sense of fellowship – *koinonia* – a sense of life together. Acts 2:44 says, “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” Here we have an example of Christians caring for one another.

In a pastoral church, no one is allowed to feel unwanted or unloved or cut-off from the community-at-large because members minister to members. Everyone cares for everyone else, and so everyone is cared for.

Several years ago Dr. James Lynch of Johns Hopkins University authored a challenging book with the title, *A Broken Heart*. In the book he made the startling assertion that “loneliness is the number one physical killer in society today.” He used actuarial tables from a decade of research, and the tables reveal that persons who live alone have premature death rates from two to ten times higher than those persons who live with other people.

The church, of all places, must be the place where people reach out in loving, supportive ways to one another. That is why I am so delighted that Advent has an extensive meal ministry – breakfast after the 8:00 am service, lunch after the 10:00 am service, and brunch during the summer months after the 9:00 am service. This is not just filling our stomachs with food. It meets the needs of people for connection, conversation, and community.

Our meals, social events, concerts and service ministries witness that the church is a family. Think about that concept for a moment. It is in the family that we learn to reach out to others and not be centered on self. The church as family just enlarges all of that. We find ourselves in a relationship with others, reaching out to strangers who need a kind word or a helping hand or a listening ear. The church must love, in Christ’s name, like a family.

A vital church has some vital signs. It’s a place of spiritual growth and learning. It’s a community of faith, where people experience a loving social life. It’s a place where love is operative in pastoral ways.

And lastly, a vital church is missional. Those early Christians had established a beachhead for Christ in hostile territory. They attracted people to Jesus because of how they lived. Their joyous living, loving, and sharing drew people to come and stand with them. No wonder Acts 2:47 concludes: “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The early church had a passion for Jesus. Everything they did centered on Jesus and his mission. Frankly, I am not sure we in the church today are as Jesus-centered as we should be. Church growth, I have learned, is not about feasibility studies, demographic reports, and marketing strategies. Church growth is about having a passion for Jesus. When Jesus is the center of a church’s life, it grows. Growing churches may vary widely on theology, liturgy, and ministries,

but they all have one thing in common: a passion for Jesus and a desire to share Jesus with others.

Missional churches engage people, know who they are, their values, beliefs, lifestyles, experiences, and backgrounds. They have a passion to transform lives in Jesus by meeting people at their point of need and understanding, accepting them as they are rather than as we expect them to be, speaking their language, answering their existential questions, and showing unconditional love and acceptance. They have a clear message of Christian faith, but their methods of ministry change and adapt to changing circumstances. They are not rigid or religious, but flexible and open, recognizing that the Spirit is at work in the world as well as in the church. They hold to a core faith but make everything else secondary.

Finally, missional churches know that only the church is called and commissioned to share the good news of God's love in Jesus. All of us are loved by God. With God there are no throw-away people. There are only people who are loved, accepted, and forgiven. What a relevant message for this hurting, divisive world in which we live – living and witnessing a love that unites rather than divides!

Here then, are the vital signs of a vital church according to the Book of Acts: a church that is Spiritual, Social, Pastoral and Missional.

- Spiritual... in that it offers an encounter with Jesus.
- Social... in that it is a community of the common life where people do more together than they could do by themselves.
- Pastoral... in that the members minister to both members and non-members showing love in a variety of ways.
- Missional... in that the church has a passion for Jesus and reaches out to all people, no matter who they are or where they are on their journey of faith.

Let me conclude with a story. At the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, in the semi-finals of the men's 400-meter race, Britain's Derek Redmond fell on the backstretch with a torn hamstring. Despite excruciating pain, the injured runner struggled to his feet, fended off medical attendants who raced to help him, and started to hop to the finish line. When he reached home stretch, a large man in a T-shirt emerged out of the stands, pushed aside a security guard, ran to Redmond, and embraced him. It was Derek Redmond's father. "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son. "Yes, I do," Derek shot back through his pain. "Well then," said his father, "we're going to finish this together." And they did. The crowd rose, cheered, and wept.

That, dear people, is a parable of the church. We can't cope alone, but together we can cross the finish line. Together we can witness God's love and grace to this hurting world.

Together we are the church. With a passion for Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit we go into the world proclaiming the good news of God's amazing love for all people in Jesus Christ.

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Text – Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost, C

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