

## IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO “GO TO CHURCH”

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In the early New Testament church people didn't “go to church.” It is impossible “to go church” (Kimball, p. 91). Nowhere in the N.T. does it say they “went to church.” When they did gather together, they gathered with a sense of mission (Acts 14:27).

“To many people attending our worship services, the word ‘church’ refers to the Sunday meeting during which the pastor speaks, the worship leader leads some songs, the choir sings, and the offering is taken. Then ‘church’ is over, and they go home (Kimball, p. 92).”

The Greek word for church is “ekklesia,” which means assembly. People in the early Christian community gathered together not because they were spiritual consumers looking for inspiration, for comfort and for their needs to be met, but because they were consumed by the power of the spirit, committed in service and mission to others. When many of us are no longer consumed by the Spirit we become consumers. When the church becomes an object of consumerism, “both members and those outside the church expect the church to be a vendor of religious services and goods (Kimball, p. 93).”

People of faith, people consumed by the spirit don't “go to church.” They “are the church.” We are the body of Christ wherever we are in life. People of faith are the church in the workplace, in their homes, in the mall, wherever life leads them.

In his book, Emerging Church, Dan Kimball challenges us with this statement. “Do the people in your church regard evangelism as the very reason for their being as the people of God? If we took a hard look at how we spend our time and energy and resources, my guess is that the average church focuses most efforts on the quality of the programs and ministries to keep those already attending happy rather than on the our biblical mission. Where have we gone astray (Kimball, p. 93)?”

How do our churches get back on the mission track and more specifically what are the next steps we need to take at Grace?

Recently, (March, 2007), wrestling with this very question, the congregation council at its retreat established a “Unifying Thematic Goal,” giving us direction for the next few months. They offer this picture—one of a table. The table top is the goal, **“Compassionate Connections Through Christ.”** (And why did the Council pick this goal? Very simply, compassion, defined as active love, is contagious. Compassion contributes to vibrancy of community where members become more connected with each other and in turn more connected with visiting worshippers. Many people walking through the doors of Grace for the first time to worship are looking for connections, looking for authentic, Christian community. People today hunger for community because there is so little of it in our world.)

To make the goal, **“Compassionate Connections Through Christ”** more specific, this table has five legs, or “Defining Objectives:” 1) study of the word; 2) compassionate caring; 3) inviting others to participate; 4) daily prayer; 5) service to others. Regarding number (3), we need to do more inviting. A big difference exists between making announcements on Sunday and somebody coming up to me to and inviting me to participate. (For example, Al Simonson invited me to help out with the Mother and Child Banquet. If he hadn’t invited me, I wouldn’t have participated.)

Regarding number (2), we are starting CIA, Caring In Action, where, after signing up, people take turns delivering meals to members recovering from hospitalization.

Just recently a new woman’s bible study started, “Breaking Free,” a ten week course, which affirms leg number (1). This will be offered again, I am sure. And, in addition to prayer during worship, after each worship service, we meet in the chapel for prayer, highlighting the importance of leg number (4).

As we come together to establish all five legs, the council believes we can make **“Compassionate Connections Through Christ.”** This happens because we study the Word, give compassionate care, invite others into mission, pray for the mission efforts and extend service to others.

As this five legged table is well established, does this mean that we don’t need to gather for worship? No, what we stop doing is “going to church,” because you and I are the church. As we gather together on Sunday morning we “bring church with us” to give praise and glory to God, the one who redeems us and makes us whole sending us into the world to give witness to his love. Our mission, our being the church every single minute of the day brings us together, not our unmet needs, nor comfort found that at church nothing changes.

Yes, we still have a building in which we gather, responding to all the obligations associated with such a possession. Yes, we have pipe organs, grand pianos, sound systems, hymnals, pew Bibles and, yes, we might even have screens projecting the words of the liturgy. All of these things contribute to the experience of worship, but if we view these things as helping us to consume, we become people “going to church,” rather than people “being the church.” If we have screens, sound systems and pipe organs and no people consumed by the Spirit, we have people only “going to church,” consuming, and then going home.

Rev. Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA, said recently that at the rate in which the church is decreasing by the year 2045, the ELCA will no longer exist.

There is a big elephant in the sanctuaries of our churches; it is called the tradition of satisfaction. Solace and comfort come from everything staying the same. A leader told me that because so many things are changing around him, he takes comfort that the church is one place where you don’t have to deal with change.

When you hear Bishop Mark Hanson's words, how does it impact you? One thing I know is that just like I couldn't ignore an elephant in my living room, I can't ignore the reality of the ELCA not existing. Facing this reality I am motivated to break the patterns of church life as usual. Einstein is quoted as saying, "Insanity is repeating the same thing expecting different results."

Recently, a person in her thirties, made this statement to me. "I was very frustrated with church, because it seems that people are more caught up with 'tradition' than with growing towards a closer relationship with God and encouraging others to grow in their faith as well." Traditions create the danger of freezing us in the past. We become so encumbered with repeating everything done in the past that there is no room to embrace the new. It doesn't work, as Jesus tells us, to put new wine into old wine skins. Our mission is not to maintain tradition but to make disciples. Are we making new disciples? You, members of this congregation, make disciples; pipe organs don't make disciples, nor do screens, traditions, contemporary worship, the building, and the new elevator. You make disciples through "**compassionate connections through Christ,**" through one to one relationships, through invitation, prayer, study of the word, caring and service.

This is our great challenge. To live consumed by the Spirit means we no longer succumb to traditional church life as usual. The action of the Congregation Council to challenge the congregation to grow compassion at Grace reflects the work of the spirit in our lives. May we respond to the bidding of the spirit.

Note: Quotes in this essay are from the book, The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations, by Dan Kimball. He is one of the central leaders of the Emerging Church. Dan Kimball calls it "Vintage Christianity: a refreshing return to an unapologetically sacred, raw, historical, and Jesus-focused missional ministry."

(Please turn to the last page to explore some important questions.)

Here are some questions from Dan Kimball to ponder:

1. How would the average person in our church define the word “church”?
2. Would you view Grace as consumeristic? Why or why not?
3. How much of your leadership’s energy is focused on putting on the weekend event (worship, etc.) compared with energy spent on training and teaching people to understand their true identity as the missional church?
4. Do you agree or disagree that how the leaders in the church including the pastor define the word “church” is the most important thing about the function, strategy, and methodology of a church? Why?

Bishop Mark Hanson, the presiding Bishop of the ELCA, in his report to the Synods in 2007 asks these challenging questions for the church to ponder.

1. What does it mean to be a Christian in a world of many faiths?
2. What are the signs of God’s activity in our lives and in our world to which we are called to witness?
3. How can we unleash the deep resources of the church to tell the story of God’s amazing grace in Christ Jesus?
4. How will we as the church respond to the call to engage more deeply in the Holy Scriptures?
5. How will we generate more resources to undergird and grow the mission and ministry of this church?