

In Praise of Small Church

Galatians 6:7-10

Good Morning Church Family and a special welcome to those of who are joining us online. It's good to be together.

For the past three Sundays, we've been going through a series on church essentials and answering the question of what is required of the church? What does scripture tell us are "musts" for the life of the church? To recap, the three essentials were Jesus as the center and the foundation, worshipping God together through prayer, preaching, singing, and praising, and thirdly, doing life together by praying for one another, caring for one another, and bearing one another's burdens. Though I suppose other churches and leaders might conceive of it differently, in my mind and in my study, those were the essentials. Those are three things that scripture explicitly and consistently calls the church into. So, I wasn't quite sure where to go from there! It didn't really seem that there were more essentials to add to the list, but it also didn't quite feel finished either.

For the past few months now, I've felt what I would call the "nudgings of the Spirit" towards embracing the gifts and the goodness of being a small church, and being a pastor in a small church. This didn't come to me in some great word from God, but the theme of small church life would come up in conversations, in readings, in my prayers, or in interviews I've been doing in my role with Canadian Mennonite. So, for this

morning, I'd like to share some of what has been coming up for me and my hope and prayer is that this will settle in our hearts in a good way too.

Before we dive in, I need to make a disclaimer. In principle, do not think that there is anything wrong with being a part of a large church. I know plenty of churches that have attendance in the hundreds of people or even the thousands of people which are filled with spirit, faithful to Jesus, and serving one another and their communities beautifully. This is not a sermon against large churches. This is a sermon about the unique gifts and graces of being a small church, and a call to live into that small church identity.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with growth, with more and better, with measurable benchmarks and the steady, upward climb to bigger and better things. We see this in all kinds of sectors in our world-business, education, the wellness industry, the economy-it's this relentless pursuit of more. And this idea has made its way into how many people, Mennonites included, think about church life. I have a friend who has been a pastor for 30 plus years. His congregation started as a house church and then transitioned into more traditional church space. His church has had roughly the same numbers of people since they made the transition from a house church - which is about 40 people. There's a core group of households that have been part of the church since the beginning, and other people sort of come and go over the years, but the overall number remains at about 40. My friend, the pastor, said that he would go to denominational events or conferences from time to time, and, as he sat down for a lunch or coffee break with other pastors, the conversation would always turn to church

growth. “Soooo Pastor, is your church growing?” And he would say, honestly, “No, we’re not growing. We’ve more or less had the same number of people for years and years.” He said that the mood would immediately shift, the person asking the question would grow uncomfortable, mumble some comment and then direct that same question to another pastor, hoping to hear a different answer. Undoubtedly, the one who asked the question was uncomfortable because church growth equals church success which equals church health, right? If a church is growing, then there is wisdom gleaned from this pastor, ideas or programs that perhaps you could implement at your own church, so that your church could grow!

Another pastor friend has served at a church in Saskatoon many years. At one point, in the early 2000s, the growth of the church exploded, four services each weekend, 1500-2000 people in attendance, and all that entailed. He refers to that era as the “camelot days”, everything was growing at an exponential rate. He and colleagues were always being asked, what’re are you doing there? What’s your secret? The most popular people in the room at pastors gatherings. And then things shifted, the church went through a hard season, lots of people left, everything shrunk, and suddenly nobody was asking them what they were doing.

I tell these two stories to illustrate what I think is an important point. Somewhere along the way we landed on the notion that a growing church is a Godly church, and, conversely, a church that isn’t growing is unfaithful. That’s a pretty blunt way to put it, I realize, but it illustrates the ethic. People are implicitly picking up the message that

being a small church is something to fear. Being a small church means that there is no future. You're a church at risk. I suspect I'm not the only one here who has heard these questions in the wind, "What's going to happen to Langham Mennonite? How many people are there on Sundays? Zoar used to be such a big church! What's going to happen?" If I'm being honest, I'll say that those sorts of questions get my back up. What's going to happen? What about what's happening now? The gifts, the good fruit, the lived faithfulness in this church now. Churches should not be reduced to the questions of what may happen in the future, because scripture says, that's not up to us.

In Matthew chapter 9, we see Jesus preaching and healing throughout the region. Then at the end of that chapter, Jesus has this conversation with his disciples, starting in verse 35, "And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." When I would read this passage, my first instinct would be to think okay, I've got to work harder. Recruit more people. Draw in more workers, that's the way this is supposed to go. But when we look at the text more closely we can see that Jesus doesn't say, "Go get more workers!", he specifically says, "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Not work harder. Not implement new growth strategies, but pray and God will send out more workers on his timeline, and according to this plan.

I recognize that this goes against our instincts, but a lot of the language around church growth has been borrowed for business or organizational growth. And the problem with thinking about the health of a church using organizational or business measures of success is that the church was never designed to be a business or an organization, the church was designed to be a family. And if we can slowly and purposefully shift our understanding of church from an organization to a family, then our measures for “success” (for lack of a better word) will shift as well.

An organization with 15 people? No new growth? Might as well end it. A family with 15 people who love, care for and support one another? How beautiful. An organization with no energy for new things or programs? Probably not worthwhile. A family who can't do more, but still wants to spend their time together? Why not? Businesses build a frame that their employees must fit into, families do things that make sense and work for who they are. Looking at what makes a healthy faithful church should be much more akin to asking what makes a healthy family culture than a successful business culture.

So, then if we think of church as a family, what does that mean for us? How can we reframe this question of growth?

First, I think it's important to keep in mind that being a small church does not exclude us from any of the three essentials that we've been talking about over the past month. We can still keep Jesus as the foundation, still worship God together, and still do life

together. If that's what it means to be a church, then here we are, friends. And isn't it beautiful? And when voices from within or without suggest that maybe we're not measuring up, that maybe the end is nigh, then I think we can turn our attention back to these essentials found in scripture, to assess how we're doing as a family.

A colleague recently told me the story of a small church that had a very family-minded approach to church life. It had taken a long time to get there, but they were in a good place. And the pastor, who had sort of spearheaded this church culture shift was retiring. His departure raised the question for them, "Should we close? Is it time?" After much discussion, they decided they'd wait a year, start the pastoral search process, and see where they were in the year's time. And they continued on with church family life as usual, and at the end of that year, they said, "Close? Why would we close!? We want to be together." Even though they were a small church. Even though there were 5 other Mennonite Churches (from the same conference!) within an easy drive, they wanted to be with each other. They wanted to be this church family with these people.

In our own church, to be a healthy family, we must nurture siblingship. The Apostle Paul reminds the church at Galatia about the importance of "life in the spirit" that is, life lived for God and with one another in a way that produces good fruit, that builds this family culture where people are welcome, loved and cared for. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us

keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

What is especially compelling is that Paul is addressing the church growth that he sees as essential, and it's not about more bums in seats (as the saying goes). Paul is admonishing the Christians at Galatia to grow-not in numbers, but in character. In godliness. In Spiritual fruit. I heard a story about a pastor, a man from Nigeria, who said this about church, “Growth is not when every single person in a church grows. That spiritual growth is what matters.

Eugene Peterson, in his memoir, *The Pastor*, tells the story of a group he calls the “company of pastors”. It was a group of pastors from across a wide range of Christian traditions who met regularly to talk about what it meant to be a pastor, what it meant to serve the church and how to be faithful in the calling. In his book, Peterson tells the story of a fellow pastor in the group who always seemed to be “upsizing” his church. In his ministry, he'd move from pastoring one church to another always on the road to the bigger and better church. He really saw this as the way forward for the Church and The Gospel as a whole. And eventually, Peterson sends his young pastor a letter, cautioning him against this pursuit of a bigger church, a more public platform. I'll read an excerpt of the letter. He says, this pursuit of Bigger church, “...is also the kind of thing for which we have abundant documentation through twenty centuries now, of debilitating both congregation and pastor. In general terms, it is the devil's temptation to Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple. Everytime the church's leaders depersonalize,

even a little, the worshiping/loving community, the gospel is weakened. And size is the great depersonalizer. Kierkegaard's criticism is still cogent, "the more people, the less truth." The only way the Christian life is brought to maturity is through intimacy, renunciation and personal deepening." He admonishes this pastor, "Your present congregation is close to ideal in size to employ your pastoral vocation for forming Christianity maturity."

I said at the outset that this wasn't a sermon against large churches, but I think Peterson's words affirm for us a wonderful grace: small churches are wonderful places to grow in the life of the Spirit, to grow in Christian maturity. I'm certain that if my first pastoral calling had been to a larger church, instead of here, I wouldn't have grown as much as I have. Small churches don't allow you to be anonymous, to stay on the sidelines, and that is such a good thing, even though it's hard, even though not every person is prepared to say yes to that intimacy. Small is beautiful because it readily calls us out from ourselves, into the intimate love of Jesus, found in the family of Christ. May we rest in our smallness, knowing that God desires us to grow us more and more into the image of Christ. May we listen only to the voice of truth, the voice of the Spirit, and not the voice of culture.

I'll close with this beautiful words from Ephesians 3:17-19, " And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how

high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be **filled** up with God himself.”