

God's Direction for a Christian Congregation

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A number of years ago I served as the essayist for a district convention of the Pacific-Northwest District of the WELS. I was also invited to preach at that convention. Using Acts 2:42-47 as my text, I preached on the subject on which I am going to address you in a little more detail this morning: God's Direction for a Christian Congregation. Not all of you here today were present at that district convention and, even if you were there, I would not be so naïve and presumptuous as to expect that my message was so memorable that what I said was indelibly etched into your memory. So, let me summarize a portion of it, which I will then amplify in what follows.

In that sermon I mentioned an interesting and rather provocative book I had come across during the time I was serving as a parish pastor in San Jose, California. The book was entitled *New Congregations—Security and Mission in Conflict*. What struck my attention initially was the fact that the book dealt with a number of congregations, seven, to be specific, in the general area where I was living at the time, the San Francisco Bay area of California. The congregations were all fairly young in age, which again drew my interest, since Apostles congregation in San Jose where I was serving was at the time also a young congregation. And the make-up of these congregations, predominantly suburban middle class, also paralleled the makeup of Apostles.

The book began by asking such questions as

“What is the mission of a Christian congregation?”

“What is its purpose?”

“What goals should it establish for itself?”

Formal Goals

The author zeroed in on three goals, *formal goals*, he called them, all of which I am sure you would consider to be desirable: fellowship, nurture, and service.

Fellowship

First, fellowship. A translation of the Greek word *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*), “fellowship” means oneness, sharing, having all things in common. When we think of our condition from the very beginning of our existence—alienated from God and from each other—we realize that fellowship is a marvelous gift of God. In our original state we were far off from God and separated from one another. God has graciously brought us to himself and thus joined us also to one another. This he has done by the blood of Jesus and by the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace. It is by the “love of God” and the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” and the “fellowship [brought about by] the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:13) that God has drawn us together. And God continues to keep us close to himself and to each other through the same Means of Grace, the Gospel in the Word and also in the fellowship meal of the Sacrament, through which God provides us with a “participation” (*κοινωνία*, fellowship) in the body and blood of Christ.

Within a Christian congregation a group of Christians has the opportunity to enjoy and display this fellowship. The Christian congregation ideally will be a marvelous showcase that expresses visibly the truth of Ephesians 4 that we have “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Within a Christian congregation a gathering of believers around Word and Sacrament enjoys the blessing of experiencing “the tie

that binds our hearts in Christian love”—a common and united faith in the Lord Jesus and his redemptive work, founded and caused to flourish by the Spirit through the Means of Grace.

Nurture

This brings us to the second of the so-called formal goals: nurture. Nurture means growth. We think of St. Peter’s closing words in his second epistle, a letter filled with warning about false teachers and the destructive nature of their teaching. In the second last verse of the epistle he sounds his word of warning one more time: “Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.” Then, in the final verse of the letter, he points to what is needed if we are to be kept from being carried away by soul-destroying error: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pt 3:18)

Within a Christian congregation a gathering of believers has the opportunity to help each other grow in faith. It is an ideal setting for nurture, for letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish one another (cf. Colossians 3:16). This is where Christian education fits in, and not just for children, but also, even especially, for adults who in turn will then nurture their children (cf. Ephesians 6:4). As we teach each other and learn from each other, we are nurtured, with the goal of becoming, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). That’s nurture, Christian growth through Christian education.

Service

The third of the formal goals for a congregation identified in the book *New Congregations—Security and Mission in Conflict* was what the author identified as “service.” We would probably call it “outreach.” Service, or outreach, is the other side of fellowship and nurture. Fellowship and nurture have to do with that which we experience within the family of believers. Service (outreach) has to do with reaching out to those outside the congregation, particularly to those outside the family of Christ. It has to do with giving those outside the family of Christ what they need the most, the message of new life in Jesus Christ. Service is a congregation sharing the Gospel of Christ with the community so that by the power of the Spirit others can be brought into the Christian family where they, with us, can enjoy the blessings of Christian fellowship and nurture.

I think you would agree with me that these three words do strike at the heart of what a Christian congregation is all about: fellowship—a Word/Sacrament/Spirit-created oneness; nurture—building one another up with the Word; service—reaching out to others with the Gospel.

Survival Goals

I mentioned above that the book *New Congregations—Security and Mission in Conflict* was a study of seven congregations in the San Francisco Bay area of California. The author spent a considerable amount of time looking at each of the seven congregations through the lens of these three goals: fellowship, nurture, and service. What he discovered was that only one of the congregations had, right from the outset, deliberately determined to follow the fellowship/nurture/service path. The other six had adopted a very different set of goals than fellowship, nurture, and service. What they had adopted, very likely unintentionally, were what the author called *survival goals*. They, too, are three in number: members, buildings, and money.

Members, Buildings, Money

Gaining members, building buildings, and raising money—when these become a congregation’s chief goals, a vicious circle is created. Members need buildings. For buildings you need money. For money you

need more members. With more members, you need more buildings, which produces the need for more money, for which you need more members, etc. When does it all end? Presumably when the property is filled with buildings and there are enough members to keep things going on an even keel financially. Then you have accomplished your goals and can, like the farmer in Jesus' Parable of the Rich Fool, sit back in self-satisfied comfort. But a congregation that has adopted short-sighted "survival goals" rather than long-range, ongoing "formal goals" may well, like the church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1), be dying even while it appears to be alive and thriving. So it was with six of the seven Bay Area congregations the author examined.

It is highly unlikely that a congregation will consciously plan to set its sights on such survival goals. It is easy, however, to let that happen by default, to let concern for survival goals, the things you can see, overshadow what we would all agree should be numbered among the real goals of the church: fellowship, nurture, and service (outreach). Is this perhaps happening in our own congregations? You might examine the agendas of meetings of your Church Council and Voters' Assembly. Where is the emphasis—on survival or on LIFE?

The Direction Taken by the Early Church

What I intend to do in what follows is to take a look at the early church as it is described in the book of Acts, to examine the direction that it took. After that, I will conclude with some discussion questions intended to make us think about how we today might more fully follow that same direction.

Survival Goals? No

Members, Buildings, Money

It doesn't take much looking at all to reach the conclusion that that early church paid scant attention to such survival goals as members, buildings, and money. It didn't worry about getting more members. It let that matter rest in the Lord's hands. As the church went about its business of fellowship, nurture, and service (outreach), "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It had no buildings for some time. It didn't even contemplate a building program but was content to gather in the covered outer court of the temple and in the homes of its members. As far as money is concerned, it appears that a good share of the members were quite poor; but money did not seem to be a problem to them.

On the other hand the formal goals—fellowship, nurture, service (outreach)—these the early church actively pursued.

Formal Goals? Yes

Fellowship

Acts 2:42 – They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship.

The Greek word translated "devoted themselves to" also could be translated "persisted in," "held fast to," "persevered in." The form of the Greek word has in it the idea of ongoingness: "they continually devoted themselves to, persisted in, held fast to, persevered in the apostles' teaching and the fellowship." The "apostles' teaching" (Greek: διδασχία, didache) was the body of truth, the doctrine, the apostles, as Christ's spokesmen, had brought to them. This in turn had produced their "koinonia," their fellowship, with the one true God and with one another. As long as they continued to hold fast to the apostles' doctrine, the Holy Spirit would continue to maintain and strengthen their fellowship with God and each other. Koinonia derived from and based on anything other than the apostles' doctrine, that is, the truth, is not from God, as Jesus reminds us in the Gospel of John: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth

will set you free”—free from Satan’s bondage and for fellowship with our Lord and with others whom the Spirit has set free through the truth. Conversely, if we don’t hold to Jesus’ teaching (or, as the King James Version put the Greek more precisely, “continue in his Word”), we are not Jesus’ disciples and therefore cannot experience the blessed fellowship that the early Christian church experienced. A continuation in the apostles’ doctrine resulted in a continuation of *koinonia*, fellowship.

The fellowship the believers in the early church enjoyed was expressed in many ways:

They expressed their fellowship by worshipping together

Acts 2:42 – They devoted themselves...to the breaking of bread and to prayer (literally, “to the prayers”).

In the way the Greek is constructed in Acts 2:42, these two, “the breaking of bread” and “the prayers,” go together just as do “the apostles’ doctrine” and “the fellowship.” “The breaking of bread” and “the prayers” undoubtedly are a reference to worship. When the early Christians came together, they did so to worship. They came to receive from God (the “breaking of bread” is quite certainly a reference to the Sacrament); and they came to give back to God (the “prayers” would represent the worshiping congregation’s response of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving).

It is clear that worship was the heart and center of the way the early Christians practiced their fellowship. United by the Spirit in a common faith around the apostles’ doctrine, “every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts” (Acts 2:45), the place where they assembled for worship. Unity, fellowship established by the Spirit was expressed constantly as the early church assembled for worship. And not only did they *express* their fellowship through their worship. Since it centered around the Means of Grace, their worship also helped to *maintain* and *strengthen* their fellowship.

They expressed their fellowship by praying for one another

Acts 12:5 - Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

You know the story. It was about a dozen years after the Pentecost Day birth of the New Testament church. Herod Agrippa had begun to persecute the church. He had actually put the apostle James to death by the sword. Then he put Peter into prison. The response of the church? It held prayer vigils for Peter. “Many people” gathered in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, to pray for Peter (Acts 12:12). They prayed “earnestly” on his behalf. Luke uses the same Greek word here that he uses in Luke 22:44 to describe the earnest prayer of Jesus in the Garden, when his sweat was like great drops of blood. The church literally prayed Peter right out of prison.

Acts abounds in references to the prayers, both corporate and personal, of those who were a part of the early church:

Acts 1:14 - They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

This was right after Jesus’ ascension, as the church waited for the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit. With the words “they all joined together constantly,” Luke uses the same Greek word he later used in Acts 2:42 to describe how the church “devoted itself” to worship. Prayer to God, prayer with and for each other, was a constant in the early church.

The church recognized the importance of giving its leaders time for prayer and so gave approval to the apostles’ recommendation that it choose men to assist them with some of the church’s administrative work:

“We will turn this responsibility over to them, said the apostles, and will give our attention to *prayer* and the ministry of the Word” (Ac 6:3-4)

The church prayed when it was choosing a successor to Judas: “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen” (Ac 1:24). It prayed before it “laid hands on” the seven deacons (Ac 6:6) and before it sent Saul (Paul) and Barnabas off on their first missionary journey (Ac 13:3).

Luke favorably describes the centurion Cornelius as a man who was “devout and God-fearing,” who “gave generously to those in need *and prayed to God regularly*” (Ac 10:2).

Certainly, prayer, corporate and personal, was no stranger to the early church.

They expressed their fellowship by encouraging one another

Acts 4:36-37 - Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

We know him as Barnabas, don’t we, this leader of the early church who was Paul’s companion on his first missionary journey. His real name was Joseph. His nickname was Barnabas, which, Luke tells us, means “the encourager.” As one follows the course of the ministry of Barnabas, it quickly becomes clear why the church had pinned this nickname on him. When, three years after his conversion (most of it spent in relative seclusion in Arabia), Saul of Tarsus came to Jerusalem, we are told that “they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple” (Ac 9:26). Then Barnabas stepped in and encouraged the key leaders in the Jerusalem church to welcome Saul as a fellow believer: “He brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus” (Ac 9:27). As a result, the church accepted Saul so that he was able to “move freely about in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (Ac 9:28).

This is not the only encouraging Barnabas did. When news reached the church in Jerusalem that the Lord was gathering a congregations of believers in Antioch of Syria, some 300 miles to the north of Jerusalem, it was Barnabas that the church sent to meet with the church there. We are told that “when he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and **encouraged** them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Ac 11:23).

Barnabas, you probably recall, accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey, as did a nephew of Barnabas, John Mark. We know how John Mark turned back not long into that first journey. The reason isn’t given, but Luke uses a strong Greek which the NIV aptly translates as “desertion,” (Ac 15:37). Whatever the reason for John Mark’s leaving, it is clear that Paul felt that his quick departure disqualified him from traveling with them on subsequent trips. Barnabas didn’t agree. “They [Paul and Barnabas] had such a sharp disagreement [on this issue of the suitability of giving John Mark a second chance] that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus” (Ac 15:39). This was Barnabas, the Encourager, at his best, willing to put up with some youthful (?) weaknesses.

Who was right, Paul or Barnabas? Let Paul himself give you the answer. Some twenty years later Paul is sitting in chains in a dungeon in Rome, soon to be executed by Nero. He writes to his close friend and co-worker, Timothy, urging him to try to get to Rome before the winter storms make travel to Rome impossible. If he waits until spring, it may well be too late to see him before he is put to death.. Interestingly, Paul also requests Timothy, “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2 Tm 4:11). Evidently Mark had done some maturing over the years! Fast forward a few more years: Matthew, *Mark*,... Yes, the same John Mark whom Paul was ready to give up on but Barnabas encouraged, is the human writer of the second Gospel. What blessings can come from encouraging words and encouraging actions!

They expressed their fellowship by helping one another

Acts 2:44-45 - All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Acts 4:32, 34-35 - All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had....There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

The Jerusalem church was not a wealthy church. One reason for its poverty may well have been economic boycotts on the part of the larger Jewish community against those whom the Spirit had led to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah and their Savior. You may recall that the poverty of the Jerusalem church was such that the churches in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece had determined to take up an offering to help their needy brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. "Your plenty," he wrote the church Corinthian (2 Cor 8:14), "will supply what they need" (literally, "their lack").

Yet, we are told that "there were no needy persons among them [that is, in the Jerusalem congregation]." The philosophy of the members of the early church was not "what's mine is mine," but "what's mine is yours if you need it more than I do." We don't have to guess what produced that kind of generous mindset. When St. Luke says that "had everything in common" and that they "shared everything they had," he uses in both of those phrases an adjectival form of the noun *koinonia*, which, as you recall, means a "oneness," a "sharing," a "having all things in common." The deeper oneness, the oneness with God and each other in the fellowship of believers created by the Spirit through the Means of Grace, resulted in this kind of oneness also, the oneness in which the physical welfare of their brothers and sisters was just as important, if not more important, than their own. Because the Spirit had truly made them "one in heart and mind," when a brother or sister was hurting, they all hurt and when a brother or sister was helped, they were all helped.

The various "-isms" which decree distribution of wealth, e.g., communism, socialism, could not even begin to approach what we see in the early church with its spontaneous outpouring of tangible love.

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Nurture

Acts 2:42 – They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

We have already noted above that the word translated as "teaching" comes from the Greek word *didache*. It has the primary meaning of "that which is taught," or "doctrine." It is used, for example, in Romans 16:17, where we are warned to "keep away" from those who "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching [*didache*] you have learned."

The believers in the early church had the privilege of learning the "apostles' doctrine" from the apostles personally. The "apostles' teaching" thus was also what the apostles taught them. This was not a one-time teaching and learning. As was mentioned previously, they "*continually* devoted themselves" to the apostles' teaching. The apostles kept on teaching and they kept on being taught.

The apostles kept teaching

The apostles kept on teaching, emphasizing above all the redemptive work of Jesus, the Gospel, culminated in his victory over the grave:

Acts 4:30 - With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

When other administrative duties crowded in upon their teaching time, they turned that work over to others so that they could give their attention to “prayer and the *ministry of the Word*” (Ac 6:4). They kept on teaching even when commanded not to teach:

Acts 4:18-20 - They [the members of the highest Jewish court] called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.

Acts 5:18-21 – They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out....At daybreak they entered the temple courts [their place for public worship and teaching],...and begin to teach the people.

Acts 5:42 - Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Obviously, teaching the Word by which the church would be nurtured in the faith was of primary concern to the apostles.

The church kept learning

Acts 2:46 - Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts.

The church kept learning. Every day was Sunday for these early Christians, a time to be fed from the rich pastures of the Word. There was a hunger for the Word that wouldn’t be satisfied with an hour, or even two hours, in the course of a week. They couldn’t learn too much about their Savior. They couldn’t grow enough in faith. They “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.”

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Service (Outreach)

Acts 1:8 - You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The third of the so-called “formal goals,” service, or outreach, was also admirably present in the early church. Although there are passages in the Scriptures that command witnessing, e.g., Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8 is not such a passage. It is a prediction, a promise. “You will be my witnesses” is not an imperative, not a command. It is a simple future tense verb. Just as the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them on Pentecost Day so would they thereafter, empowered by the Spirit, be Christ’s witnesses in ever-widening circles, ultimately to the ends of the earth.

No one had to tell the early Christians that they needed to express their fellowship in Christ and that they needed to be nurtured regularly with the Word. In the same way no one had to tell them they needed to be Christ’s witnesses. This is simply what Christians do. Outreach, along with fellowship and nurture—this was part and parcel of what the early church was all about.

We see “friendship evangelism”

*Acts 2:46-47 - Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts praising God and **enjoying the favor of all the people.***

In their pre-Pentecost life, they had remained hidden behind locked doors for fear that someone might find out they were followers of Christ. Now they refused to hide their light under a bushel. They took seriously their role as the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” People knew who they were, and people, even the heathen, spoke well of them as they observed how they loved one another.

We see verbal evangelism

Acts 8:1 & 4 - On that day [when Stephen died as the first of a long line of martyrs in the New Testament church] a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria....Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

We might assume that the called workers would be actively involved in person-to-person, face-to-face outreach with the Word. Such was the case, from the evangelistic work carried out by Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem to the far-flung missionary endeavors of the apostle Paul and his companions.

Perhaps even more significant is what is described in the above passage. The first full-scale persecution of the church following the martyrdom of Stephen caused the church to scatter from Jerusalem. The apostles, however, the “called workers,” remained in Jerusalem. “Those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went.” “Those who had been scattered”—these are the lay Christians. They “preached the Word,” Luke tells us. This is an unfortunate translation because more than likely we connect the word “preach” with “pulpit.” A more literal translation would be, “They [the lay Christians] went about from place to place, *evangelizing the Word*,” that is, telling the Good News of the Word, the message of Christ and salvation.

Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). The hearts of the early Christians were filled to the brim, overflowing in fact, with the Word of Christ and the love of Christ. That, in turn, moved their mouths to tell others about what so filled their hearts. The church historian Harnack has noted that “when the church won its greatest victories in the early days in the Roman Empire, it did so not by teachers or preachers or apostles, but by informal missionaries,” the many lay Christians who knew that the best way they could serve another person was by introducing him or her to Jesus Christ.

We see “vicarious evangelism”

Acts 13:2-3 - While they [the church in Antioch] were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

How would the Gospel be brought to the “ends of the earth”? Not every Christian could go. But Christians could send others to go in their name and then support them with their prayers and offerings. To do this required an unselfish spirit. The church in Antioch gave away two of their pastors for the wider work of the church. So far as we can see from the inspired text, there does not appear to be any hesitation on the part of the church. The Lord called and the church willingly sent.

Even more important, the zeal of the members of the early church to engage in vicarious evangelism as well as their own personal evangelism was based on their firm belief that Jesus was telling the truth when he said, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). I am sure that the early Christians could hardly imagine that a Christian could make a statement such as Paul Rietmann, Episcopal priest and pastor of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Tacoma, recently made in a letter to the editor in the *Tacoma News-Tribune*

(September 16, 1999). Voicing concern that the Southern Baptists were making a concerted effort to convert Jews to Christianity during the Rosh Hashanah, Rietmann wrote, “We would never think of targeting members of the Jewish community or any other religion in evangelizing efforts....In sharing with my Jewish friends over the years, I have found that Christians and Jews believe in the same God. Our main difference is the interpretation or understanding of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth” (as though that were only a minor point of disagreement!). The early Christians were not universalists. Along with the apostle Peter, they believed unequivocally that “salvation is found in no one else” (Ac 4:12). That’s why outreach was not an add-on to their ministry. It, along with sharing and expressing their fellowship and nurturing and being nurtured, *was* their ministry.

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Lest we be given the wrong impression and become discouraged when we compare our congregations today with the early Christian church, we should hasten to add that it was by no means a perfect church with a perfect ministry. It was still the church militant, not the church triumphant.

We see *hypocrisy* at work in the early church. The immediate and final judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira for their hypocrisy indicates quite clearly the serious nature of this sin and the fact that God cannot be mocked (Ac 5:1ff). As strong as the early church was in many ways, even such a grievous sin as hypocrisy was not totally absent.

There was *jealously* also, as seen in the complaining of the widows of the Grecian Jews that they were not being treated fairly when it came to the daily distribution of food (Ac 6:1ff).

Greed was present also. We think of Simon who, we are told, upon hearing the preaching of Philip, “believed and was baptized” (Ac 8:13). But then, when he saw the power the Holy Spirit had given to the apostles to bestow special gifts of the Spirit upon people, he greedily saw this power as a means of financial gain for himself—if he could but learn their secret—for which he was severely denounced by Peter.

Like the church yet today, the early church had its faults. Yet, to the degree that it focused on the spiritual goals of fellowship, nurture, and service (outreach), it was greatly blessed by God:

Acts 2:47 - The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:4 - Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

Acts 5:14 - More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

Acts 6:7 - The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 9:31 - The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace [following Saul’s conversion]. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

The church that puts survival goals far down on the list of priorities and assigns the highest priority to formal, spiritual goals will enjoy the blessing of God. The reason for this is simple. Fellowship, nurture, and service all have to do with the proclamation of the Word, with the use of the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. When our worship, our teaching, and our outreach are centering in the Word, as they should, we can confidently claim God’s promise for ourselves and our congregations:

*As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Is 55:10-11).*

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Congregations often focus their energies on the urgent (“survival” goals) rather than on the important (“formal” goals). What have you done in your congregation that has proven to be helpful in shifting that focus?

Fellowship

2. Continuing in Jesus’ Word—all of it (the “apostles’ doctrine”)—is the key to fellowship.

How many lessons should there be in a Bible information class?

What mechanism, if any, does your congregation have for members to periodically review the basic doctrines of the Evangelical Lutheran Church?

How important is it that we keep our congregations informed about current doctrinal aberrations? What is the forum in which to do this? the sermon? Bible class? other?

Worship

3. In view of the importance of worship, what can we do to help our members say with the psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Ps 122:1, KJV) and thus lead them to ever more regular worship?

Prayer

4. What are the pros and cons of our congregations having occasional “prayer services,” particularly in a time of special national or congregational need?

Encouraging one another

5. What are ways by which we can be better encouragers of each other—pastor/teacher, teacher/teacher, pastor/pastor, pastor/member, teacher/member?

Helping one another

6. What do we do in our congregation when a member is facing financial disaster?

Nurture

7. In recent years the WELS has called adult education “Job #1.” What are ways by which we can get more of our adults involved in the Bible study program of the church? (What has been tried in your congregation to increase attendance? Has it worked?)
8. Agree or disagree? To expand its program of adult Bible study a congregation would do well to train lay people to teach classes of adults.

Service (Outreach)

9. How does a busy pastor find time for doing outreach?
10. What have you done to involve lay people in the congregation's program of outreach? What have the results been?
11. How does your congregation determine the number of dollars in the budget to be devoted to outreach (including the wider mission of the church through the Synod)?