

## WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Acts 2:42-47

September 10, 2006 – Pentecost 14 [B]

Tomorrow is **the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks** – one of the darkest days in the history of this nation. Five years ago when the first plane flew into a building – no one understood at first what was happening. But we soon learned that hijacking commercial airliners and turning them into “guided missiles” was part of a PLAN – the work of Islamic fundamentalists intent on waging “JIHAD” [holy war] against the U.S.

In the 5 years since – there has not been another successful terrorist attack against this country – but experts WARN that it is just a matter of time. Lawrence Wright, a reporter for *The New Yorker* magazine, has done extensive investigation into Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, and has uncovered evidence that the attack of 9/11/01 was not an isolated event – but merely the “first phase” of a 20-YEAR PLAN by Islamic extremists to spread RIGID Islamic rule across the world.

In the years since 9/11, our government – and others – have also been making plans, too – to identify and bring to justice those responsible; to identify other potential terrorist cells, and to safeguard us from further attack.

I invite you to think with me this morning about **THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING**. There's an old saying that goes like this: *S/he who fails to plan, plans to fail*. And there's a lot of TRUTH to that. If you don't envision and prepare for a DESIRED FUTURE – then you are left to the mercy of circumstance. We see this in Lewis Carroll's classic story *Alice in Wonderland*. A young girl named Alice falls into a rabbit hole and finds herself in a strange and mystical world.

In one scene, Alice comes to a “fork in the road”. Uncertain which direction to go in, she sees a Cheshire Cat sitting in a tree. Alice asks the Cat: *Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?* The cat answers: *That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.* Alice says: *It really doesn't matter, as long as I get SOMEWHERE.* And the cat replies: *If all you're interested in is getting “somewhere”, then it really doesn't matter which way you go.*

Having a plan is important. **Without a plan, there's no telling where you'll end up.**

I realize that at least as far as “Church” is concerned – some people don't think “planning” is “SPIRITUAL”. But **JESUS HAD A PLAN.**

Jesus' plan was to bring new life to the world through his death on the cross for our sins – to seek out and call to himself those who would embrace his “plan” – and for his followers to carry on his work by going into the world and making disciples.

And in the text for today from Acts, we see that one of the unmistakable images of the early Church is that of GROWTH – people RESPONDING to the Good News Jesus brings, then MOVING OUT into the world, MAKING NEW DISCIPLES of Jesus as they go, and turning the world upside down!

But 2,000 years later – **GROWTH is probably NOT one of the first things that come to mind when people think “church”**. The Church today often seems WEAK and FRAGILE in comparison to that vibrant picture from Acts 2.

Consider for a moment that today:

- many churches/denominations are in decline
- though a vast majority of Americans identify themselves as “Christian”, a majority of these are “NOMINALLY Christian” – i.e., they don't attend worship on a regular basis or support a congregation financially
- there are between 95-100 million “unchurched” in America today [an “unchurched” person is defined as someone who hasn't attended a worship service in the last 6 months, with the possible exception of a wedding or funeral]; these “unchurched” are people who don't feel a need for the church or for a relationship with God

And the obvious question is: WHY DON'T THESE PEOPLE ATTEND CHURCH?

We may not want to hear the answer. Many of these “unchurched” don't attend because **they view the Church as IRRELEVANT** [not worth their time or energy]. And **many congregations today are CLUELESS about how to effectively reach them.**

SO – How DO we reach the “nominally” Christian and the “unchurched”? How DO churches fulfill the mission to make disciples and grow? **WHAT'S THE PLAN?**

There are several KEY factors that are essential for churches to grow:

#### **I. CHURCHES GROW WHEN THEY FOCUS ON OTHERS INSTEAD OF THEMSELVES.**

Jesus came to give his life for others and to SERVE others in order to call them into a new relationship with God – and GROWING, healthy congregations ALWAYS focus MORE on the needs of others than they do taking care of themselves. It is an undeniable fact that **churches GROW when they reach out – and conversely, churches DIE when they focus on themselves.**

We've seen that in this congregation. In the last 10 years, missions projects have helped fuel a "revival" in FUMC. There is an innate human need to do something with our lives that MATTERS – and nominal Christians and the unchurched long for this, too. But for too many congregations, the call to "SERVICE" has degenerated into an expectation that the Church exists to "SERVE US" – and nominal Christians and the "unchurched" aren't interested in being part of a "religious clubs" that exists "for members only". That's why to reach others – we must be involved in something that MATTERS – and that's why our "vision" at FUMC is **to create a community of believers who are centered on God and focused on others.**

A second key factor of church growth: **II. CHURCHES GROW WHEN THEIR CONGREGATIONAL "THERMOMETER" IS SET ON "WARM"**. Every congregation has an internal "temperature". Some congregations are COLD and HOSTILE while others are INVITING and WELCOMING. What is crystal-clear is that congregations that are INVITING and WELCOMING also tend to GROW.

But – **whose job is it to "invite" and "welcome"?** The church staff? Yes – but it's also the job of every church member. Every person MUST do this – because **73% of "unchurched" people have NEVER been invited by someone to attend church!** Now – if you have an "unchurched" friend or neighbor – chances are they WON'T respond to your FIRST invitation. Reaching them will require SOFT BUT CONTINUOUS invitations.

Is OUR congregation INVITING and WELCOMING? In one church, a member said: It's OK for new people to join, just as long as they remember – it's not THEIR church; it's OURS!

Would that kind of attitude be true in OUR congregation? Are we an INVITING, WELCOMING church? Do our facilities "welcome" others [the handicapped, the elderly, children]?

Churches grow when their congregational thermostats are WARM!

**III. CHURCHES GROW WHEN WORSHIP IS JOYFUL & VIBRANT.** Joy-filled worship that leads people into an experience with God is often the FIRST "contact point" congregations can have with the "unchurched". But what we've been slow to realize is that in each worship service, there are 4 or 5 generations present on a given Sunday – 4 or 5 generations with DIFFERENT liturgical and musical preferences. Not every person responds to the same style – which is one reason our Administrative Council has just approved adding a 3<sup>rd</sup> morning worship service to begin later this year. The truth is – there are NEW ways to tell the OLD, OLD story.

But whether it's traditional, less traditional, or non-traditional – congregations with multiple services and different styles BROADEN their reach – and **nominal Christians AND the “unchurched” WILL attend worship that is joyful and vibrant.**

And finally – **IV. CHURCHES GROW WHEN PEOPLE HAVE ACCESS TO SMALL GROUPS WHERE LIFE-CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS ARE FORMED.** We are relational creatures and we long for INTIMACY with others. It's one thing to be among a few hundred people worshiping together, but **small groups are the BEST place for people to lower their defenses, share themselves, and get to know others.** Jesus chose a small group to share in his work; John Wesley formed the early Methodists into small bands and classes; and our future includes becoming a congregation of small groups.

Many churches DECLINE and DIE because they forget WHY they exist. Church isn't about US; it's about worshiping God; it's about loving and serving others. Does our congregation lead people to new and deeper relationships with God? Does our congregation place a high value on inviting, welcoming, and nurturing people?

When I learned this week that the “Crocodile Hunter” – Steve Irwin – had died in a freak accident after being stung by a sting ray off Australia's Great Barrier Reef – I thought to myself – CRIKEY!. Irwin was such a lovable guy who dedicated his life to protecting animals and teaching people to appreciate them. He LIVED his passion to the end.

Brothers and Sisters – our PASSION is helping people connect to God, serving God and others.

I want to live THAT passion to the end.

Don't you?

Let us pray....