

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 5/22/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, May 23, you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who are graduating from high schools, colleges, and other places of learning. Ask GOD'S blessing upon them as they move forward on their journey of life. Pray that their learning may help to launch them into new ventures that will benefit the people of their community.*

When we talk about “congregation,” we’re almost always talking about those who come to worship on Sunday mornings. Included in that number are also those who used to come but are not longer able to join their fellow worshipers. And many see that a significant portion of the church’s mission is to care for the congregation.

Let me suggest a couple other ways of thinking about “congregation” that can help us to look more outward as we consider GOD’S mission through our church. When I teach churches about sharing the gospel (also called outreach or evangelism), I will talk, not just about congregation, but about potential congregation. The potential congregation of each church is the people its members know who are not actively involved in the life of a church anywhere. Those family members, neighbors, colleagues, and others that each member of the church knows who are not participating in any church are all part of our potential congregation. Think, if fifty of us can each identify two unchurched people that we could invite to worship, our potential congregation is 100 more people!

Those who are active in a church often have only a couple people with whom they interact who are not worshiping somewhere. The more time you spend with Christians, the fewer non-worshipers you know (unless you are intentionally placing yourself where unchurched people may gather). Because of the decline in church attendance today, however, the number of unchurched or formerly churched people each of us see regularly is steadily increasing, so we all should be able to identify a few who we could invite.

Studies, though, have shown that each new person who comes to a church knows five to eight people who do not participate in the life of a church. If you take that initial 100 potential members I previously named, and consider that each one of them knows conservatively five more who are not attending worship, the potential congregation multiplies to five hundred more. And so it continues with each new person who becomes involved in the church. Now you’re talking about the kinds of numbers that the early Church saw on Pentecost. Our invitation to others has tremendous possibility for positively impacting our church.

A second way of talking about “congregation” is something I just heard recently, but I think it makes a lot of sense. GOD places churches in locations where they can care, not just for those who come, but for all the people around them. Thus, our congregation is the community around our church. Rather than just asking what our members need, we should be looking outward, assessing the needs of our neighbors, and seeking to find ways to care for our community—our real congregation.

There was a time when “parish” meant the geographic area around a church. Regional and national church bodies were very intentional about not planting new churches in locations that would overlap into another parish. Today, there are often several or even many churches of different denominations

within a few blocks of each other. They share the same parish, and realizing this can motivate churches to work together to address the challenges of the people around them. Together churches can often accomplish much more than they could separately while avoiding overlapping on some needs at the exclusion of others.

The New Testament is filled with examples of the Church reaching out to those around them who did not know JESUS. The primary goal of the early Christian Church was to make CHRIST known. That goal hasn't changed, though many have moved to the back of their minds or completely forgotten it. Yet there are so many in our community, in our "congregation" who need what GOD has to offer in CHRIST JESUS. It is JESUS desire that we look outward and work to share the good news of GOD'S love with everyone we can.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey