

SESSION 4

PREACHING GUIDE

OVERVIEW AND GOAL

In this session we will reflect on the birth and formation of the Church, and be inspired and instructed by the story of how the ministry of Jesus led to the next chapter of God's Kingdom plan – renewing the world through the formation of a “new humanity.” Your community will be invited to trust and depend on the Holy Spirit in sharing the love of Christ in your world. You will also be invited to explore ways of “living together and for others” that will share God's Kingdom priorities in words and actions.

KEY BIBLICAL PASSAGES

Acts 2:1-12; 42-47; 4:32-37; Ephesians 2:11-22

BACKGROUND

The first church was formed in a time of persecution, confusion and hope. The early followers of Jesus were small in number and did not have all their thinking straight (see Acts 1:6). Jesus told them to pray and wait for the Spirit to come upon them to do what they could not do alone. Thankfully, they obeyed – and when the Spirit came, a “new humanity” was born into this world. Immediately, language and ethnic barriers were broken down, and the good news of salvation in Christ was boldly shared. The early followers of Jesus experienced new power that helped them form the first Christian community, slowly bringing life and hope in a world of injustice, inequality and suffering. What's more, they were beginning to have “global” impact by living out the priorities of Jesus “locally.” They were becoming God's “Kingdom people” through their life in community.

BRIEF THEME SUMMARY

God has created a community through which he both reveals and accomplishes his Kingdom intentions in our world. Described as the “body of Christ” in the New Testament, the church community is meant to be a sanctuary of belonging,

a greenhouse for spiritual growth and formation, and a training centre that equips us to take the love of God into our world. The Church cannot simply be content to live with the status quo. Rather it must challenge societal constructs which oppose God's values of compassion, truth, justice and love. Though the Church always will be wonderfully diverse in its expressions and personality, it remains united in core beliefs and purpose – following the way of Jesus into the world. In being God's servants and Jesus' followers, the Church provides an early glimpse of God's new humanity in the new heaven and earth promised at the end of history.

STORIES & ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Kevin Makins is a church planter in downtown Hamilton, Ontario, for a new congregation called The Eucharist Church. He describes the church's location as a place of "all sorts of refugees, urbanites with money, and longtime residents. We are dealing with issues of displacement, renewal and gentrification."

The Eucharist Church's focus is on being a community where Christ is Lord and people are reconciled. This means being integrally involved in the well-being of the community.

"As a church, you have to know why you are located where you are located," Kevin says. For downtown Hamilton, this means being a prophetic, caring light, given the unique challenges. "One way to do so is bringing people together for conversation so everyone will be heard, especially those whose voices may be ignored. Through this we are also trying to help people hear what God is saying to them today. Reconciliation with God, with others and with our city – it all goes together," Kevin explains.

Like the Early Church, the people of Eucharist Church centre their worship time around the 'eucharist,' which is an ancient Christian word that describes the Lord's Supper. "For many years people have been gathering

to share the meal, and at the table they've found healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is a time when everyone is on the same level, eating and drinking from a common cup, and it has a profound impact on the way we view each other in Christ. We have people who are 'low income' eating next to people who are 'well-off', eating next to the 'trendy artists.' We have all these different worlds, which in a city like Hamilton would often be split up – but here they gather together around what Christ has done," Kevin says.

Kevin also insists that taking communion together is NOT a sign that we "have it all together" or have "checked all the boxes," but is a way of saying "yes" to whatever God is doing, of entering into a much bigger story. In that way it also symbolizes the past, present, and future work of Jesus. "As we break ourselves open and pour ourselves out for each other and for our city, we experience a foretaste of the future, when all will be reconciled and we will be one," Kevin says.

2. Al Fewkes is Associate Pastor of Youth and Young Adults at Kennebecasis Baptist Church in the town of Quispamsis, New Brunswick. His focus is helping the youth take the values of Christ into the world, which has involved working with Habitat for Humanity to improve the quality of people's lives. The youth group also had an opportunity in 2010 to help a woman who lives alone, and whose house was in need of repair. "She was in a wheelchair and had not been upstairs in her own house for a very long time. We were able to bring her own possessions down for her to see!" Al says.

The following Christmas the youth group decided to make it possible for the same woman to celebrate Christmas in her house. They bought her a tree, decorated her home, and threw her a party. She said it helped her make it through what has normally been a difficult Christmas season. She has now begun to attend worship.

3. Main Street Baptist Church in Saint John, New Brunswick is located in the “old north end” of the city, surrounded by crumbling buildings, slum landlords, poverty, and crime. Since 2004, John Knight has served as the full-time ministry staff person dedicated to serving the neighbourhood. The church has intentionally begun to partner with others in the community – police, health professionals, teachers and social workers – to shape a new vision for O.N.E. (old north end), dealing with both the symptoms and the root causes of the problems in the community.

Main Street Baptist has embraced a vision for a “beautiful community of faith” that is rooted in the salvation experience and is holistic and integrated in its outreach to people. “Ours is a model of transformational discipleship that is all about partnerships,” says Knight. The church presently offers free meals and Bible studies to the community, teaches health and life skills, and runs a clothing closet and food bank. Their dream is to bring to reality a Hope Ministries Centre which would inspire social enterprise, create a playground for families and children, and secure housing for vulnerable adults and at-risk youth. At a recent Sunday worship service, people from the community were baptized, having made a profession of faith in Christ. “Community outreach is actually not budgeted in our church,” Knight says, “but ours is a generous congregation who loves to welcome the stranger in our midst”.

SERMON SUGGESTION

Introducing the First Church Again; God’s Kingdom Community

Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47, Acts 4:32-35

The core activities of the first church in the book of Acts provides the blueprint for global discipleship emerging from the life of the local congregation.

BACKGROUND

To bring into focus the life of that first group of believers, it is important to remember that Jerusalem was a place of significant poverty and material need in the first century. The population was faced with crippling famines and food shortages. Fishermen and peasants who had migrated to the city often had trouble finding work, and older Jews returning to the homeland to die increased the number of elderly people who needed care and support. In a number of places, the New Testament writers also mentioned the plight of widows and orphans, who struggled in a patriarchal society with no social security or welfare.

Regarding spiritual need, we should remember that the leadership of the Jerusalem temple had conspired with the Roman government to have Jesus crucified (see John 18:19 - 19:16). This does not indict all people of the Jewish faith in the time of Jesus, but speaks to the corruption of the official leadership. It also explains the fear that the disciples had after Jesus was crucified and also the frequent and strong persecution launched against the early believers when the church was born and grew.

It was in the heart of this great city that the first 120 disciples waited and prayed for 50 days until the Holy Spirit brought them to birth as God’s Kingdom community for the world. As these first Christians gathered and began to live out the truth and love of Christ, we are given two “cameos” of the early church in the book of Acts, which give us helpful insights to the vibrant life of God’s people.

The two passages in Acts teach the following truths:

1. The early Christians were united: “one in heart and mind” (4:32). This was directly a result of the power of the Holy Spirit, but also centered in careful teaching and bold leadership. The unity in Acts 2:42-47 was an outflow of the coming of the Spirit earlier in Acts 2; the unity in Acts 4:32-35 follows the statement that the Spirit had filled them (Acts 4:31).

Also of crucial importance was mature human leadership – the disciples had often squabbled when they were with Jesus, but the power of the Holy Spirit now held them together. This underscores the vital importance of dependence on God's power and wise, mature human leadership in Christian community today.

2. Their relationship with one another was seamlessly linked to their relationship with God, whom they praised and worshiped (Acts 4:47). Acts 2:42 describes the central activities of prayer, as well as learning from those in authority (the apostles) who had themselves learned from Jesus. Verses 42 and 46 separately mention "breaking the bread" and "eating," which refers to both the sharing of communion as well as everyday meals. Their unity of purpose was not forced or obligatory, but marked by gladness and sincerity (2:46).
3. The word for "fellowship" – the Greek word "koinonia" – meant more than just comradeship and a sense of team spirit. It was also used (in 2 Corinthians 9:13) to indicate a partnership of sharing material resources. In order for many people to survive the harsh economic conditions in Jerusalem, generosity and sharing of material goods was essential. This distribution was "as the need arose" (2:45, 4:35) because the attitude was that everything was "held in common" (4:32, 2:44). This does not mean that people abandoned private property (there continues to be reference to individual homes, as in Acts 12:12). What was key was a willingness to make possessions available and to share resources. As a result, there was "no needy person among them" (4:34). In this way the early followers of Jesus continued to live out the ministry priority of Jesus who brought "good news for the poor" (Luke 4:18), both materially and spiritually. It also fulfilled God's Kingdom intention that dated back to the early formation of Israel, when God instructed the people that "there should be no poor among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). The passage in Deuteronomy, and the life of the early church, reveals that this is God's preferred will for all creation.

4. The powerful example of the early church's support for the poor would continue into the first few centuries. Bishop Ambrose of Milan (4th century) reportedly said that "a slave redeemed at the church's expense is a more beautiful sight at the communion table than a chalice of pure gold." The example of the early Christian community also challenges us to consider the words of John Stott: "Christians living in poverty today are a standing rebuke to the church."
5. In addition to the practical support and hospitality, the early community proclaimed and confessed the risen Christ. This was not a feeble or apologetic proclamation, but "with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all..." (Acts 4:33). Not surprisingly we read that "day by day the Lord was adding to the number those who were being saved" (2:47). What Christians have sometimes termed as 'evangelism' was not a special program or sporadic activity; it emerged naturally from eating together, sharing material resources, and opening to God's power in declaring the risen Jesus. Bolivian theologian Mortimer Arias describes this as "evangelism by hospitality." It also brings to mind what Jesus did when he offered to eat at Zacchaeus' home on the day the tax collector found salvation, making a pledge to share his material resources with the poor and victims of injustice.
6. Between the two beautiful snapshots of the early church activity we read of persecution (Acts 4:1-31). In declaring that "Jesus is Lord" to the world, the early believers faced fierce opposition from those who believed the Roman Emperor provided the basis for peace in the world, and the Jewish establishment that was strongly opposed to the message and Lordship of Christ. Persecution still exists today in places where Christians boldly commit themselves to truth and justice in a manner that threatens ungodly principalities and powers. Persecution should not be confused with Christians being ignored or ridiculed because they are self-serving or irrelevant.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING AND PREACHING POINTS

By praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit to enable them, the early church community was unlike any other charitable organization or service group – they were to become God’s new humanity, evident in Acts 2:1-12 and Ephesians 2:11-22. Explore and explain the multilingual capacity to communicate “God’s acts of power” in Acts 2:11.

A more modern example is found in Martin Gilbert’s book *The Righteous*. There Gilbert speaks of a Ukrainian farmer who provides refuge and protection for Jewish people who are hiding from the Nazis. When the farmer learns of their ethnic origin, he offers prayers in Hebrew during mealtime. This is a poignant example of how Christians are to communicate God’s love in a manner that accommodates the needs of those being served – in words and actions.

In studying the Book of Acts in general and Acts 2:42-47 in particular, point out that the early church committed to the following priorities or core activities that began to impact their world:

- Community – finding ways to gather to support one another physically and spiritually, grow in their faith, and begin to show the world how Jesus Christ had united them and was achieving his Kingdom intentions through them
- Justice and Compassion – addressing the needs of the poor, marginalized and vulnerable – single women and widows, diseased and disabled, orphans
- Hospitality – Eating together and sorting out ethnic and religious tensions inside the church – in particular, addressing differences in culture and spirituality between Jews and Gentiles who were turning to Christ (we will provide more discussion of this in the upcoming Session Five)
- Proclamation and Confession – declaring that “Jesus is Lord” to the world and facing the reality of persecution from those who worshiped and believed the Roman Emperor provided the basis for peace in the world, and the Jewish establishment that was strongly opposed to the message of Christ

What are the local and global ministries in your church that correspond to the four priorities of the early church? Take some time to describe and acknowledge how God is working his Kingdom priorities through your church’s ministries.

In extending love and truth of Christ into their community, the early church faced both external opposition and internal tensions (e.g. between Jewish and Gentile Christians). What are some external and internal challenges or barriers that inhibit the Canadian church (and your church community) from reaching out boldly to our world with the grace and love of God?

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination* Walter Brueggemann explains that Christianity in North America has been so influenced by consumerism and individualism that we have become numbed to the needs of those around us. Take some time to boldly and carefully share with your congregation some of the reasons that Christians and churches today can justify not reaching out more boldly to the world. Share the Biblical concept of “welcoming the stranger”. For the Hebrews this meant treating the alien or foreigner with kindness, fairness and generosity (e.g. Deuteronomy 1:16, 14:38-29, 24:14,17). Similarly, the early church was instructed to be generous to strangers (Hebrews 13:2, 3 John 5).

APPLICATION TOOLS

There are some innovative and imaginative examples of how churches in Canada today are nurturing a global discipleship mindset, beginning with impacting their own neighbourhood and community. The books by Tim Dickau and Karen Stiller/Will Metzger listed below offer examples of churches who are creatively and fruitfully impacting their communities in both material and spiritual ways. A recent issue of *mosaic* (Spring 2009) described the work of three other churches: Apohaqui Community Church in New Brunswick, Awaken Church in Calgary and Parkdale Neighbourhood Church in Toronto.

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Go to www.cbmin.org to read the story.

For starters, plan a church leadership meeting by asking the participants to read the *mosaic* article, and come with ideas on how your church can impact your community more deeply and creatively. In particular, explore some ways your church can welcome the stranger more intentionally and wisely.

As you discover what is happening in other churches, consider inviting a pastor from one of the churches to come and lead your church or leadership team in a retreat that explores your outreach strategy.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Tim Dickau. **Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice, and Confession.**

Cascade Books, 2011.

Karen Stiller & Willard Metzger. **Going Missional.** Word Alive Press, 2010.

Gary V. Nelson. **Borderland Churches: A Congregation's Introduction to Missional Living.** Chalice Press, 2008.

Rick Rouse & Craig Van Gelder. **A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation.**

Augsburg-Fortress, 2008.

Rick Barger. **A New and Right Spirit. Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture.** Alban Institute, 2005.