

18

CHURCHES SPROUTING LIKE FLOWERS

Throughout human history, whenever people get excited about something, they tend to gather in groups and talk about it. God made us this way. The interests can range from football to needlework to the latest book, but are often about something more important, like the birth of a new baby or a new spiritual understanding. Outside the closed gate of Eden, Adam and Eve's descendants began to gather to sacrifice and pray. The patriarchs gathered their families around them to tell the stories of how God had led them. In time, people built temples and synagogues where they collected and read the writings of prophets and sages.

While Jesus was here, people gathered around Him by the thousands, and after He returned to His throne, that story spread like wildfire. As it had been when Jesus was alive, people gathered by the thousands to hear Peter or Paul or James. But in order to discuss and thoroughly understand what they heard, they had to also gather in smaller groups. Read or have someone read Acts 2:46. You'll notice the people went to the temple to praise God in large groups, but also met day by day in each other's homes, sharing both physical food and the spiritual food of God's word together. In this way the church grew with astonishing swiftness.

In the back of a Bible, or online, you can find maps of the journeys the early disciples made through their world. Paul's missionary journeys are the best known, both because of clues in his letters and because Luke kept a journal that we now call the book of Acts. This one man, and his changing companions, crisscrossed all along the Mediterranean, from Palestine on its eastern end, through all the countries along its northern shore, and all the way up to Rome, halfway up the "boot" of Italy. Today, driving a car on our better roads, it would be over 2500 miles to drive from Jerusalem to Rome. Paul and the other missionaries walked, or rode horses or carts, or traveled in boats. Those were the only options. And yet they crisscrossed back and forth several times. Some even believe he got as far as what is now Great Britain. All along this route, churches sprouted up like wildflowers, mostly in people's homes.

We know far less about the travels of the other apostles, but old stories say they went all over the world they knew then. Tradition has Thomas founding the first Christian church in India in AD 52; Mark is credited with founding the Coptic faith in Egypt; Andrew is thought to have gone to what is now Russia; Philip may have traveled to North Africa, and some believe Mary Magdalene went to France. We won't know the complete truth of any of this until we meet them in heaven, but what we do know is that the people who heard told others, and those told others, until within one lifetime, the gospel traveled throughout the known world.

During what we call the Dark Ages, as false teachings got a strangle hold on Europe, the gospel seemed to languish, but there never was a time when God didn't have believers, hidden though they might be, and from the 1300s on the light of truth began to flash out again.

In the time of the reformers, churches began to sprout up again. People who heard the reformers speak or read their writings began to try to get Bibles in their own languages, to learn for themselves. It wasn't easy to get a Bible, so when one person had one, others gathered around that one and little home churches began and grew until they needed buildings of their own. For example, no one knows how many churches Martin Luther himself started, let alone how many were started by people who heard and believed what he had to say about God's love and grace. Soon, despite his opposition, they even began naming themselves after him and the Lutheran denomination was born.

That evangelizing spirit is one of the signs of true reformation whenever and wherever it happens. It tends to come in waves. One of those waves happened in several countries on several continents during the 1830s and 1840s. The resulting "advent movement" planted the roots of our own Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and several others. We believe that there will be another great wave of light before Jesus comes again. Read His promise in Matthew 24:14 and lift up your heads—He's near!

DEVOTION

Let's review the steps that set the early church on fire when Jesus went back to heaven. You may like to have a scribe record your findings.

1. First, review Acts 1:4. What did Jesus tell them to wait for?
2. Now look again at verses 14 and 15. Who is there? Is it only the eleven remaining faithful apostles? Is it only men? How many are gathered? What are they doing and what is the effect on them?
3. Look at chapter 2:2-4. What happens? What happens in the following verses?
4. Now read verses 42-47. Find and list all the characteristics of this early church. Discuss how the things you have read before this contributed to this result.

How similar or different is your local congregation?

What can a young person do to help?

Well, first of all, remember what "church" is. It's just faithful Christians gathering.

Starting a church is not confined to organizing an official congregation. It could be a study group at your school or in your home. It could be a bicycle evangelist pedaling from village to village, or an online series of Bible studies.

It doesn't even have to be confined to a religious gathering. What does James say true religion is, in James 1:27?

1. What if your home could be a church without actually being a Church?
2. Could it be a safe place where people could come if they were hurting or in need?
3. Could someone come to your room if he or she needed to talk?
4. Could a family who were hungry find food and help in your kitchen?
5. Or could you be the one to go, as Jesus did. Could you visit someone who was lonely or sick?
6. Could you help a mother with her children or an old man with his garden?

In Daniel 12:4, describing the time of the end, Daniel records the angel as telling him that many would run to and fro and knowledge would increase.

Do you think that describes our times accurately?

In Habakkuk 2:14 God makes a beautiful promise.

What is it? This can only be completely fulfilled after the earth is made new again. But do you think it can also begin before that?

Ask God if there's anything He wants you to do to sprout new growth in His kingdom. And beware—besides all of the above, He may want you and your friends to start an actual new church congregation! It could be true. Just wait to see where He leads.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

“Play church.” You may have played church when you were a little child. Here is a more purposeful way of trying it again. What if your group were the only church in your town? How would you organize? Pay attention to the different gifts among you. Who would be the speaker or speakers? Who would be the helpers? The musicians? Would you do your services the same or differently from the ones you are familiar with? Organize and create a mini church service. Or create a program and actually offer it to your church or community.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, body + heart + mind = one living soul.

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Reread Acts 2:42-47. This week you will use this passage in two ways. One is to find heart, mind, body, and soul for yourself in it. The other is a little different. It's possible to think of a particular congregation as one body. You may have noticed that groups have a kind of "soul" or "personality" of their own, beyond the individuals that make up the group. See if you can define the heart, mind, strength, and spirit of the early church described here.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Which of the characteristics and actions of this group as a whole showed their heart and emotion? Which call to your own heart and emotion? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Where do you see mind and thought and intellect at work in the group depicted? Is this a strong or weak area for you? Are there ways God calls you through this passage to strengthen or balance your mind? Sometimes, especially when still in school, we tend to let our minds overbalance us. This is not healthy. How many verses in this passage speak to thinking? How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body*: What are the specific ways the early church worked for the physical health and strength of themselves and the community? How can you imitate them? What are the ways God wants to strengthen your body this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit*: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, consider the “soul” of the early church. Was it well-rounded? What made it so? Are you well-rounded? Where do you need to exercise or relax different sides of your being?

DAY SIX: Your family, community, and church have their own personalities, too. Where do you see the characteristics you’ve studied at work? Where do you fit in?

DAY SEVEN: Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings.
- Build something.
- Create a podcast or blog post or Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY

written by
Debbonnaire Kovacs

General Conference Youth Ministries Department
12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904
Phone: 301-680-6170 Fax: 301-680-6155
Website: gcyouthministries.org
Email: youth@gc.adventist.org

A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

We have had some longer skits, so here is a shorter, easier one based on Lydia's story in Acts 16.

CHARACTERS

1. Lydia
2. Several other women
3. Paul
4. Silas
5. Timothy
6. Luke

PROPS

None necessary. Define a space that is "by the riverside" and perhaps mark where the city gate is.

ACT 1

Scene: Lydia and the women are gathered by the river, talking and praying. **Paul, Silas, Luke,** and **Timothy** could be outside the door and come in to represent traveling. They walk slowly toward where the women are.

Paul: Even though we've been in Philippi for a few days now, I'm still tired from all the traveling and preaching. I'm so glad it's Sabbath! (Others agree: "that's for sure, amen to that," and so on.)

Luke: Where shall we meet?

Timothy: We could go to the synagogue.

Paul: I think there will be a prayer group outside the gates. There sometimes is. There's a nice place by the river.

Silas: (Points to women) There's a group. It's only women, though.

Paul: That doesn't matter. In God's new kingdom there is neither male nor female. (He leads the way to the women, who look up and see them.)

Lydia: (All the women stand to greet the men) Welcome. Are you visitors to Philippi? (They nod.) Are you worshipers of God? Would you like to pray with us? (All the men thank her, nod, or whatever, and they all sit down together.)

Timothy: It's so peaceful here by the water.

Silas: It's a beautiful place. Do you ladies know about Jesus and His resurrection? (The women shake their heads, but look interested.)

Lydia: Resurrection? You mean from the dead?

Paul: (Smiling) I know it sounds impossible. Let me tell you a story. You see, centuries ago, God promised to bless the whole earth through the Jews. All through the centuries, our prophets have promised the Messiah. (The women nod.)

Lydia: Yes, we do know about that. We've accepted the Jewish faith.

Timothy: (Excitedly) Yes, but He's come! The Messiah has actually come! (realizes he's interrupted his elders and looks embarrassed) Sorry, Brother Paul. I didn't mean to interrupt.

Paul: (Smiles) That's all right, Brother Timothy. God has called you also. You shouldn't let people look down on you just because you're young. Why don't you take it from here?

Timothy: (Excited again) Okay. Well, sisters, this is going to seem unbelievable, so hear me out. God sent a Man, born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. He preached and healed...we could take hours and hours telling you all His miracles. But His teachings were the most important. He says God loves everybody, every single person. Loves us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to live and die for us!

Lydia: Wait—die for us?!

Paul: (Shakes his head sadly) Yes. He was loved by thousands, but you can imagine what the church leaders thought. They were jealous. They killed him. (Women look shocked.)

Silas: On a cross.

Women: react with horror. On a cross? They crucified Him? That's horrible! (And so on.)

Paul: I never got to meet Him in person. (He straightens from his sorrow, with a face of amazement.) But He called me anyway! To preach, especially to Gentiles.

Women: Like us!

Paul: Yes—I met Him in a vision, and I so did not deserve His mercy! But that's the thing about Jesus. He came to show us the unbelievable mercy of God. Jesus died in our place and saved us from all our sins. Now all we have to do is accept and trust Him and be baptized.

Lydia: That's all?

All the men: That's all.

Lydia: That's amazing! (She looks around.) We've been talking so long I lost track of time! I believe! Here's the river, can't I be baptized?

Paul: (Showing his delight) Yes, absolutely!

Lydia: And then won't you come and stay at my home? I have plenty of room, and I want you to tell the rest of my household about all this!