

Introduction:

"I like a small church, everyone is close and nobody falls through the cracks." "I like a large church because nobody bothers me." These seem to be opposite statements, but in fact they are the same. Large churches can lose people in the crowd. Is this problem inevitable for large churches? If it is, maybe we should quit converting people. After all, what is the point of bringing people to Christ, if doing so pushes others away? Or is this a problem with modern approaches to keeping up with people? To answer these questions, we must first understand the problem. All Christians have needs: relational needs, spiritual needs, emotional needs, benevolent needs, etc. When those needs are not met, even Christians will feel lost and drift away. Before scoffing at these as weak, keep in mind that God established His church so we could provide for one another. This year, we have focused on the Jerusalem church, seeing their devotion to God, their unity in heart and soul, and how they simply couldn't help but point others to God. Another key to their success was losing no one in the crowd. In **Acts 2:41**, the church numbered about 3000. By **Acts 4:4**, the Jerusalem church had 5000 men, with wives and widows they easily numbered over 10,000. In **Acts 5:14**, multitudes were constantly added. The Jerusalem church was a large congregation. How did they keep up with so many people? They didn't have phones, e-mail, church directories or record keeping software. Yet, people were not lost in the crowd.

Discussion:

I. Jerusalem's two keys to losing no one in the crowd.

A. Leadership development not just worker development.

1. In **Acts 6:1**, we find one instance when the Jerusalem church overlooked someone: the Hellenistic widows. Notice how the church dealt with it.
2. The apostles did not tell the congregation as a whole to do better. They did not divide up the widows among themselves. They did not divide the congregation up into work groups with a set number of widows in each group. They didn't start new churches all over Jerusalem. Rather they assigned seven men to be in charge of this task (**Acts 6:3**).
3. Consider the number of widows there must have been. If you extrapolate from the number of widows in our congregation, the Jerusalem church likely had over 400 widows following the day of Pentecost. As the multitudes added up to 15,000 members, they would have had close to 600. No wonder these seven were placed in charge of the task and not told simply to accomplish it.
4. By necessary implication we recognize what happened in this church. The congregation was growing (**Acts 6:1**). This caused some of the members to be lost in the crowd. Their needs were going unmet. The church had authority to meet this need. So the apostles set up a group of men who would be leaders over this work. These seven men, of necessity, would then begin to develop others to accomplish the fulfillment of these needs.
5. This demonstrates a key need we have. We have to develop leaders, who will in turn develop more leaders and equip the members to accomplish the work that is necessary.

B. House-to-house relationships.

1. The other key is that the Jerusalem saints did not just relate to one another in the crowd. They related to one another in smaller groups. However, there is no indication of assignment. These Christians simply met together in one another's homes. Seemingly, this took place through what we might call "circles of contact."
2. Allow me to show you an example of this in action though not in Jerusalem. In **Acts 9:36-43**, we read the story of Tabitha. When Peter arrived in Joppa and came into the upper room, he found a group of widows displaying the tunics and garments Tabitha had made for them. Tabitha saw a need among a particular circle of believers and she filled it. We have these kinds of circles all around us. We have family circles, neighborhood circles, Bible class circles, role circles (elders, deacons), circumstance circles (widows or young-marrieds), age circles, similarity circles (baseball fans, enjoy sewing), affinity circles (card clubs, woodworkers), job circles (Paul and Aquilla were both tentmakers), proximity circles (who we sit by in

the congregational assembly), etc. We must not just view these as circles of contact, but as work circles. When we do so, who will be left out?

3. What should we do from house to house?
 - a. First, as we noticed with Tabitha, we should learn to meet the needs that others have. Tabitha made tunics and garments for widows. Can any of us do similarly? Having spent time with others, have you learned they need something you can provide? Then do it for them. Seek people out to serve.
 - b. Second, notice what the early Christians did when they spent time together. In **Acts 2:46**, the Christians spent time together socially. This demonstration of hospitality did more than just meet the needs of the saints who had come to Jerusalem from far off. It caused them to get to know one another. It caused them to grow closer to one another.
 - c. Third, in **Acts 2:47**, we learn that the Christians spent time from house-to-house praising God. For them, worship was not just about the assembly. No doubt, they sang with one another. In **Acts 12:12**, the brethren prayed together. In **Acts 20:20**, the brethren studied together.
4. This demonstrates a key need in our congregation. Each of us must work on developing “house-to-house” relationships with others, spending time with one another and praising God with one another. We must allow these relationships to be flexible: new people coming in, other groups branching off, etc.

II. What all this means for you as an individual member of this congregation.

- A. This means the work of serving does not belong to others. It belongs to you. **Ephesians 4:11-12** says so. Don't wait for the church's next program. Don't bemoan what the elders haven't done. Don't expect somebody else to take care of a need. You do it. Then we will be held together by that which every joint supplies (**Ephesians 4:16**).
- B. This means you must not expect the preachers or elders to attend to your needs personally. Can you imagine what would happen today if our widows claimed they had a need and our elders or preachers said, “We do not have time for that; assign some other men to be in charge of that task”? Yet, isn't that exactly what the apostles said in **Acts 6:2-4**. According to **Acts 6:5**, this plan found approval among all the Jerusalem saints. Let me bring it home to something we actually deal with: hospital visits. It is not a preacher's job to make hospital visits. It is a Christian's job. When all of us are visiting those in our circles of contact, everyone will be cared for. We must understand how the desire for the preacher to make hospital calls is crippling growth in American churches. I have received advice from numerous preachers. “Edwin, if you want people to listen to you when you preach, you have to visit them in the hospital.” If you do not listen to Bible truth because I didn't visit you in the hospital, I will not be the one who is lost. But we might all be lost if we continue a pattern that cripples our growth. Do you realize that one person can only handle the responsibilities of about 12 to 15 relationships? I could never visit the hundreds of sick and shut-in we would have if we converted as many people as the Jerusalem church did. And we will never convert that many people if I have to try. Brethren, we will lose our own souls if our desire to be personally attended by the preacher or elders limits the number of people we can bring to Christ. Let's be like the Jerusalem church and all work together on this.
- C. This means you must recognize you are a working part in this congregation. According to **I Corinthians 12:14-18**, we may be an eye, an ear, a hand or a foot, but we all have to do something in this congregation. The worst concept people have today is that the work to do within a church is what is done on the stage in the assemblies. **Romans 12:4-8** provides a representative list of differing functions we have in the church. Only “teaching” is used in the public worship, but even it is not limited to the assembly. People need to be encouraged and comforted. They need to be taught. They need prayer. The sick need to be visited. Those in need, need help. What can you do in these situations? According to **I Peter 4:10-11**, we all have been given special abilities. We each can do something. Whatever abilities you have are to be used to serve others. Can you cook? Feed somebody. Can you work as a handyman? Help somebody. Can you speak? Teach somebody. Can you pray? Pray with somebody. You have abilities and you must use them to serve others. Do not sit back and wait to be served. Figure out what you can do to serve others. Then serve them.

III. The Livingston Plan for House-to-House relationships

- A. With all of this in mind, as much as we would like all of these relationships to develop organically, we have discovered that some oversight and direction is needed. Some purposeful steps to develop these two keys' Leadership development and House-to-House Relationships, are necessary.
- B. That is why, as we have already announced earlier in the year, the shepherds have been working on a new House-to-House plan. This corresponds with our circle of discipleship. As we have stressed again and again, a disciple honors God, learns from God, loves like God, and points others to God all while abiding in God's

Word. As such, we have developed plans and are developing plans that will help from a congregational perspective with each step of this growth process.

1. As a congregation, in order to help you develop your ability to **Honor God**, we pursue our Sunday assemblies. Obviously, there is overlap in all that we do, because everything we do honors God. Further, we know that you will do many things individually to honor God. But as a congregation, the number one plan we have to help you develop that part of your spiritual growth is our Sunday assemblies.
 2. As a congregation, in order to help you develop your ability to **Learn from God**, we have developed our weekly classes that take place on Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Certainly there is overlap in all we do, even in our assemblies we teach and thus learn from God. And, of course, there is plenty you will do on your own to learn from God. But as a congregation, the number one plan we have to help you develop that part of your spiritual growth is our weekly classes.
 3. As a congregation, we do not yet have an official plan for **Points Others to God**, though we encourage and push for that in all we do and our Guest Evangelism program is providing opportunity for that work. However, once we get our Love Like God plans running smoothly, that will pave the way for us to bring more people in and will allow us to focus more officially on this part of the discipleship circle.
 4. As a congregation, in order to help you develop your ability to **Love Like God**, we are developing our House-to-House Meetings. Obviously, there is overlap in all we do as we prompt loving each other as Jesus did in our assemblies and classes. Further, there is plenty you will do on your own to love like God. For instance, the monthly birthday and anniversary bash that Marita and I put on, the Sunday nights at the park the Hagemos and other young couples started pushing, the get togethers some of you host for the college age and high school, simple time together that families do, all of this helps us love like God. But as a congregation, the number one plan we have to help you develop this part of your discipleship growth is our new House-to-House meetings.
- C. Already this year, we've worked on developing some new leaders (part of Jerusalem's success in this area) by conducting a couple of pilot H2H meetings. We appreciate your patience as many of you heard from those who were able to participate about how beneficial they were and wished you could go ahead and be involved. We're sorry we couldn't just open up to everyone immediately. This sort of semi-organic approach to these H2H meetings will take place in stages.
- D. At the end of our pilot groups, we now have the leadership in place for 9 H2H meetings. These will begin in September. These groups will be unassigned. That is, we are not going to assign you to anyone's meeting. Rather, sometime in August, we'll allow voluntary sign ups. You will be able to see who is leading which meetings, when and where they are taking place, and you will be able to decide if you want to participate. In this first round, we are hoping to get close to 50% involvement. It will be first come, first serve on the sign up. We wish we could immediately establish meetings for 100% of the congregation. But, as we said, this kind of approach takes time. We would rather move slowly, but surely, than quickly and falteringly.
- E. The purpose of our H2H meetings is to help develop deeper relationships around spiritual growth. The goal is not socializing, but mutually digging deeper into applying God's Word to our lives and, through that, developing more meaningful relationships that will prompt deeper connection and service to one another. We want to accomplish the two important keys that Jerusalem used to keep from losing others in the crowd: leadership development and house-to-house relationships.
- F. Stay tuned over the next month for more lessons that will explain what is happening with our H2H meetings and how you will be able to get involved.

Conclusion:

We've got exciting plans to help you grow in your discipleship by loving like God. However, do not let these plans cause you to say, "Wow, that is exactly what we need. I can't wait until our house-to-house meetings get started." Right now, determine to implement the Jerusalem keys in your life this week. Meet with one of your brethren for a Bible reading or study. Invite some people over to sing praises to God. Invite some over to pray for some specific needs this congregation has. Invite someone over for a meal or a game night. Spend time with someone who has invited you. Call someone who is absent. Catch someone doing something right and honor them for it. Seek someone out to serve this week. Cut their grass, take them a meal, mend their clothes, clean their house, wash their car, fix their plumbing, visit them in the hospital or nursing home, etc. Whatever you can do for them, do it. You cannot do all of these things this week. But do at least one of them. Determine right now what you will do, for whom and when. Once you accomplish that, figure out what you will do the next week. Then the next and the next and the next, etc. When we each make this commitment, no one will be lost in the crowd and we will grow.