

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, one of our guests told me they dropped into our classes and assemblies not really expecting much. They normally like to be part of smaller congregations where they can dig deep with others and live life together. But they have had trouble finding a congregation so they decided to check out this group that meets on Livingston Avenue whose sign says they are just trying to be Christians. He told his wife something like, "We'll probably walk in, sit quietly, and walk out. No one will notice us, and no one will speak to us. But we can at least check it out." However, each time they've been our guest, they get surrounded and stick around for 30 minutes or more just talking with folks. He told me what he decided is we are a large congregation with the heart of a small congregation. First, let me say to the members here, good job. We've purposefully tried to work on our friendliness and welcoming nature. You are doing a great job, and I simply ask you to keep it up. The 10-minute rule is bringing glory to God. Second, this highlights something we all need to recognize. Folks today seem to think we have only two options. Either one, be part of a small congregation in which the members can get really close, but the congregation can't do much work. Or be part of a large congregation that can do more work, but the members necessarily drift apart and isolate. What we need to see is we can be part of a large congregation and a small congregation all at the same time.

In fact, that is exactly what we see happening in the Jerusalem church. You think 350 is a large congregation? Imagine getting to your second Sunday and going from 120 to about 3000. That was a large group and they were doing great work. They were reaching new people for the Lord every day. But at the same time, they had the heart of a small congregation. How? Because, as we learned recently, they didn't simply relate to one another in the crowd. They also related to one another from house to house (cf. **Acts 2:46-47**). In **Acts 4:4**, the number of men came to about 5000. The whole group then could be over 10,000. In **Acts 5:42**, despite their growth, they were still busy doing their meeting in the temple and from house to house. For them, the issue of large and small wasn't either/or; it was both/and. They met as the large congregation at the temple, and they lived their faith together in small circles from house to house. With that in mind, I want to explain the great benefits of having a both/and mentality on this. Let's consider the great blessings about both the assembly and the living room.

Discussion:

I. Blessing #1

A. In the assembly, we are reminded of the army.

1. When we spend our time in the trenches, day in and day out fighting the battles of faith (**I Timothy 6:12**), facing the devil and his powerful minions (**Ephesians 6:12**), we can forget we are not alone. Sometimes we can forget that we are part of something much, much bigger than us. Further, when we make the false dilemma choice to simply be part of a small group, we can tend to think there are only a handful of us. That can be a real depressing drag. That can cause us to fear God's side is losing.
2. When we gather in the assembly, meeting with the crowd, we are reminded we are not alone. We are part of the Lord's Army. Look around you. Look at all these people fighting the same battles you are every day. Look at them, here again, drinking from the refreshing well as they plan to go back out into the war. You are not alone. There are battalions of soldiers fighting with you every day.

B. In the living room, we are reminded of our family.

1. But if you want real support, you look for family. In the living room we see our family. The living room is where we develop the relationships that allow us to encourage the older men as fathers, the older women as mothers, the younger men as brothers, and the younger women as sisters (**I Timothy 5:1-2**). It's in the conversations around the kitchen table and over coffee that we get involved in one another's lives.
2. There are many churches that claim to be family, but family doesn't just meet once per week in a huge hall. Family spends time together talking, sharing, caring, supporting, disagreeing, challenging, provoking, crying, laughing, hugging. The living room is where we truly provide the shoulders to cry on, the counsel to carry on, the band aids to keep on. Years ago the Cheers bar became known as the place where everybody knows your name. Everyone wants a place like that. What were they saying? Everyone wants family. That doesn't happen in the army, but it does happen in the family. It may not happen in the assembly, but it does happen in the living room.

II. Blessing #2

- A. In the assembly, we stand with one another in the presence of God.
 - 1. When we gather as an assembly, singing, praying, and praising God, we are standing together in the presence of God. Certainly, we can individually enter God's presence as well, but in this setting we are linked spiritually arm in arm as a group of God's people surrounding His throne in equal chorus.
 - 2. I recognize, of course, the 350 or even 10,000 (as in Jerusalem) is not near the same as 144,000 (cf. **Revelation 7:4**) or a multitude no one can count (**Revelation 7:9**). But it is the assembly that allows us a glimpse of heaven, the power of many voices around His throne blending in praise to God.
- B. In the living room, we sit with one another in the middle of life.
 - 1. In the living room, we can share the pain of a miscarriage. In the living room, we can share the struggle of betrayal on the job. In the living room, we can pray together with arms draped around each other's shoulders because of marriage or parenting struggles. In the living room, we can also truly rejoice the career promotion. In the living room we can truly celebrate with one another the victory of a child who has turned to the Lord. In the living room, we can honor victory over some troubling sin.
 - 2. It's not just about those extremes. In the living room, we hear and heed the council of others. In the living room, we can share the prayer requests and pray for one another. We think it is the assembly where prayer requests get the most and best attention, so much so that people get irate when their prayer request doesn't get mentioned in a list of announcements. But which is better? Your request being in a litany of hundreds of others, most of which are missed, with the promise that someone at some time will pray for them. Or, your request shared in the intimacy of the living room as people pray with you right then? The living room allows that; the assembly doesn't. In the living room, we can open up our hearts and our lives to each other, sharing encouragement, seeking help, being challenged, being comforted.

III. Blessing #3

- A. In the assembly, we celebrate what God has done for all of us.
 - 1. Every Lord's Day we gather around the Lord's Table to celebrate what Jesus did for us on the cross. As **I Corinthians 11:23-26** reveals, we gather to remember the body and blood of the Lord. The body that was broken by whips and nails for us. The blood that was poured out on the ground on our behalf.
 - 2. I need that reminder. Regularly, I need to be reminded that Jesus has offered the sacrifice for my sins. He has paid the price for my debt. I can have victory no matter what happened last week because Jesus Christ is our propitiation. And He has done that for all of us. What a celebration! What a joy it is together to commune around the Lord's Table and remember what He has done for all of us.
- B. In the living room, we celebrate what God is doing for each of us.
 - 1. In the living room, as we share and listen, we learn how God is working in each of our lives. As **Hebrews 10:24** explains we need to provoke one another to love and good deeds. In the living room, we get to open up and see how each of us growing. We get to experience that growth together.
 - 2. In the living room, we get to be honest about our struggles with what we heard in the assembly. In the living room, we get to talk about where we need to grow and where God is growing us. It is in the living room where we get to share our increasing victory over anger, lust, gossip, lying. In the assembly, we celebrated together what Jesus did to cleanse our sins. In the living room, we get to walk with one another and witness how God is providing each of us victory over our sins.

IV. Blessing #4

- A. In the assembly, we share our resources for greater kingdom impact.
 - 1. In **I Corinthians 16:1-2**, Paul talked about the collection that the congregation was taking to help the saints in Judea because of the famine there. It is because of this gathering we are able to do work that none of us could do on our own. It is because of this collection of resources we are able to support preachers in foreign fields. It is because of this collection of resources we are able to help brethren in need.
 - 2. No doubt, the larger the assembly grows, more work can be done. The more we individually share our resources the more we can accomplish. Think of all that can be done as we grow in this aspect of our assembly together. Think of those we could even send from this congregation to spread the gospel in neighboring communities or in foreign fields. Think of the support we can provide when disaster such as famine, tsunami, earthquake strikes our brethren in other places. What a great opportunity we have.
- B. In the living room, we share our time for deeper personal discipleship.
 - 1. In the small groups that gather in living rooms, there are not many pooled resources to accomplish large works. However, what we are doing is sharing time. Let's face it, spending time with each other in the

living rooms and kitchens takes time. No doubt, as relationships in those settings deepen, we'll find that it won't just be time in the living room and in the kitchen, but also spending time out in the backyard cutting grass, cleaning out gutters, fixing cars or broken furniture. Being in those living rooms leads to spending time together in hospital waiting rooms and with extended families in nursing homes.

2. It is in those living room relationships that individually we share of ourselves and our time to provide the needs. What Dorcas did in **Acts 9:36-42** was a living room relationship kind of thing. It is a sacrifice, but what wonderful benefits and dividends they pay. In a culture where social equity is dwindling, it is in our living rooms that we develop those relationships that motivate the sharing of time and self.

V. Blessing #5

A. In the assembly, we are inspired to go higher.

1. When we gather in the assembly, someone opens the Word inspiring all of us to grow and go higher. No matter the topic. Whether the proclamation of the Word in our assembly reproves, rebukes, or exhorts (cf **II Timothy 4:2**), the goal is to challenge us to reach as high as we can.
2. Whatever we learn about in these lessons is intended to help us reach for Jesus Himself, to be like Him. To live like Him. To spark us to open our hearts and let Him walk us into the presence of God.

B. In the living room, we are challenged to go deeper.

1. But in the living room, we are challenged to dig deeper. Too often, in the assembly alone, the inspiring messages of sermons, songs, and prayers can bounce off of us once we make it to work on Monday. In the living room, our brothers and sisters challenge us. Exactly how are we doing with those messages we've learned? How are we doing at love, mercy, holiness, victory? What struggles and sins are holding us back? What attitudes do we need to increase? Which ones need to decrease?
2. In the living room, we are able to make applications together with other Christians. In the living room, we are able to share what challenges we are facing regarding the lessons we are learning. In the living room, we are truly able to provoke one another to love and good deeds (**Hebrews 10:24**). In the living room, we are able to open up our hearts and minds and share where the message isn't sinking quite right yet. I think about the sermon we had earlier in the year in which 60 to 80 men responded saying we wanted to go higher as husbands. In the assembly, we were inspired to soar higher. But it is in the living room that I'm able to say to another husband, "I know I preached that sermon, but I'm really struggling right now at soaring that high. This week I just don't like the idea of being Jesus. I don't like the idea of loving first. I want Marita to love first sometimes." It's in the living room that another husband is able to say, "I know the feeling. Aren't we glad Jesus didn't take that approach?" To which I respond, "I don't really like you right now either." But it is the living room that provokes that opportunity to dig deeper.

VI. The Assembly and the Living Room at Livingston

- A. I am super excited about assembly opportunities we have here at Livingston. I'm also super excited about living room opportunities. I think many in this congregation have taken advantage of living room opportunities on their own, developing relationships with other Christians, spending time together. However, as the congregation gets larger and larger, it becomes harder and harder to make sure that is happening.
- B. Therefore, in September, we are going to kick off our House to House relationships. Think about it. We are developing the opportunity to have very purposeful living room relationships with others. We are developing relationships where everyone knows your name so when you gather here in the assembly you know this is the place where someone knows your name.
- C. On August 16, the shepherds and I will be making a presentation about our 2015-2016 theme and plans. More information will be given about the House to House meetings. Then on August 23, we will open up the meetings for you to sign up for which one you want to be part of. In this first session, we have enough leaders for about 50% involvement from the congregation. We hope to grow to at least 80% within the first year. The first session will be 12 meetings over 13 weeks (taking Thanksgiving week off), starting the week of September 13 and ending the week of December 6. We'll have another 12-week session in the Winter/Spring of 2016 and then another 10-week session in the summer, and so on.
- D. Here is an opportunity for us to become more like the Christians in **Acts 2:46-47; 5:42**. We can gather here for our assemblies to be reminded of the army, stand together in the presence of God, celebrate what God has done for all of us, share our resources for greater kingdom impact, and be inspired to go higher. Then we can gather from house to house in order to be reminded of our family, sit with one another in the middle of life, celebrate what God is doing in and for each of us, share our time for deeper personal discipleship, and be challenged to go deeper.

- E. Here is what we would like from you today. Take out your Connection Card, write your name on it and let us know today if you would be interested in being part of one of our house-to-house meetings and then drop the Connection Card in the collection plate when it is passed in a few moments. This is not you signing up for one of the meetings. We won't take your card and assign you to group. This will simply give us an idea of who is interested and willing to commit to the weekly house to house meetings this fall.

Conclusion:

Assembly and living room. Growing a large congregation with the heart of a small congregation. The Jerusalem church didn't seem to think it was an either/or proposition. They saw it as a both/and proposition. Some seem to waffle between extremes. Some think all they need is the large assembly. "Come in each week, get inspired, get my batteries charged up to go it alone throughout the week." Others think all they need is the small group. "I just want to be part of a small group where we live life together." Can we encourage both?