

“Come Holy Spirit?” – Stephanie Wing, 6.7.09

I want to tell you about a church. It was the church my sister and her family went to for 8 years while they lived in the small town of Abingdon, Virginia. Abingdon is a town about the size of Harrodsburg, with historical and cultural attractions that draw tourists, like Harrodsburg. Like Harrodsburg, Abingdon has many churches, both new and historic, independent and denominational. So just picture Harrodsburg as I tell you about their church.

Highlands Fellowship was started by Pastor Jimmie. He grew up in Abingdon, but had since pastored churches in Texas and Kentucky. Each time he went home to visit, he would say to his wife, Lori, "Someone needs to build a new kind of church here." Finally she said, "Why don't you do it?" After prayer and preparation, Jimmie and Lori moved back. In December of 1994, they held an open house to talk to people about their vision. By March they had 40-50 people meeting regularly to prepare for the first service. Their first worship service, held in a community center on Easter Sunday, drew 156 people. Five years later, on Easter Sunday of 2000, they moved to their brand new, 46,000 square foot worship center and had 1200 in attendance. Today they average over 3,000 people each week in 4 different locations, and they continue to grow and expand. It has always been quite unbelievable to me that in a town with just over 7,000 people

and so many other established churches, this kind of phenomenon could happen.

Can you imagine that in Harrodsburg?

I still get an occasional mass-email from Pastor Jimmie. Listen to some excerpts from an email I got just before Pentecost: "Sunday is Spontaneous Salvation....Do something spontaneous right now! Call and invite a friend to church this Sunday. Pray for them to hear the good news and say yes to Jesus. Your friends will be surprised at how awesome it was to be in church. They will be blown away at how God knew what they needed and then provided it! They will be amazed at how the Music was a style they could relate to. They will love Ronnie's sense of humor and the message at how God touched their heart and opened it, seemingly spontaneously! So what are you waiting on? Follow Jesus, invite someone!"

Now some of you might be squirming in your pews a little, perhaps thankful that you AREN'T at a church like that. Thankful that you aren't at a church where we advertise that kind of music, highlight the sense of humor from the pulpit, and talk about how awesome it will all be. Thankful that our church would never be mistaken for a warehouse, and probably even thankful that our church will never have 3,000 people here on a weekly basis. Could you imagine the parking problems? Don't get me wrong – Highlands is doing some amazing ministry.

Pastor Jimmie is a man of deep faith with clear gifts for leadership and ministry. Despite the huge success and growth of the Church, he remains a humble servant of Christ. That being said, I doubt that many of us would choose to make Highlands our church home if we lived in Abingdon.

Looking around at some of the big mega-churches, I often think, “how did that happen?” How did something so big come from something so small? Really, that is the question of our Christian faith, too. From a rag-tag group of fishermen and followers of Jesus we now have the Christian church, 2 billion strong worldwide. How did that happen?

It all spread through evangelism, a word that comes from Greek and literally means the spreading of a good message. Today “evangelism” is often a distasteful word that recalls a long history of less than desirable tactics for spreading that message. Perhaps you’ve encountered someone who will ask a total stranger if they are saved, if they have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, or if they have contemplated where they will spend eternity. I don't like those questions much. And yet Peter's proclamation in Jerusalem, part of which we read today, is one of the clearest, "Come to Jesus!" sermons that ever was! And it was effective – that day 3000 people joined the church. Even Highlands took 15 years to come that far.

This text should be a real challenge for us. After all, we don't often see this kind of Holy Spirit interference in our church today. We probably don't want to see it. This work of the Holy Spirit is highly disturbing. We often look to the Holy Spirit as a comforter, and rightly so, but we too easily put the Holy Spirit in a comfortable box. We forget that when the Spirit moves, things really shake up. Lives are changed. People are called to do strange and uncomfortable things. When the Holy Spirit descended on Pentecost, EVERYONE was called to preach and prophesy - not just the pastors!

The growth of the early Christian church was totally improbable. There was just a small group of people who had known Jesus. Then one Sunday they brought in a praise band, opened a brand new building with all kinds of bells and whistles, and they found the best public speaker to come in, tell a few jokes, and then slip in a good message they could easily relate to their daily lives. It was a huge success. But wait, that's not what happened at all...

Gathered together in a simple place, the Holy Spirit descended on the group. ALL of them began to preach about Jesus Christ. They didn't promise freedom from financial worries, stronger families, or how to get your best life now. They simply preached the gospel. They told what they had heard, seen, and experienced in the person of Jesus Christ. They didn't do this on their own - they were

empowered and filled by the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised to send his Spirit after he left them. But we are also promised the Holy Spirit. Do we really expect it to show up? Are we ready for it?

It is easy to remember that we are a church. We look like a church. We act like a church. But what is the message that we declare? What good news do we have to share? And how do we share it? We can get trapped in a mindset of trying to figure out what we can do to grow the church. Certainly there are things we can do that might help. Our friendliness and welcome is really important. Both of our recent guest preachers couldn't say enough about how much they loved being here, how welcoming and hospitable everyone was, and how they felt right at home. But perhaps we could do more to invite people we know to come to church, or to reach out to members who we haven't seen in a while, or to follow up with visitors. Maybe we need to do more outreach in the community, or even just invite people to come and join us for a Sunday. Recently a Harrodsburg native and long-time member of the Baptist church stopped by to see us, and mentioned it was her first time ever in our church. We joked about it, then she said seriously, "No one ever invited me before." How many people just need a simple invitation? You never know how an invitation might end up changing lives. In our passage from Isaiah, God asks, "Whom shall I send?" God sends us to invite others, to share the

good news that we know. Isaiah said without hesitation or reservation, “Here I am; send me!” Are we as quick to answer?

But even as we think of how we might grow our church and increase our witness, we also need to reformulate the question. We shouldn't ask what we can do, but rather what the Holy Spirit might do in our midst. In the fifth chapter of Acts, when the apostles are on trial before the Jewish council of elders, a wise and respected Rabbi, Gamaliel persuades the council not to kill the apostles.

Regarding this movement of Jesus' followers, he says to the council, if it is a human undertaking, surely it will fail, but if God is in this, it can't be stopped!

Are we praying for the Holy Spirit to move in us and through us? Are we prepared for that kind of disruption? Recently we heard Bishop William Willimon share a story about a small Methodist church in Alabama with a new pastor, a recent seminary graduate. He called her to see how things were going, and she said that on the first Sunday, there were 12 people in church. Everyone told her that no one lived in that tiny little town anymore, but she discovered that there WERE people who lived there, in run down trailers and shacks just on the other side of the tracks. So she went down there and started talking to people, and invited them to church on Sunday. She even offered to go pick them up before the service, cook lunch for them afterwards, and then bring them home. The next

Sunday there was such a crowd that she had to drive back and forth a few times to ferry them all. On Palm Sunday, she baptized six adults. The Bishop said, "Wow, that's great! You started with 12 and have already added 6 more members?" She said, "Not so fast. Easter Sunday we lost 6 members." Apparently in the week between Palm Sunday and Easter, a few of the families decided that they didn't want to go to the same church as crack addicts and their children. Ouch.

When the Holy Spirit moves among the people, everything moves. You can bet that items will shift during takeoff and landing, and that nothing will ever quite settle back into what it once was. We pray for the Spirit to move, but are we ready to go where it will lead?