

Community Church of Issaquah

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## The Mission of the Church

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When most of us hear the word, “church” we immediately think of a structure or a building. If we drive down Front Street, there are churches all along the way – buildings. We look up an address for a congregation and there under the title “churches” we find where that particular group meets. That’s the way most of us picture what a church is - a building. Even though that structure might just be the gathering place for a congregation, there is a much deeper meaning to the concept of church than that.

When I came to the Seattle area in 1985 to pastor a small church in the Ballard community, we worshipped in as quaint and old two storied building complete with a steeple. Before it become home to Grace Gospel Chapel, the church I pastored, it was a German Lutheran church. The church stood out in the neighborhood and was easily spotted when you gave directions of how to find it. Like many churches during the past few years, the membership of it had declined to only 8 people – far from the 150 or so when I pastored. As a result, the building was sold, and on that site now there stands four modern condos. It pains me to drive down that street now. When I expressed my sadness about the loss, the woman who was pastor at the time said, “It’s only a building.”

In reality, churches are a great deal more than just a building. Churches are gathering places for bodies of believers who seek to form a family and who gather to worship and serve. Just like Community Church of Issaquah, this “church” is truly much more than this building where we meet on Sundays. It is a home for a family. This concept had not

implanted itself in my brain from my earlier years as a Christian or even as a minister. Reality came knocking when I left the Southern Baptist Church in Wichita, Kansas, and searched for a new church home. After months of seeking to find a comfortable place to belong, I realized that I wasn't making much progress.

A couple of my new friends and I decided to have a Sunday night Bible study and we met in my living room. We initially chose the Epistles of Paul to begin our study. One night one of the four faithful attenders said, "These churches Paul talks about aren't buildings, are they? These people met in homes just like us, didn't they?" I had not thought about that, but realized how very true that observation was. The four of us sitting in my living room had become a church. Over a short span of time, that four-member church grew rapidly and within two years we had purchased our own building and the family had grown to about 175 members. That is always how churches form and how they change, just as CCI has done since 1890.

If a church isn't just the structure or just the number of members, what is the reason to have one? Paul makes that very clear in the verses we shared from the book of Acts. "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." There are three important lessons to learn from this instruction given to those early believers who had gathered in homes long before there were buildings.

First, we are to keep watch over ourselves. Often, congregational members and attenders lose sight of the need to take care of yourself, as we often tend to focus on others, particularly those outside the church. But each of us has a personal obligation to make sure that we continue to grow and mature in our faith. What does that mean? Clearly, we are to continue in our devotion to the Word of God, studying, reading,

questioning, and maturing. Remember the days when Sunday School was that special time in churches where we were taught more and more about the Bible. We all read them faithfully and learned so much from those teachers whose work was to educate us. Sadly, those days are gone for most churches.

Our own personal growth and self-care must also include spending time in prayer and building our personal relationship by communicating with the Lord. This is the work of keeping watch over ourselves. If we were to take a little survey, it is likely that most of us would say this has been a portion of our church work that is lacking or has slowed down over time. Yet, this one emphasis is surely the most solid foundation of any church. How can a church prosper or grow – not just in numbers but also in its outreach – if its members do not build stronger individual faiths and fail to keep watch over themselves? We know the answer to that.

Aside from our own attention to ourselves, there is a second equally important lesson in our Scripture passages today. “Keep watch over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” We all have responsibilities to provide care and nurturing to the other members of our church family. We are told to be shepherds of the church of God. What does that entail? If we compare it to an actual shepherd, we can get a clearer picture. When someone is responsible for a flock of sheep, for example, there are specific duties to be met.

In addition to protecting them from any outside danger, the shepherd must make sure that each one of the flock is fed and is led to the best grazing places. Water must be provided as well and a safe place to rest at the end of each day. How does that apply to you and me? Simply this: as human shepherds for those who are in our “flock,” we should always be compassionate that each person is in a safe place, that they are

nurtured and fed spiritually, and that we must never abandon them while in our care.

The work and mission of the church calls each of us to be caregivers for those in our faith family. Years ago, I was always impressed with the work of so many people in the church, particularly the women. The moment it was learned that someone was sick or in need, food appeared on their doorstep and a list of providers was created to make sure that for whomever needed it, the necessities were provided. Feed the flock. We don't usually do the food provisions these days, but we do feed our friends with prayer and encouragement. There are angels in this congregation who have gifted me with surprises more than a casserole or cake to be caregivers to me. They have fed me in my time of need.

Just as we have in the past provided edible foods for others, we are entrusted with the work of providing spiritual food for them as well. Each Sunday when we engage in our time of prayers and praise, I am hopeful that each of you see this as a time when those who care reach out in compassion and love to give you spiritual nurturing. I truly believe that when we engage in that time of sharing, it is the witness of how much we truly care for each other and how we want to spiritually feed the flock. It is that strong evidence of the sincerity of your commitment to be true disciples of Christ that shows how we do indeed keep watch over the flock. I honestly believe that if anyone in our church were to say, "I need. . ." before they had finished their request, someone would be there to feed them and to be their caretaker. Feed the Flock.

There is a third mission of the church, and it goes well beyond the doors of the home or the building where we meet to grow in our desire to be stronger disciples. There is a very delicate and needy world outside of our church, and we are called to, as Paul wrote to the believers in

Colossia, “Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.”

It is the work of every church to reach outside their walls to find those who are in need of God’s mercy and grace. Throughout the year, offerings are taken here at CCI for various mission needs, from Retired Ministers and Missionaries to our Christmas project in our own community. This is the work of the church. Whether we collect clothing for the unhoused at Tent City, or prepare a meal for them, or make a contribution to Camp Burton for its upkeep, this is all the work of the church that God gives us to do.

Three missions of the church: keeping watch over yourselves; keeping watch over the flock we are led to oversee; and reaching beyond our walls to a world filled with people in need. It is very common for a church – any church – to have a mission statement. CCI has one but I won’t ask you to repeat it right now. What I would ask of you – each of you – will you at some time today take a few minutes of evaluation to see how close to Paul’s words you and our church are focused. I believe with all my heart that you will be very proud. You should be.

Let me close with more of the message Paul wrote to the Colossians when he said, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” My hope is that we move into our Congregational Meeting with that sense of overflowing thankfulness for this church and this faith family.