

We are at a crossroads as a church. We are praying about and planning to add a second service and a second pastor. These are huge changes on par with hiring me as your first pastor and deciding to move forward with our building project. If you were with us in 2007 when we voted to hold a capital campaign you know that it was a real faith stretching time. How could a group of 80 people build a half million dollar building? Less than half you were here at that time and only a handful were here when you called me fourteen years ago. But here we are preparing for two huge changes.

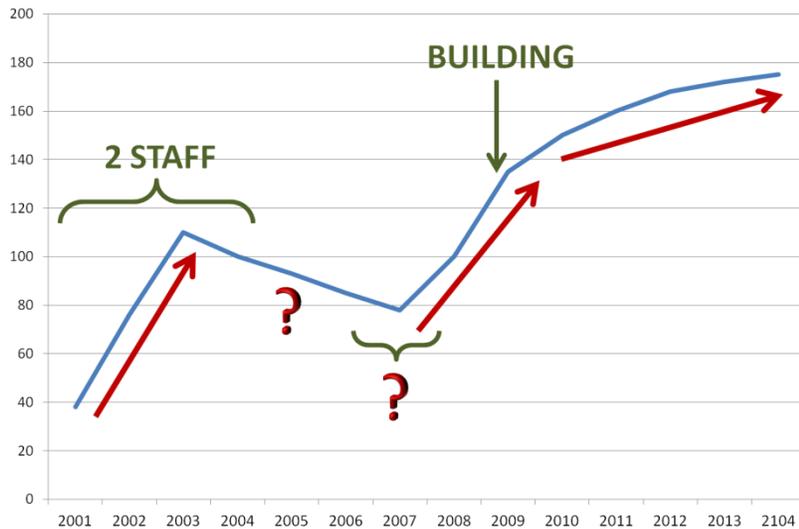
Why add a second service? I sent a survey about the second service to the whole church but did not get very many responses. The main thing the survey did was tell us that we have not done a good job at explaining the reason for wanting to add a second service. If most people had been able to explain our vision but only a few people did not understand, then I could conclude that those few people haven't been paying close enough attention. But when the majority do not understand our vision, that's not your fault. That's our fault. We obviously have done not a sufficient job at explaining our vision. The same goes for our vision for a second staff. We talked a lot about a second service two years ago but we've talked very little about the second staff. But what little I have heard doesn't match what we are thinking. So again, that is our fault, not yours.

So this is the reason for the short series in the book of Acts. The plan is to dig into this book of the early church in order to best illustrate our vision for adding a second service and adding a second pastoral staff. Let me read the passage and then make some comments about our current situation.

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the

proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Worship Attendance 2001-2014



Here is a chart of our worship attendance from 2001 to 2014. It has some interesting parts to it. Our first two years were a time of rapid growth. Percentage wise, this was our peak growth period. I think a big reason for this was due to the fact that we had two full time pastors. Many of you don't know that when I came to Viroqua I brought Jeff Gordon with me. Through a few years of meeting and praying together Jeff and I decided to plant a church together. We became a church planting team in search

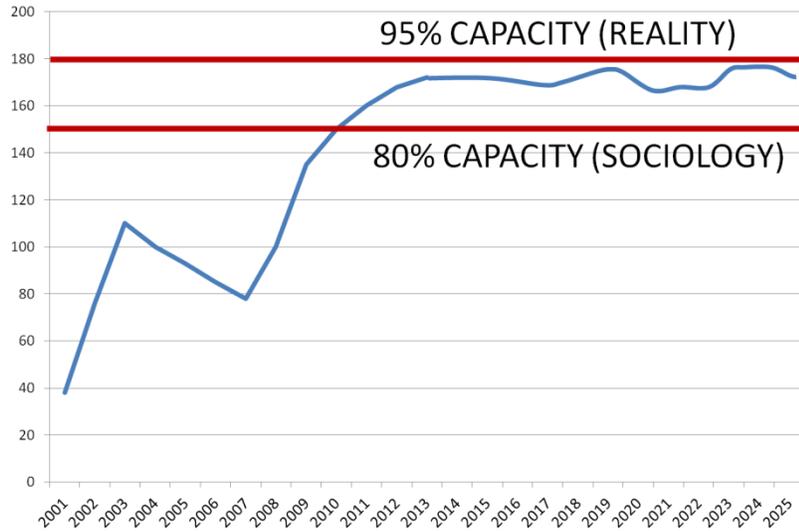
of a location so when the church called me to Viroqua, Jeff and his family came also. This was possible because Jeff raised all of his own support. I am convinced that having two pastors had a huge impact in those early years.

Then we began a slow decline of about five years. To me, there is just a big question mark over this time. I am not sure why it happened. Losing Jeff almost certainly was part of it. Three of those five years we worshipped in the auditorium of the Landmark Center so that probably didn't help either. But I am not sure if we will ever know the answer.

So we had this slow decline, but then in 2007 we started to grow again, not as rapidly as before but steady growth. Some of you will look at that and say, "Well that must be when you built your building." Maybe, but we did not move into the building until August of 2009. We had well over half of the current growth before we moved in here so that can't be the full explanation. From my perspective there is another question mark at the turn around point in 2007. In 2007 we decided to build but I don't know how that would suddenly cause the church to start growing again. After we moved into our building the growth curve began to level off. and we find ourselves hovering at an attendance of 175.

This is all well and good. I am grateful for what God has done in and through us over the past fourteen years. There was more than one of our founding members who never thought we would make it this far. But good stewardship, good discipleship and good leadership causes us to ask the question "What next?" What will the next 10-15 years bring and how do we lead Grace Church through these years? Let me show you another chart.

Worship Attendance 2001-2025



This is my best guess at our worship attendance over the next ten years if we do nothing. Many of you know the 80% rule. Once a church reaches 80% capacity in their sanctuary they will stop growing. I have always thought that this was merely a sociological principle. There's some truth to it but you certainly can't quote chapter and verse on the matter. And sure enough we broke right through the 80% capacity barrier. We've been there for a few years now. But now we face another barrier called reality. This rule cannot

be broken. If you worship under a spreading tree in the Congo, then you are not limited by space but if you worship in Wisconsin, this is your limiting factor. There's no argument with this barrier. Therefore, if we do nothing, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to realize that we will be bumping up against this barrier for the next ten years. Many church experts would say that we will actually start to decline after a few more years.

So that is the summary of where we have been and where we might go if we do nothing. In light of all of this, some of you might wonder if we are just too focused on numbers? Is this whole thing just a numbers game? Why are we so concerned about growth in numbers. Aren't there more important things to be doing as a church? These are all fair questions and present a good opportunity to more clearly explain our vision for adding a second service. So let's jump into the text.

I want to start with the last verse in this passage, verse 47.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Aha! See, God is concerned with numbers so we should be too! That's not the point of this passage is it? But there is some significance to these numbers. Notice the progression as the early church grew.

- Acts 2:41- *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*
- Acts 2:47- *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*
- Acts 4:4- *But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.*

All of this happened just in Jerusalem. The church grew exponentially after Paul and company carried the gospel to the Gentiles. This is part of our vision--not to have a church of 5000 but to allow room for God to work. We could have just been a house church. Grace met in homes for

about a year. We could have decided to stay at Cornerstone when which only had room for about 50 people. We could have but all along the way we decided to make room in order to allow God to work.

We are a church filled with sinful people. were you aware of that? When you come you just add more sinners to the tally. So we are very far from perfect but we do feel that God has blessed us in so many ways, and I don't mean just numerical growth. Here's the thing. You have chosen to make this your church for a reason. You believe that it is a good place for you and for your family if you have one. If you think it is a good place to grow in your faith, why would you not want that same opportunity for others? That doesn't seem quite right, does it? It's good for us but not for anyone else. We're full now so sorry, just go away. If we do nothing we might as well lock the church doors a few minutes after service starts.

Now I realize that these verses in Acts are talking about conversion growth. Everyone of these are brand new believers being added to the body of Christ. We desperately want that also but that it be done within a healthy, disciple-making church. Who is the church for--believers or unbelievers? Ultimately you could say both but the church is designed for believers. It is a place for them to grow, and I don't mean just Sunday morning. All that the church is, is for the life of the believer. However, you come and grow so that you can go and tell. You grow in your faith so that you have a faith to share with others. Our job is not to design a church where most unbelievers will want to go. Our job is to have a church that will teach, train and equip believers to leave here and carry your faith to those who don't know Christ. We must have discipleship *and* evangelism-evangelism within the context of healthy discipleship.

What I am describing is often called church health. If an organism is healthy, generally speaking, it will grow. This is exactly what we see in the early church. There was spiritual growth and numerical growth. Look again at verse 42.

And they devoted themselves to:

- *the apostles' teaching*
- *and the fellowship*
- *to the breaking of bread*
- *and the prayers.*

These four things are basic to the Christian life. The apostle's teaching would essentially be the same thing as studying and preaching Scripture. Theirs was the authoritative teaching of this time period. And what did they do with the apostle's teaching? they were "devoted" to it. I'm going to go into an in depth word study in the Greek language here. Do you know what the word devoted means in Greek? Listen carefully-it means 'devoted.' But how many of you could say that you are devoted to the Scriptures? You might believe that Scripture is the word of God, it's reliable and all that, but are you devoted to it?

And how would you measure devotion? Let's start at a very basic level. How often do you simply read the Bible? If you only spend 10 minutes per week reading the inspired Word of God, could you say that you are devoted to it? But devotion goes so much deeper than that. Besides, reading the Bible never produced a mature believer. That's right. reading your Bible does not

make you spiritual. But if you don't read your Bible you'll never mature. It's a matter of application and obedience. Reading is a habit. Obedience is devotion.

These four basics of the Christian life are often called "means of grace." They aren't magic. You don't get grace merely by doing them but by being devoted to them. The second means of grace listed is fellowship. I think this is really relevant to the issue of adding a second service. Probably the main reason that we should not add a second service is due to the fact that we will be separated. We will no longer all be together on Sunday morning. Actually, that *should* bother you. If it didn't bother you, I would be concerned. That would mean that you don't care. That would mean that you are not connected to other people in the church body and that would be a shame.

Our fellowship is going to change but one thing that a second service is not changing is our unity. I hear some people are concerned about this. We need to make a firm distinction between unity and fellowship. Our fellowship will be affected-no question. But our unity does not have to be affected. We are one body in Christ. We are a unified body even if we are not in the same service.

But even the fellowship problem is answered by this passage. Be devoted to fellowship. Are you devoted to fellowship with others in our body? We can't be best friends with everyone, but being devoted to fellowship means that you are welcoming to others. I guarantee you that there are people sitting in this room that each of you don't know. And some of the people you don't know are not first time visitors. Sometimes these folks have been with us for a year or more and you still don't know them. You might know their name but you have never actually met them or said a single word to them. Do you think that is being devoted to fellowship?

There will be a natural grief process to this change. Adding a second service is a BIG deal at so many levels. You will feel a sense of loss but I want you to understand that is normal. Expect it to happen and don't be surprised by it. Embrace the grief and don't allow it to convince you that it was the wrong decision. It's the same thing that happens when our kids grow up and move away. The change of them being apart from us is a loss. There is grief but it's a good grief. As much as we love our children, we really don't want them to love with us for the rest of their lives and if you do, you've got a whole different kind of problem on your hands. We want them to grow up and make their own way in life. But the process of change feels like a loss because it is a loss. Expect the grief. Embrace the grief. Pray your way through the grief.

And it also means that we will have to be that much more devoted to fellowship, and I don't mean just fellowship dinners. What might that look like? Let me throw out some possible applications.

- If our best buddies end up in a different service it means that we will need to create other ways to remain in fellowship with them. This can be done in your home, over coffee, at Bible studies, etc.
- If our best buddies end up in a different service then we need to build bridges of new relationships. If you walked into this church for the very first time, how would you want to be treated? You know what a good experience would look like so I encourage you to welcome newcomers in the same way you would want to be welcomed.

- We will need to create some other avenues for fellowship. We will have two problems in regard to future fellowship dinners. First, if we grow much more at all, we won't be able to fit downstairs. It's often very tight as it is. And second, if you attend the first service will you want to go home and come back later for the meal? So maybe we need to find another place to hold these dinners? Maybe we rent or borrow another location two or three times per year and get everyone together.
- We will need to get engaged in service. Bible studies and service are the two main avenues for fellowship. I think this is one of the reasons that the building project was such a good experience. During the busiest time, I went two full months without a full day off. I would take off early and go watch Ryan play soccer, that kind of thing, but I didn't have a full day off in two months. But as got through that very busy time I realized that I was not tired or burnt out. That was no doubt due to God's grace but it was also due to the joy of shared service. we had such great fellowship together as we sawed wood and hammered nails. And we ate together every Saturday. That was awesome! But the folks I see who are most connected--old timers and newcomers alike--are those who are engaged in service together. Fellowship, in all of its facets, is a means of grace.

Let me quickly cover two more habits of a healthy church. Look at verse 44. *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

This looks like Christian Communism, doesn't it? And it was in some respects but the huge difference was that it was voluntary. It was not forced sharing but purely love-driven sharing of money and resources. The principle here is that they had a transformation of money and possessions. They realized that they did not really own their stuff. They were just managing it for the Lord. So when needs arose, they gave willingly and generously.

Most of you know that Sarah Boisen is gettin' hitched next month to Colin Landis. My favorite part of officiating a wedding is the premarital counseling where I get to know the couples. I asked Colin and Sarah to put together their first budget. One thing that warmed my heart is that they included tithing in their budget. Here's a young couple who have already believe that they don't own their stuff. It shows a transformation of their money and possessions.

Finally, the last habit of healthy church is found in verse 43. *And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.* They were in awe of the Lord's work. Their affections were transformed. Joy dripped off of their hearts like honey from a honeycomb. It was sweet joy and impressive awe. They saw and rejoiced in what the Lord was doing.

Do you feel that way about what God is doing in and through this church? We began as a rag tag group of somewhat disaffected people. Most of us could never have imagined what we have become. When we reflect upon it, we are truly in awe. This is not just a toot our own horn kind of statement. I am just saying that we are grateful. It probably should not have worked. But it has. God did this. Every bit of it. We have seen people give their lives to Christ. We have seen people healed. We have watched relationships heal and deepen. We have sent countless people to the mission field. We have watched young people grow up and follow the Lord. Sarah was only three years old when the Boisens started attending and now she is getting married.

Churches are tough places. Nowadays, being a healthy church often means just surviving. But God has allowed this church to exist and to grow in spiritual depth and numerical breadth. We have many of the habits of a healthy church. I am in awe and so very grateful. I would hope you could also share in our gratitude and catch our vision to allow make room so allow God to continue to do his work in his church.

Rich Maurer
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