

Becoming... Sermon Series
#2 - From Organized to Organizing
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So, how are you doing on those New Year's resolutions? We're only two weeks in, and I'm noticing some people are already starting to slip. I especially see it at the gym, because I notice the parking lot is a much emptier when I drive by on my way to Denny's. How about your spiritual resolutions? Did you keep them? Did you make them? In our first sermon series of 2018, we're talking about how we can continue to make progress in our journey of faith. We're talking about who we are becoming...

Last week, we talked about the shift in emphasis from believing to belonging. It no longer matters as much that you believe the "right" things, because who's to say what those right things are? Instead, we focus on accepting that we belong to God and committing ourselves to belonging to a congregation and getting involved so that we can figure out what we believe. We belong, we behave, and then we discover what we believe.

Today's journey is from organized to organizing. Now, I can tell you right away that I don't like this topic, because I love being organized. I alphabetize my to-do list items. I separate my M&Ms by color before I eat them. There's nothing wrong with being organized...unless it gets in the way of living out our faith. And for a long time, that's been one of the church's biggest problems.

Of course, it didn't start out that way. At its conception, the church wasn't an organized institution; it was a movement. The early church didn't have boards and ministry teams, and you didn't do pledge campaigns so the finance team would know how many denarii they'd have to work with. No, in the early church, people showed up, they gave what they had, and the church leaders made sure the ministry got done. Jesus didn't start his ministry by forming a committee; he simply called twelve folks to follow him. That right there is the difference between organized and organizing, between an institution and a movement.

So, what happened? Well, as a movement evolves, one of two things happen. Either it fulfills its mission and disbands, or it decides to keep going and turns into an institution. As the church grew, the leaders realized it needed some structure to function. When that happens, two things usually take place: someone calls a meeting, and there's a disagreement at that meeting. Check and check. That, in a nutshell, is the history of organized religion as an institution. Acts 19 actually describes an early church meeting. It says – no kidding – “Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusing, and most of them did not know why they had come together.” Anyone else ever attended a Board meeting like that?

The church as institution became most pronounced after World War II. Once the boys returned from fighting and got regular jobs in the business world, they decided that the best way to run the church was to run it like a business. So, they formed administrative boards and divided responsibilities into departments. In other words, they institutionalized the church. And it worked! Until the late 60s, when the authority of institutions began to crumble. Oh, by the way, guess what year the Disciples of Christ decided to institutionalize into an official denomination? 1968. Talk about bad timing.

So for the last 40 years or so, the church has been fighting a losing battle to preserve its organization, sometimes at the expense of doing God's work. Here's an example that I hope you find funnier than sad. At my last church, we decided we needed to revise the constitution and

bylaws, which hadn't been done in over a decade. And if you want to argue that the church isn't an organized institution, go read that last sentence a few times. So we had an open meeting where we invited anyone in the congregation to come and suggest changes and updates to the congregation. Let me tell ya, if you really want to draw a crowd, put that meeting notice in your newsletter! We decided we'd go line-by-line through the constitution, letting people chime in when that had a question.

The Board Chair started with Line 1. "The name of this church shall be Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)." "Stop!" someone said. "Do we have to have the Disciples of Christ part on there?" Ten minutes of discussion ensued. The Board Chair read line 2. "The purpose of this church shall be to bind together followers of Jesus Christ." "Stop!" someone said. "Bind sounds too constricting. How about 'joins together'?" Ten minutes of discussion ensued. I don't know what happened after that, because I resigned.

And before we start laughing at the expense of other churches, let's not forget that when I started here in 2009, there were 60 people on our Board. And up until last July, there were 39. We're in the midst of experimenting with a 15-person board for the exact purpose of moving from an organized church to an organizing church. I'll be the first to admit we're not there yet, but we're moving in the right direction.

Why is that important? What's wrong with being organized as a church? Nothing, in its most ideal form. But how many churches does that describe? Here's what happens when a movement becomes an institution. A structure is put into place with the initial purpose of sustaining the passion and purpose of the movement. But the more the structure takes hold, the less it focuses on perpetuating the ideals of the movement, and the more it focuses on perpetuating itself. The best example for that is the perennial conflict in almost every church – this one included – between funding the outreach committee and funding the property committee. Do we take care of others, or do we take care of ourselves?

Well, ideally the answer is both, and you can do both when you have enough money. The church has 99 problems, but too much money is not one of them. And what happens when the money gets tighter? Do you give more of it away or do you keep more of it for yourself? Self-preservation is human nature. So, when someone comes up with a new ministry idea, the first question is, "How much is it going to cost?" When a church leads with that question, you can start digging the cemetery plot.

The challenge for churches today, Crestwood included, is to continue to stay organized for the purpose of organizing, because you do need both. Just as you can't be only organized, you can't be only organizing. A church that eschews organization so that they can focus all their energy on praising Jesus will do great until the electric company tells them they're gonna have to praise Jesus in the dark because they can't pay their bills. A healthy church today is organized for the purpose of organizing.

What do I mean by organizing? I mean finding out the greatest needs in our community and organizing to meet them. An organizing church is much more like a movement, calling people together to share God's love in this world, like Jesus sending out his disciples in our passage today. I made fun of my last church, so let me brag on them a bit. Built into our budget was what we called our Seed Fund. Anyone with a new ministry idea could come to the Board and ask for Seed Fund money to start their project. Brian McLaren calls this a "forward-leaning church," and I love that image. How can we be a forward-leaning church, filled with forward-leaning followers of Christ?

It starts by looking around you. What needs aren't being met? One of our church members, a local teacher, noticed that the boys on a local middle school football team had to stay after school for practice, sometimes until later into the evening, without any food. So she organized a bunch of church members to provide dinner for these kids for several weeks. Didn't require a committee vote or board action. She just did it, and hungry kids got fed. That is the organizing church at its best.

I recognize the irony of preaching this sermon a year after we renovated and expanded our Children's Wing. Bricks and mortar is one of the primary ways an institution invests in itself, right? But it only becomes a hindrance to our purpose if we stop using it to organize our service to God. Look, I like a good church meeting as much as anyone, and I'm serious, because a good church meeting is one in which we connect to God and we connect to each other for the purpose of doing God's work. But people don't join churches to go to meetings. They join churches to experience God, to learn about their faith, to make a difference. A good church structure facilitates that, cultivating leaders and inspiring members to follow Jesus out into the mission fields and middle schools around us. Remember, Jesus came to overthrow stagnant, life-draining systems. We have to be intentional about not becoming one of those ourselves.

So, what does this mean for us, as individual believers and as a church? It might mean de-institutionalizing our own perspectives. As we continue to seek volunteers for our blossoming children's ministries, our language needs to move from "I've already served my time" to "our kids need us to help them grow in their faith." As our social action team looks for ways the church can serve the community, the boundaries that this world has so thickly drawn may need to come tumbling down, so that we are pulling together with our brothers and sisters of other churches and other faiths, converging and collaborating in ways that make this world a kinder, more compassionate place.

Here at Crestwood, we'll always have some level of organization. It's who we are. But the minute the organization keeps us from organizing to do God's work, then we're in trouble. If one of you has an idea for doing ministry, but feel like there's not a place for it here at Crestwood, then we've failed in our mission. Our responsibility, as stewards of God's good news, is to help people organize in ways that feed hungry kids and provide hats and gloves for the homeless and throw open the doors of this building in order to welcome all to this table. Let's covenant together not to get so caught up in maintaining the institution that we forget that Jesus called us – and calls us – to be a movement for wholeness in this fragmented world. That world doesn't need one more committee meeting. It needs the love and grace of Jesus Christ. And guess what? That's us. The world needs us.