

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Herding Cats, Managing Church

(Acts 6:1-7)

Study #9

Introduction: A commercials you've gotta love...

It was during the 2001 Super Bowl that my favorite commercial of all time aired for the first time. (In between commercials, I understand that there is a game. Really?)

The setting for this commercial is western. What appears at first to be a crew of old cowhands bringing in a herd of longhorns off the Chisholm Trail turns out to be "cathands," bringing in a herd of shorthairs.

At one point, the camera zooms in on a Tabby fording a river. One of the old "catboys" speaks lovingly of "living a dream" and of heroically enduring scratches.

One grizzled old man is removing cat hair from his leather vest and another sneezes from cat dander. The final scene shows the men riding off into the sunset, driving a herd of hundreds of cats while music suitable for a trail drive plays in the background.

It was a commercial for Electronic Data Systems, but it immediately resonated with me, a pastor, who thinks, from time to time, about the nature of church management.

Now, don't get defensive. I'm not suggesting that Christians are as incorrigible as cats. The Lord Himself might complain about His sheep/cats, but I'm not. After all, I am one.

But the commercial highlighted what has been, for me, a tension, for much of my time as a pastor. How do you manage the work and the people of God? And how do you do so in such a way that respects the uniqueness of the hard-to-quantify spiritual nature of the church's work?

This morning we get to see the first management crisis in the church as we turn to Acts, chapter 6. The fledgling church of Jesus Christ begins to deal with the challenges of organization. And the way they resolve a management conflict instructs us, here at Northwest, in the fine art of LOVING church management.

When we last saw the twelve apostles, at the end of chapter 5, they had just experienced a night in jail, a public trial, a brutal beating, and a vicious tongue-lashing, with the Jewish Sanhedrin telling them to stop talking about Jesus.

But they had left the Council, *[5:41]...rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

Here is the church triumphant, marching to victory, riding off in victory to live happily ever after. And just when you think that there is going to be smooth sailing, up pops another *growth opportunity*.

The church had begun by the power of the Holy Spirit. It sprang into existence as a living organism. But with its continued growth it began to take on the life of an organization.

That's not a bad thing! But now it has to deal with such organizational challenges as conflict resolution, roles and responsibilities, competing priorities, and structure.

So far, it has needed to exercise its courage and boldness muscles to fight overt persecution.

Today, courage is still required, but not only courage. What is needed is the added combination of solomonic wisdom + sacrificial love.

A Grumbling In the Ranks (v. 1)

An Increasing Church

From dozens

Luke reminds us at the outset that what is recorded here occurs at a time of numerical growth. Thus far in Acts, he has made reference a number of times to the increasing numbers of people who had placed their faith in Jesus.

In the first chapter, he tells us that there were about one hundred and twenty believers.

To thousands

Then, at Acts 2:41, he mentions the addition of three thousand who believed in Jesus when Peter preached at Pentecost. Acts 2:47 tells us that more were added.

To tens of thousands

In chapter 4 the number of the believing men came to be about five thousand, meaning that, with women and children, the number is much greater than that!

And still growing

Acts 5:14 tells us that “others” are still being added. And when we come to chapter 6, Luke tells us that the church is STILL growing. It is increasing. In fact, it is multiplying as more and more disciples are making more and more disciples.

These references to numbers don’t mean that Luke was a card-carrying member of the Church Growth Institute, or that he was obsessed with growing a mega-church.

He is simply indicating - by the numbers - the progress of the Gospel. Dynamic change was occurring in many people’s lives. More and more people were being touched by Jesus.

And what kinds of people are now making up the church?

A “Non-Homogenized” Church

Jerusalemites

Well, we know that citizens of Jerusalem would have made up a significant part of the church. These would have been people who had lived in and around Jerusalem their whole lives, perhaps in families that had lived in Israel for generations.¹

But, there were others besides Jerusalem residents in the church.

Judeans

There were loads of people from towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem who had come to the big city to be healed of their diseases by the apostles. (Acts 5:16) Many of these were likely brought to faith and incorporated into the life of the church. So, there was representation from urban Jerusalem and from the surrounding rural districts.

Internationals

And, do you remember what we saw on the birthday of the church? The experience at Pentecost embraced people who had come from all over the world to observe Passover. Those folks would have given the church a highly ethnic flair from Day One.

And among these internationals would have been a large presence in the church of “Hellenists.”

Hellenists

The Hellenists were Jews whose families had NOT lived in Palestine for generations, if not centuries.

¹ Maybe since the return of the exiles under Zerubbabel and Ezra in the 5th century BC.

These were the Jews who lived among the Gentiles in foreign lands, and who had in many respects adopted the customs of Hellenism (the Greek culture).

These Hellenistic Jews attended Greek-speaking synagogues in the various cities where they lived. Many of them didn't even speak Hebrew or Aramaic. And there would have been huge social and cultural differences between the Hellenistic Jews and the Jews who lived in Israel.

So, the first church ever was made up of a highly diverse group of people. It was not homogenized, but was heterogeneous. And it's not hard for us to picture a church with that kind of a diverse membership.

- Just imagine a church filled with parents, some of whom send their children to public school, others to private school, and other who home-school.
- Or imagine a church where some adults who attend are married with kids, some are married without kids, and some are single.
- Or imagine a church with attenders that call themselves Republicans, others Democrats, while others self-identify as libertarian.
- Or imagine a church whose members include Hispanics, some of whom are first generation US citizens, others are second, with close ties to Mexico or other Latin American countries, and others are third generation.

And on and on we could go. The fact that all of us here live in relative close proximity to one another doesn't mean that there is no diversity among us. There is great diversity here!

And despite the fact that all the Christians were Jews in the church in Jerusalem, there was tremendous diversity there, too.²

There would have been significant differences among the people when it came to culture, background, age, demographics, social status, language, race, dress, politics, musical taste - and more.

² There would not have been a lot of difference when it came to faith, as all of the Christians were Jewish at this point. But there were surely differences in the way the Jewish faith was practiced in Jerusalem and Mesopotamia and Arabia and Egypt and Greece!

With respect to faith, the church was monolithic. Everybody believed in Jesus. But in terms of culture, the church was mongrel.

There is the very real possibility that the Jerusalem Jews looked down their noses at the Jews who had hailed from foreign lands as being somehow polluted by outside, non-Jewish influences.

There was the equally real possibility that the Hellenists looked down their noses at the Jerusalem Jews for being sheltered and unsophisticated.

Put all of the differences together and then throw in the prejudices that so often pollute human interactions and you've got the makings of quite a conflict.

If you add money to the mix (and money is definitely a part of the mix of Acts 6!), the conflict is almost inevitable.

The drama this morning revolves around the needs of a certain group within the church, the group of widows. We are not surprised to discover that one of the primary benevolence ministries of the church had to do with the support of widows.

And Widows slipping through the cracks

The place of widows in God's heart

Some of the widows who were in Jerusalem had placed their faith in Jesus.

So, from the very start of the church, widows have played an integral role in the church's life. In Jerusalem, they attended large group worship services, teaching sessions from the apostles, fellowship gatherings, home meetings, and communion services. Widows were eagerly assimilated into the life of the church.

But widows, in that culture and in most cultures throughout time can be among the most needy of people. That is why the Old Testament gave explicit instructions to the Jews to take care of their widows.³

³ See Exodus 22:22; Deut. 24:19-21; 26:12-13; Isaiah 1:17.

And the church in Jerusalem was determined to follow God's Word in this case. They made a commitment that the widows who could not provide for themselves should be provided for by the believing community.

The ministry⁴ effort of the church to provide for the widows was *organized* and *intentional*. There was a daily distribution of food for the widows in the church. Way to go, church!

However, as well intentioned as this ministry was, it wasn't going well. It really wasn't.

If you had asked the apostles how the ministry was going, they probably would have told you that it was going great. Widows were being served. Food was going out. *"Everything is fine, thanks."*

But there was a problem. It was just a problem that the leaders hadn't seen. It is easy for leaders to be oblivious to significant problems in an organization. That is true in businesses and schools. It is also true in the church, and a low level *grumble* can be heard in the background as we turn to Acts 6.

The place of widows in the church's food ministry

[6:1] Now at this time⁵ while the disciples⁶ were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.⁷

⁴ "Serving" (*Διακονία*) makes its way into this verse as the description of the distribution of food. This word belongs to the word group that describes ministry of all kinds in the New Testament, and which is (nearly) transliterated, "deacon."

⁵ "*At this time*" doesn't really tell us much about the time frame. The interval between Pentecost and this episode was probably quite brief, as in months.

⁶ The converts to Christianity are referred to simply as "*the disciples*" - a first for Acts.

⁷ "In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went around to the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on; and those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the coming week.....It is

It wasn't the widows who were grumbling. Others were grumbling on behalf of the widows.⁸ And, their beef is legitimate. The Hellenistic Jewish widows were not receiving food.

Now how could that have happened in a church that was doing so many things right? Helpfully, Luke doesn't say. By not saying we can let our imaginations run somewhat wild.

He certainly never implies that this tragic oversight was malicious. More likely, the cause was poor supervision or thoughtless administration. I think it was less likely mean-spiritedness and more likely a lack of proper attention to details.

It is hard for me to picture the Hebrew widows cutting in front of the Hellenists in the cafeteria line. But it is easy for me to envision the word about the food distribution plan just not getting out to the Hellenists.

It is easy to imagine crucial information about where to get the food and what time to get it not being communicated in a way that the Hellenists understood.

I can see how that could happen.

- If we send around a church-wide email to get out critical information, a certain number of people won't get the word, either because they don't have an email account or we don't have their email address.
- If we post something on the church web site, some people won't get the word because they don't check the church website regularly.
- If we tell recent attenders that they can visit with us after the worship service in the Hospitality Center or in Community Blend, but don't tell them where either room is, we'll...we've gotten the word out, BUT NOT REALLY.

clear that the Christian Church had taken over this custom." (from William Barclay)

⁸ *Γογγυσμος* - a murmuring, same word used in the Old Testament (the Greek translation, called the Septuagint) for the murmurings of the Israelites against either God or Moses. However, I do not attribute the same negative connotations to the grumbling of Acts 6.

Somehow, these Hellenistic widows weren't getting the word. They were "*slipping through the cracks.*"

And what made it worse was that at this time, the responsibility for the distribution of food was in the hands of the native Hebrews. Whether the Hellenistic Jewish widows were overlooked on purpose or not, it looked really bad.

In our own extremely multicultural society, frictions can arise because of real or *perceived* injustice and discrimination. And when the group in a position of power even inadvertently gives a slight to a minority group, the wrong is magnified and tensions rise.

As well, invariably, the group that is wronged realizes what is happening long before the group in power recognizes it. That's what has happened here in Acts 6.

Hurt feelings and empty stomachs prompted grumblings in the ranks. Let's watch to see what the leadership does about it

Response to a "Situation" (vv. 2-6)

It's the People's Choice! (vv. 2-4)

The Twelve state their priorities (negatively) (v. 2)

[6:2] So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."⁹

The apostles see the need

First, notice that while the apostles saw it as their role to address the situation - even publicly! - they did not see it as their role to meet the need, personally.

The apostles understood how important it was that the church should meet the needs of the widows. But it wasn't going to be THEM who met that need.

The apostles knew their role

In order for them to personally serve tables, they would have to neglect the Word of God. And this, they were unwilling to do.

Now, let's be clear about this. It is not that the apostles considered serving widows to be inferior to teaching. They didn't think that waiting tables and serving food was beneath them. But, they knew that they had been tasked with special stewardship from God for the ministry of the Word.

The apostles saw the dangers

They were commissioned with the ministry of the Word. That included the public preaching and teaching of the Word. They went from house to house giving instruction to smaller groups.

If they got personally involved in the food ministry, the ministry of the Word would be compromised.

To have neglected the ministry of the Word would have compromised the progress of the overall work. People needed to receive the teaching that they alone were able to provide.

The apostles set their priorities

And yet, the matter before them - food service for widows - was also critical for the on-going health of the church.

To have some widows not being served while others were being served was more than unfair. It was loveless. Such a travesty would not be tolerated.

So, because they knew that every member of the church was equipped by the Holy Spirit for service, they gave a bold charge to the congregation: **YOU deal with it!**

⁹ There are elements of this story that are reminiscent of Exodus 18, and the overwhelming workload of Moses that was alleviated by Jethro's advice to multiply his efforts through delegation.

They never removed themselves from the loop of responsibility in the matter, but they trusted that the members of the church would share ownership in the problem.

The Twelve delegated to the congregation

[6:3] “Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.”

This charge shows two things. One, it showed what great confidence the apostles had in the congregation. And two, it showed how important they understood the task at hand really was by requiring that only mature, spiritual, wise men be placed over the table-serving ministry for widows.

Now it may be that you are thinking that the apostles are making a big deal out of what, on the surface, looks like a rather mundane chore - serving tables. If that is what you are thinking - think again!

Human need was at stake. Relational issues were at stake. It is not a stretch to suggest that the unity of the church (divided along the lines of Hellenists and Hebrews) was at stake.

That is why the men chosen had to be men of **“good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”**

Then, as we look further into this charge, it becomes clear that the Seven, whoever they might be, would not be the only ones serving tables. In fact, they themselves might not be serving tables at all.

The Seven were being placed “over” this task. They are to be the management team for the newly formed **Hebrew AND Hellenistic Hebrew Widows Food Ministry.**

They were the Ministry Coordinators!

Here is another reason for setting the bar high for this group of seven. They are to be leaders of people and managers of a ministry. They will need the relational skills to lovingly enlist others to serve the widows and the integrity to inspire confidence.

Well, having charged the congregation to select these seven godly men, the Twelve stated exactly what they will continue to do, as shepherds of the church of God.

The Twelve stated their priorities positively (6:4)

[6:4] “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry¹⁰ of the word.”

Again, the apostles clearly saw their stewardship as either/or.

“Either -

- *we will be involved in every aspect of the church’s life;*
 - *we will feel constrained to put our finger into every ministry pie;*
 - *we will run ourselves ragged with constant fire-fighting;*
 - *we will personally orchestrate every effort -*
- or*
- *we will do what we have been charged to do, trusting God to raise up people within the congregation to do what THEY can do!”*

They knew that they could not serve tables AND be fully engaged with prayer and the ministry of the word. Prayer and the ministry of the Word were, for them, time- and energy-consuming activities and they had to give their all to that stewardship.

And do you know what? The congregation said “AMEN” to the apostles’ priorities. They didn’t resent the apostles not serving tables. They wanted them giving themselves to the ministries of prayer and the Word.

The congregation wanted the apostles “apostling.” And they gladly stepped up to the plate and did what the apostles charged them to do.

They chose seven godly men.¹¹ Luke even gives us their names, a touch for which we can all be truly grateful.

¹⁰ In this passage, “*Διακονία*” (service/ministry) is used in reference to both food distribution and the communication of God’s truth.

¹¹ Sadly, we are not told how these men were selected. They had likely already emerged as leaders and had been recognized as such by the other members of the church - both by the Hellenists and by the native Hebrews. But whether it was

The People's Choices (v. 5)

[6:5] The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip,¹² Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.¹³

No doubt these were all good, spiritual, wise men. Luke even singled Stephen out as *“a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”*¹⁴

A couple of chapters deeper into Acts we discover that Philip was a gifted leader who distinguished himself by spreading the Gospel to Africa as he shared Christ with an Ethiopian court official.

About the other five we know nothing at all. But the one thing that all seven had in common was that THEY WERE ALL HELLENISTS!¹⁵

Their names tell us that they all came from the Greek world! The apostles tasked the church to choose seven men to oversee the meals ministry to widows - and they chose seven Hellenists. Amazing.¹⁶

The congregation realized that trust between the two parts of the church had been compromised by the previous oversight. And they knew that trust could be rebuilt only by placing Hellenists over the task.¹⁷

acclamation, a formal vote, appointment, casting lots or some other means we don't know.

¹² Most agree that this is not the apostle Philip. But there are some who think that this Philip was one of the Twelve.

¹³ By highlighting Nicolas' being from Antioch, Luke is foreshadowing the prominence that Antioch would have in the Gospel ministry. Evidently, Luke was from Antioch.

¹⁴ Here is another example of Luke's habit of foreshadowing. Stephen is the main character in the long passage to follow, 6:8--7:60.

¹⁵ Note that Nicolas was a Gentile who had converted to Judaism prior to coming to faith in Christ so that he, Nicolas, not Cornelius, was the first Gentile Christian.

¹⁶ Some Bible scholars have suggested that what the apostles were really asking the congregation to do was to find seven men to oversee the service to ONLY the Hellenistic widows. Some even suggest that this was the beginning of a separate Hellenistic Jewish church fellowship in Jerusalem, a sort of happy “church split.” But I am convinced that this is NOT what happened. When the apostles charged the congregation to see to it that the task was accomplished through the ministry of seven godly men, they were referring to the meals ministry for all the widows.

The appointment of the seven Hellenists by the congregation is a tremendous demonstration of godly wisdom and management savvy AND loving sensitivity.

Thumbs Up to the People's Choices (v. 6)

[6:6] And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.¹⁸

In the Bible, the “laying on of hands” can symbolize lots and lots of things. But here it is a statement to the congregation and the Seven that they, the apostles, are pledging to stand behind the Seven and to support them in every possible way in their ministry to the widows.

And at the end of the day, the Seven having been chosen and commissioned, Luke backs away from this scene and gives us another in his series of “State of the Communion” progress reports.¹⁹

The Blessing of God (v. 7)

[6:7] The word of God kept on spreading;²⁰ and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests²¹ were becoming obedient to the faith.²²

¹⁷ Now, was there a risk of a “payback mentality” by the Hellenists? Might the Greek-ish Jews have purposefully overlooked the care of the Judean widows in the daily serving of food, as their own widows had been overlooked? I would think not. For one thing, the slight against the Hellenistic widows was likely not intentional. For another thing, the Seven were godly men who would not have thought in terms of retribution against innocent Hebrew widows. And finally, if anyone was sensitized to how awful it is to overlook any widow, it was the Hellenists, having watched their own widows experience just that mistreatment.

¹⁸ Some people who read this section understand that it was the congregation (through some delegated representatives) that laid hands on the Seven. Nope. The apostles have already clearly affirmed that THEY would place the men whom the congregation chose over the task of table-serving. (v. 3) And it was the apostles who gave the final thumbs-up to the congregation's choice.

¹⁹ The adjustment of the problem of the widows brought renewed blessing to the believing community, much as occurred in the book of Nehemiah when progress on the wall-rebuilding project stopped, while Nehemiah dealt with injustice perpetrated by the richer Jews against the poor.

²⁰ The times that Luke mentions the church's progress. 9:31 - after Paul's conversion; 12:24 - after Cornelius' conversion; 16:5 - after the first missionary

I find it fascinating that there is dramatic progress immediately after:

- the leaders demonstrate an unwavering commitment to fulfill their ministry ("*prayer and the ministry of the Word*");
- the leaders dealt with a sensitive situation lovingly and boldly by entrusting ministry to the congregation;
- the congregation carried out that ministry to a culturally diverse population with wisdom and sensitivity and love.

And what are we to make of the comment that a great many of the priests were coming to faith?

Some believe that the priests became more willing to associate with the church and thus believe in Jesus because the church effectively split in two (Hebrew and Hellenistic) over the widows incident.²³

journey and the Jerusalem Council; 19:20 - after the second and third missionary journeys; 28:31 - at the end of the book, with Paul speaking the word of God unhindered in Rome, cutting Acts into six segments of about five years each.

²¹ The priests who believed were probably not of the Sadducean aristocracy (we have no record of a Sadducee becoming a believer), but were likely poorer pious priests, like John the Baptist's father, Zacharias.

²² What does Luke mean when he says that priests were becoming obedient to the faith? Several New Testament passages speak about obedience to Jesus in terms of trusting Him for salvation. In Romans 1:5, it is clearly this idea that Paul is communicating when he writes, "*through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake.*" Consider also, John 6:29, "*Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'*" The same thought is found in John 3:36, Romans 15:18, 16:26; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Hebrews 5:8-9, and 1 Peter 4:7. Luke, along with the rest of the New Testament, is affirming that when a person places their trust in Jesus for salvation, they are obeying the command of God.

²³ C. Peter Wagner (a prominent voice in missions, the church growth movement and the "power evangelism" movement) hypothesizes that the priests were more likely to join the Christian movement when the Hellenists began to separate themselves from the Hebraists. He writes, "The principle is that the multiplication of many different kinds of churches, including those along ethnic lines, provides more options for unbelievers who are looking for a church in which they think they can feel comfortable." Wagner pleads for homogeneous groupings out of this incident, with the idea that there was a Spirit-inspired, wisely-led church split in Jerusalem, which led to a greater advance for the Gospel, because people were

I beg to differ! The upshot of Acts 6 was NOT a division into Hellenistic and Hebrew churches. No, the church was MORE UNITED after the appointment of the Seven than it was before.

If anything prompted the priests to come to faith in Jesus after this it was that they saw the early church obeying God's commands about the care of widows better than the synagogues did!

The love of the church for widows moved these priests to investigate the claims of Jesus and when they did they placed their faith in Him. And THAT is the evangelistic power of a loving church.

Conclusion:

Given my opening ruminations on church management's parallels with cat herding, maybe you can understand why this short passage of the Bible has long intrigued me.

The congregation weathered this potentially destructive event with such skill that the work of God actually moved forward, never missed a beat, and became stronger.

As I have meditated on these verses with Northwest in mind, I am impressed that there is something here for YOU and ME. And I'll close with five thoughts as we seek to apply Acts 6 to managing THIS ministry.

ONE: Needy people are worthy of all the care and attention and dignity we can lavish upon them.

In fact, every one of us here is a needy people. Some may appear needier than others. Some may clean up nice. But we are all needy. And we exist as a church to meet needs in Jesus' Name.

Go out of your way to assist the widow. Give food to the hungry. Provide help to the physically or mentally disabled.

making their decision for Christ on the merits of Christ alone, and not on the perceived need to fellowship with different kinds of people.

Pay attention to the child growing up in a single parent home. Strike up a friendly conversation with a stranger, especially someone who looks uncomfortable.

Listen and weep with those who weep; rejoice with those who are rejoicing. Help those who struggle with additions to recover. Share the Gospel with those who have not yet come to know Christ.

TWO: In Christ, there is no such thing as un-spiritual ministry.

All service honors Jesus. All service performed in His Name glorifies God.

The apostles dignified table service by requiring that the men over that ministry be *“of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom”*. And by dignifying THAT service, they dignify ALL service.

No job is mundane because every job reflects on the reputation of Jesus. No chore is menial because every chore is a stewardship from God.

People who cooked homemade goodies for the Thursday evening fellowship after Vacation Bible School were serving Jesus. So were the dozens of others who loved children throughout the week. So are Sunday School teachers, who serve week in and week out.

So are dads, who put off the purchase of something they really want so as to provide what their family really needs.

THREE: Conflict is inevitable in the Body of Christ and must be worked through, not avoided.

Conflicts, tensions, and challenges will inevitably arise in a church. It is not the presence of challenges that indicates the health of a church, but how they are dealt with.

The beauty of Acts 6 is that the issues were confronted head-on. The conflict was worked through and resolved.

There is a lot of white water at the confluence of two strong rivers. But downstream, as the waters have merged, there is the doubled strength of a more powerful river.

When people come together in a church like ours to serve the Lord there will be differences of opinion, personality clashes, conflicting priorities. There may even be some white water! But downstream from the conflict, after it has been worked through, we'll be stronger.

FOUR: Diversity is to be the rule in the church.

God loves all kinds of people and they are all welcomed here! You probably noticed that there would have been no problem in Acts 6 if there had been two churches - one Hellenistic and one Hebrew.

It was the presence of different ethnicities and cultures that provided the Holy Spirit with a context in which to work the miracle of reconciling love. Our differences are never the problem. Our differences display the creativity of God.

The challenge to each one of us is to not apologize for our personal preferences and to not judge others for theirs. God never envisioned a homogenized church where we all look the same, talk the same, dress the same. He loves diversity - and we can and will learn to embrace it as well.

FIVE: Everyone in this church has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve.

Sure, the apostles could have waited tables. They had the spiritual qualifications and the physical abilities. But to do so would have cheated the congregation of their unique contribution (teaching) and would have robbed others of making contributions they could make.

You have gifts and talents that need to be put in service here.

Sure, some ministries are more noticeable than others, but all are necessary for the proper working of the whole. And when you are providing your unique service, the work of God goes forward here, just as it did there.

And when we are the need-meeting, diverse, loving, and serving church Jesus died and rose to make us, it will be as true here as it was there that *[6:7] The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in [San Antonio]...*