

Lesson Four: The Logistics of Growth

Part I: Preparation

Bible Passage: Acts 6

Key Verse: "The word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Acts 6:7.

Summary

Today's passage in Acts shows an early institutionalization of the church. The disciples find that the work of feeding the needy and keeping track of finances does not leave them enough time for preaching, so they appoint seven men to handle logistics.

As the successes CPT had experienced in deterring violence have become public knowledge, requests for assistance from various regions of conflict have increased exponentially. In the summer of 2000, at a retreat for all the full time CPTers and staff, participants decided that CPT should grow to accommodate some of these requests. CPT is thus in the process of restructuring to facilitate growth.

Study

The Holy Spirit was behind the growth of the first-century church, but as the church became more than just the handful of people who had known Jesus personally, the structure of the church had to change to encompass both larger numbers and people from "non-regulation" backgrounds. Those people in the lesson for today were the "Hellenists," i.e., people, probably Jews, who had adopted Greek customs and language.

A key factor in accommodating that growth was the selection of leaders and administrators. Acts 6, in which the first Christians select leaders to ensure that the "hellenized" Christians received their fair share of the daily distribution of food, says a lot about the character of leadership in a Spirit-led organization:

1. Leadership arises from the community's mundane needs
2. Leadership arises from below and not from above. Authority does not "dribble down" as Willimon says, from the Bishop to the clergy to the laity. It is "the multitude" in this story who recognize their need and choose the seven men for the disciples to lay hands upon.
3. The church itself creates certain types of leadership in order to help it function – these roles are not engraved on stone by some church hierarchy. "What the church has established," Willimon says, "the church may change."

Regarding the latter point, note that two of the seven men chosen to handle the logistics of feeding the community, Stephen and Philip, do a substantial amount of teaching and preaching themselves. (See Acts 8 for Philip's story.) Stephen, indeed becomes the Way's first martyr largely because of his preaching.

The names of the seven men chosen are all Greek, which may indicate that they themselves were Hellenized Jews. While Stephen and Philip have important roles to play we know very little of the others listed in 6:5. Art from the Byzantine period (fourth through fifteenth centuries) shows John dictating his fourth Gospel to Prochorus and tradition holds that he became Bishop of Nicomedia and a martyr at Antioch. Nicolaus may have founded the heretical sect of the Nicolaitans at Ephesus and Pergamum (see Revelations 2:6,15). The Nicolaitans believed that since only the Spirit mattered, what the body did was unimportant, which led to its adherents leading licentious lifestyles. (Clement of Alexandria – a first century church leader – maintained that Nicolaus did not participate in the sinful lifestyle of his followers. He merely commanded, "Treat flesh with contempt." He never had relations with a woman other than his wife and his daughters and son lived in chastity.) Nicanor was a common Greek name – indeed it was the name of a particularly cruel governor of Judea mentioned in I and II Maccabees. Legend has it that Parmenas became a martyr in Philippi and absolutely nothing more is known of Timon.

The laying on of hands as a form of commissioning for God's work appears as far back as Israel's wandering in the wilderness when Moses laid his hands on Joshua (Numbers 7:23). Jewish leaders became members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish religious council) through the laying on of hands. In the early church this act seemed to symbolize the bestowal of the Holy Spirit more than the rite of baptism did.

Acts 6:7 contains the only historical example of Jewish priests in Jerusalem taking an interest in Christianity. Luke was possibly trying to minimize the differences between Judaism and Christianity. It is also probable that at this point in history it was difficult to tell where Judaism ended and Christianity began. Note that in Acts 15:5, Luke even had Pharisees participating in the Christian movement.

Acts 6 ends with Stephen being dragged before the Sanhedrin because other Hellenized Jews were upset by his preaching. The man chosen to "serve tables" in Acts 6:2 gives an eloquent account of Israel's history in Acts 7, ending with the charge that the current Jewish leadership is no better than their forebears who became idolaters and murdered the prophets. They had been responsible, after all, for the death of the prophet Jesus.

And thus Stephen died.

Although CPT gets the most recognition for exploits in which volunteers intervene in violent situations, the vast majority of their activities on assignment are more mundane e.g. receiving visitors and listening to the same stories over and over, shopping for and cooking food, cleaning the team housing, making phone calls, etc. Every CPTer brings gifts/expertise to project sites like writing, language ability, political analysis, a genuine pleasure in meeting new people, and an ability to facilitate consensus. Every CPTer also brings dislike of some aspect of CPT work, such as writing, making cold calls, lack of privacy, computer work, dealing with eccentricities of coworkers, God-talk, being falsely accused of anti-Semitism or guerrilla sympathies.

Regardless of the gifts and disabilities each CPTer brings to the work, all CPTers are expected to put themselves on the line when they witness violence occurring or about to occur. Those members who make a priority of cleaning team housing and shopping for groceries are just as likely to stand in front of a gun barrel as team members who make a priority of writing and political strategizing.

As the need for activists to confront violence with nonviolence has become an ever-increasing necessity, farmers, lawyers, university professor, factory workers and people from many other backgrounds have been commissioned by their faith communities to join CPT on projects or delegations.

The growth of CPT has also resulted in a deluge of invitations for it to set up projects on five different continents. In order to move beyond its capacity to support two to three different projects, CPT will have to make structural changes.

THE FIVE YEAR PLAN

In August 2000, for the first time, all of the full-time CPTers left their projects in the Middle East, Chiapas and Canada for a retreat at Cliff Kindy's Joyfield farm. Prayer and discernment led those gathered to decide that God was calling CPT to grow. By 2005, CPTers hoped to sustain six to ten teams in North America and abroad. This number of teams would require up to 50 full-time Peacemaker Corps members, 250 Reservists, 15 support staff and a budget of \$1.2 million by the year 2005. The group also decided that CPT should increase its two annual trainings to four and focus on developing regional groups such as those that already existed in Northern Indiana, Colorado, Ontario and Cleveland, OH. Priority for training would be given to those areas where people of color are the majority.

Sidebars

1) Portion of letter from CPTer Scott Kerr

[Note: At the time these lessons are being written, CPT has been having grave difficulties getting visas for its Colombia team workers. Part of its vision for growth thus includes having enough new people to send

to Colombia to replace other CPTers who cannot return. When Kerr's letter was written in July 2002, no new visas had been granted since March 2002]

Dear Friends,

It has been a long time since I have written to this list, sorry about the lack of communication, it is not for lack of things to write about, just lack of time and energy. . .

The situation in Barrancabermeja has deteriorated even further in the last few months. The AUC paramilitaries (paras) have tightened up their control of the city, and even government officials say that they [the paramilitaries] are in control of the city. The paras have brought in a new moral code that makes my stomach turn, with rules like hours of play time for kids, what color of garbage cans you can use, hours to illuminate your house, regulations on traveling in and out of certain areas, just to name a few. It seems like every week more mutilated bodies are pulled from the river with signs of torture.

In the latest most brazen act, the paramilitary have put on their death lists some girls between the ages of 12 and 16 that have been "unfaithful" to their paramilitary "boyfriends." Some girls have already been killed; others are [asking for help from] the Red Cross to leave the city. When I recently talked to a military commander in the area about the paramilitary control, he looked at me and said the people are happier now than before – in essence justifying the behavior of this occupying force. Many human rights leaders have been forced to flee or live under continual threat. I have seen a lot of evidence that links the paramilitary and the state armed forces, but what concerns me more at this point is what happens when the paramilitary no longer answer to the military as they have in the past.

Our presence in the [communities along the] Opón River continues. There we see continued paramilitary incursions in the area, but thank God nobody has been killed in the last 6 months. People are beginning their second harvests now that we have been there, and it is very exciting to see. CPT has been out there for over a year now and [has] seen over 70 families return to their homes and farms. We praise God for these small miracles.

I was unable to obtain a religious visa from the consulate, so I am here in Barranca as a tourist. But I can only remain in Colombia for 3 months a year on a tourist visa. So with CPT and our local partners we are exploring options about next steps and other strategies. As the war here heats up in the next 6-12 months, we can expect the Colombian government to tighten up the borders with regards to religious workers.

Our past requests for help, including computers, cell phones or money have been very well received. Thanks a lot... But now more than ever we need people here. We need people who are willing to spend anywhere from 1-6 weeks in the campo to be a nonviolent witness. Be prepared to talk to guerrillas, paramilitary, army and navy about peace and respect for human life. In many ministries around the world it is difficult to see the good that is happening, but here the harvest is great but the workers are few, as Jesus says in Mark. Two internationals in a community can secure food deliveries for thousands of people by just riding along in a truck, we don't need to buy the food, or a truck – just ride along and escort it past paramilitary checkpoints. Please send this request to anyone you might know who speaks a little Spanish and has a few weeks. There is an organization here that I can connect them with to place them in the countryside. If you don't speak Spanish, that's ok too, we can send you out with someone who does.

Thanks for your ears and eyes, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

for peace,
Scott Kerr
Barrancabermeja

2) Locations issuing invitations that CPT has had to turn down for lack of volunteers and resources

Former Yugoslav republics

Former Soviet republics

Chechnya

Various indigenous groups in Canada and the United States

Various urban areas in Canada and the United States

Regions outside Barrancabermeja in Colombia

Jerusalem and various locations in the West Bank and Gaza

Ethiopia and Eritrea

Afghanistan

The Philippines

Part II: Session

Focus (10 minutes)

Who is the leader of your group? Do you have one? If so how did he or she become the leader? How are people chosen for leadership positions in your church?

Next, discuss as a group which violent situations at home or abroad concern them most. If your group was responsible for finding the people to deal with this violence, how would you go about selecting them?

Transition: If one had no knowledge of Church history, he or she would never guess by viewing contemporary church leadership structures that Christianity began as a haphazard effort on the part of peasants, fishermen, carpenters and tax collectors to respond to the Holy Spirit. They would never guess that people became leaders of the first century church after lay people identified a need and appointed them to deal with it. But this was indeed the beginning of the church that today encompasses more than a billion people.

CPT also began as a small effort – one part-time staff member in donated office space – and has grown into an organization that has supported projects in Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and North America. Like the first century church, it could have failed any number of times (and may still fail), but a reliance on the Holy Spirit and the prayers of Christians who have captured the vision of CPT have made it possible for CPT to confront violence, support reconciliation efforts and save lives.

Engage the Text (20 minutes)

After reading through “Study,” think of contemporary analogies for the dynamics of the first century followers of the Way. Who are the Hellenized followers, i.e., people who have adopted the customs and language of the prevailing culture? Who are the non-Hellenized followers – the people who put identify more with their religious tradition than the prevailing culture? What are the tensions between the two groups? Who are the apostles? Who is the religious establishment? Who is the Roman Empire? Who are the people gifted in preaching and evangelization? Who are the people responsible for seeing that the needs of the people get met?

Option A: Each individual in your group should select one of the above “contemporary” roles and enact a drama based on the story line in Acts 6:1-7. Spend about five minutes thinking about how you will play

your parts. You do not have to make the outcome the same. You may find it more interesting if some people protest their roles. What if the traditional members of the group begin complaining about the disadvantaged members getting special treatment? What if the “logistics” people the group appoints do not want to take on the task? What if members of the group resent the “apostles” for not being willing to do the mundane work? You may wish to note the descriptions of “the seven” in Study – administrators, preachers, martyrs, a heretic (or one who founded a heretical sect) and an unknown. How do these men foreshadow other church leaders throughout history?

Option B: Select a real or imagined violent situation at home or abroad that concerns your group. As a group discuss what needs to happen to confront this violence and then select members of your group to deal with it.

Respond

Try to think of other Christian groups that started small to meet a need and then grew into an organization.

Next, imagine that CPT had unlimited resources and personnel. What violence-reduction projects would you like to see CPT take on? What can the churches do to help facilitate CPT’s growth to accommodate these projects.

Closing

Identify places in the world today that need nonviolent activists. Pray for each of these regions. Pray for the Holy Spirit to continue guiding CPT.

Part III: Leader Guidelines

Items needed

You may wish to come up with some basic “props” or clothing to distinguish the characters in the drama based on Acts 6:1-7, e.g., the apostles could carry Bibles to preach from; the “hellenists” could sport fake tatoos or some current fashionable accessories; the “traditionals” could wear suit coats, etc.; the administrators could wear work gloves or aprons.

Resources

Paul L. Maier, *Eusebius: the Church History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999.

Tips for leading

In order to save time, you may wish to make a brief outline of the stories of Stephen and Philip so that you can paraphrase them for the group. You may also wish to do more preparation for the drama than is called for in the lesson, i.e. calling people during the week and asking one of them to play a disgruntled person who is not receiving his or her fair share of the food distribution, one of the seven new administrators, etc.