

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## Sizing up St. Mark's

I'd like to begin this morning by referring to the back of the prayer book, to that section called the Catechism. Three questions and their answers:

- Q. What is the mission of the Church?
- A. The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.
  
- Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?
- A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.
  
- Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?
- A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.

– Book of Common Prayer p. 855

This is Good News. The Gospel is great news! God is using divine and human means to draw us in being the kind of people we were originally created to be; as one with God and as one with each other.

And as today's Gospel passage (Matthew 10:40-42) tells us we are accepted by God and if God can accept us, can't we accept each other?

Well the big question for us now is how are we going to pursue our mission, how are we going to restore all people to unity with God and each other?

Now a basic assumption, the basic starting point for us to grasp is the fact that one size does not fit all. Now we will talk about how we accomplish our mission, I'm talking about the people of St. Mark's Chapel and actually the rest of my sermon today is at the request of our friend Roger Smith. We had lunch together a couple of weeks ago and based on the conversation we had, Roger pleaded with me to share with you the thoughts I'm going to share with you this morning. By way of back ground let me say that I have a strong interest in the field of organizational development and have studied in the field over the last 45 years. My basic point is that not every community of Christians can carry out its mission the same way. The Christian church, given its choice, functions best when it functions in a way that is best suited to its size.

Now this may be familiar territory to some of you but I suspect not for all of you. For example, the strategy for St. Mark's Chapel to carry out its mission is quite different than say a congregation with 1,000 members or 2,000 members, quite different than a congregation with 4 or 5 members.

For all practical purposes we can talk about four models of church behavior, four size groupings that each has its own dynamic for mission and ministry. And one size is not better than another, it's just different.

Also, and I do believe this, that God gives each congregation the necessary gifts for a congregation to carry out its ministry. Now if we perceive that God is calling St. Mark's to be a congregation of ten people we'll have the gifts to be a congregation of ten people. If He's calling us to be a congregation of 500 people, he'll give us the gifts to be a congregation of 500 people.

With that thought in mind, let me identify the four basic church sizes and their differences in strategy for Gospel mission.

The first is what is often referred to as the "family church" with 1 – 50 active members. It's a one cell unit with strong parental figures who control the norms—a patriarch or a matriarch who's in charge and there can be more than one of them. The priest for such a congregation functions more as a chaplain not as the primal father. One does not join this church one is adopted into the family – and the mission of this family is parental nurture – to grow Christians in the family.

The next size is called the "pastoral congregation" with 50 to 150-200 active members. In this size congregation a leadership circle forms around a pastor or priest who replaces the matriarch or patriarch. We have a pastor and a leadership circle and then we have a fellowship circle and finally the full membership circle.

I just want to read five tidbits from a wonderful little book called *Sizing up a Congregation* which was written by an Episcopal priest who was on the National Church's staff a number of years ago by the name of Arlin J. Rothauge. He basically put light on things that took to church leaders and clergy who were frustrated, a work that they were hungering decades for. He was the one who identified these four different sizes of congregations. About the pastoral size congregations he writes:

1. The power and effectiveness of the leadership circle will depend largely on good communications with the congregation and the ability of the central leader to delegate authority, assign responsibility and recognize the accomplishments of others.
2. The membership looks first to the central leader for direction, inspiration and pastoral care.
3. The leadership required is predominantly pastoral because there are so many relationships to watch over in this very large family. Conflict management means survival. If this congregation becomes larger in size the internal dynamics will change because it will no longer be possible to operate as a super family with a big daddy.
4. In the pastoral church, most newcomers find their way into the membership circle through the pastoral route of the clergy person.
5. Inevitably one problem results that stifles growth, namely, the number of newcomers that can be managed within this system is quite limited if the rector is the key evangelist who is working alone. Then only 6 - 10 persons will be assimilated wholly into the membership per year.

6. In preparation for the newcomer the leadership needs to provide for and be aware of multi-entry points into the fellowship circle of the congregation. Each entry point will be governed and facilitated by a separate group, perhaps a study class, a men's or women's or youth fellowship, a service project, choir, and so on. Whatever the group, each one offers another opportunity for newcomers to make contact and find people with similar interests and values to participate in satisfying activities and to build new relationships. That's how people develop a sense of belonging.

Family size, pastoral size, next we move to what is sometimes called "program church" but nowadays is often referred to as the "resource church." This size congregation has 150-200 to 400 members and the structure of a program church has a priest as an enabler and chief administrator and he or she is surrounded by elected leaders and program leaders who staff program units and parish organizations, guilds, and service groups. The program church frequently draws people by the visibility and the quality of its programs. By programs I mean study groups, prayer groups, service and outreach groups, justice/advocacy groups. The old saying: "If you find a hurt, heal it, find a void in the community and speak to that need"—this is often a strategy for reaching out to the community. Newcomers to the program or resource church often need a directory of the composite picture of the congregation, a roadmap to find their way. The congregation also needs a structured process for incorporating new folks into the life of the congregation—a way to belong—a way to recognition and respect.

And finally there is the "corporate church," 400 or more members. Some have 1,000's of them. The corporate church has a head priest, a staff, governing board, primary leaders. This church has more complexity and diversity. Patriarchs and matriarchs return as governing boards where groups of people take over that role and formally control the life of the congregation. People have a sense of belonging to something awesome. People are attracted to the large number of members, great leadership, huge buildings, programs are extensive and wide ranging, and one belongs to a very large church by belonging to a small group. Choir, altar guild, a Sunday school class, men's club, women's club...

Well, why am I talking about all of this? How does this apply to members and friends of St. Marks? I guess by now it's safe to say that St. Mark's is in a time of transition. St. Mark's used to be a small family church. Today it is rapidly becoming a pastoral size congregation. Like it or not...we are changing and our Gospel marching orders, guided by the Holy Spirit are being redefined.

Well, how can we live with that, what do we do now? What can we, as a pastoral congregation at St. Mark's, how can we help restore people to a community with God and each other? And how does that differ from how we did that mission in the past?

Pray we can find the wisdom to accept the changes that are coming with growth. Look for ways to articulate our changes and celebrate them. Talk with each other about the changes and charge each person to renew his or her commitment to a glorious, growing and changing St. Mark's. Remember we are the "becomers," we are the becomers in the name of Christ.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.