



Churches Who Cannot Make Shifts May Be in Trouble

The very early Church faced many crises. A series of them revolved around the growth of the movement, and the shifts in who are part of local gatherings – the churches. Recorded in Acts 6:1-7 is how the growing Church in Jerusalem addressed some early shifts. Here are the words of these verses from The Message:

The Word of God Prospered

¹⁻⁴ During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers—“Hellenists”—toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven men from among you whom everyone trusts, men full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.”

⁵⁻⁶ The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose—Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, a convert from Antioch.

Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task.

⁷ The Word of God prospered. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased dramatically. Not least, a great many priests submitted themselves to the faith.

Shifts

Often we cite these verses when Baptist congregations choose and ordain deacons. While appropriately used during these times, other aspects of the very early Church appear in these verses.

First, these verses stand for a shift from a missional movement that focused on *our kind of people* to one that began to focus on *all kinds of people*. It was no longer about the just Hebrew-speaking believers or the native Hebrews, it was also about the Greek-speaking believers or Hellenistic Jews. Further, it was no longer about Jewish men and their nuclear families, it was about single women with little or no standing in the culture.

Demographic diversity struck the very early Church.

Second, the single-cell, everyone together, Apostles-leading-everything approach we see in Acts 2:41-47 shifted even in the very early Church. A differentiation of gifts and multi-cell approach was needed. Agility, flexibility, and a differentiation of spiritual gifts and leadership roles were called for.

The complexity of congregational life struck the very early Church.

Third, calling out the called beyond the inner circle of apostolic leaders was a necessary shift. These early servants –a precursor to deacons – learned not only how to serve internally within the local church, but later how to scatter and be witnesses themselves. Think of Stephen and his public witness and stoning in Acts 7.

Leadership development and deployment of evangelists became essential in the very early Church.

Why Are We Static Today?

The very early Church made many shifts as it learned the realities of its mission. With this as our 1st century role model, why are so many 21st century local churches static? Why do we hold on to heritage and do not proactively engage in the hope of the emerging future under God's leadership?

Too many local churches ignore the demographic changes within their congregation and the community context or people groups they serve. Too many local churches ignore the complexities of congregational life and development, and want to keep their same programmatic and organizational structure. Too many local churches do not develop the next generation of leadership so current leaders can move on towards the new thing God is doing in their midst.

Does there ever become a point when these churches are no longer a church, but a museum and the pastor and staff are curators?