

**Smaller Groups that meet Holistic Needs of People
Natural Church Development Sermon Series #07
June 1st, 2008**

**Series: Natural Church Development
Scripture: Mark 3:13-15
Scripture: Acts 2:42-47
Scripture: Romans 16:1-16**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on June 1st,
2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

Where have all the front porches in America gone? In a land that has lost many of its places and spaces to cultivate social and personal relationships, what should the church do? Jesus gives us some ideas in Mark 3.

What is your image of a front porch? Is it covered, open, with inviting chairs and small tables? Does it have a swinging bench, hanging plants, and candles in glass containers?

What occurs on this porch? A lot of sitting, watching the grass grow, the leaves fall, and the neighbors come and go. We wave to each other. Most times we shout a greeting, "How's it going?" or "Howdy, have a great day!" sometimes they wander over here and we catch up on the local news or talk about our sports teams. Maybe we invite them onto the porch, have iced tea, and just linger in conversation. As we talk, important topics emerge, like how to raise our kids, love our spouses, help our city, or even change the world.

The porch is always open when someone is on it. Families used to sit out there, sing silly campfire songs, tell jokes, and retell family stories. As kids get older, they come and sit out there with their dates. It's a safe place for them to be . . . private, but not secluded. It is also public, but not too out there in the open. There is just enough openness and coziness at the same time. But, when I walk my neighborhood, it becomes apparent that those front porches have disappeared.

Joseph Myers, in his book "The Search to Belong" describes how America is in search of front porches. Our move out of the farms and cities in the 1940's and 1950's left us with less and less social space to cultivate social and personal friendships. Literally, our front porches have disappeared. So what do we do?

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We need to create new types of “porches”.

Starbucks and Barns and Noble are two contemporary types of front porches. The atmosphere is warm and inviting. You can go there alone or with someone. You can come and go as you please. Some of Chris’ and my first “dates” where at Barns and Noble! Deep conversations or just talking about the everyday stuff of life can all occur there.

So what does the church do? We have ample public worship space and individuals can connect with God in the privacy of their own homes. What about that “front porch” space? Where is that social space between the public and the intimate spaces of our lives? Where do we connect with people in social and personal ways that deepen our spiritual lives? Where are our front porches for our faith lives and the church?

In the Gospel of Mark, chapter 3, we find Jesus addressing this issue. Early in his public ministry Jesus climbed a mountain and invited those he wanted with him. They climbed together. He settled on twelve, and designated them apostles. The plan was that they would 1) be with him, 2) he would send them out to proclaim the Word, and 3) give them authority to banish demons. Jesus had a growing public ministry he was also disciplined to care out regular time to listen and commune with God privately. That was not enough. Jesus needed a closer community, a smaller group.

One of the characteristics of healthy churches is that the people are active in smaller groups that meet the holistic needs of people. A good definition of a holistic small group is that they are disciple-making communities which endeavor to:

- Reach the spiritually homeless
- Meet individual needs of the people in the group
- Develop each person according to their God-given gifts
- Raise leaders to sustain the growth of the church.

Like healthy body cells, holistic smaller groups are designed to grow and multiply.

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As we think about it, that is what Jesus did. Jesus formed a group to reach the spiritually homeless, meet his needs and the needs of core community, to develop their God-given gifts, and to develop mature leaders for the early church. When Jesus left the scene, he left a community that continued to grow and multiply. Places and spaces to connect with people involving our spiritual lives continue to be important.

Two thousand years later, in our church, we have a number of “front porches”: Sunday School classes, choir, prayer group, Presbyterian Women, Going like 60, session, deacons, committees, youth group, dinners for 8, special events, and other smaller groups have served this function. These are good. They are signs of health. These smaller groupings of faith-focused people are key to who we are.

If you are not connected in a smaller size faith gathering, ask God to show you what to do. You can join one of the groups that are already in existence. You can form your own group. It can be focused on study, service, or caring. A healthy group normally has all three components. Another way to say this is a group should have a head, a heart and hands.

- The head is meaningful spiritual interaction. This could be Bible study, a devotional, discussing what you’re singing and why, a book discussion, or prayer moment before you serve, or reflections on how you have seen God recently.
- The heart of a group is the caring community. You are taking time to listen and pray for each other. You encourage and stand by one another in little and big ways. Each person knows they are important and valued in the group.
- The hands are practical help. Your group is serving each other and people outside the group in tangible ways. You have a mission focus. It might be leading worship or serving the community.

If you are in a group, make sure you function in all these ways: study, caring and serving. Also make sure you are inviting others to

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join you. Healthy groups keep fresh and alive by regularly including others to join them.

Front porches can be created in other ways too. In our previous home, Chris and I didn't have much of a front porch. We found ourselves on the deck out back. But we missed the neighborhood atmosphere of being out front. So often we would take chairs around front and sit in our driveway. Whenever we did this, people would stop by on their walks to talk. Often, church members who were driving by would pull up and spend 10 minutes just chatting. We haven't had the chance to do that here yet, mostly because we have two little children who like to play in the back yard, but we do work at sitting with other parents when we are out at parks and talking some while we watch children play. We can create our own "front porch" just about anywhere if we try.

Where do we connect with people in social and personal ways that deepen our spiritual lives? Where are our front porches for our faith lives and the church? Our front porches are wherever we create them. They can be in smaller gatherings with other people of faith. They can be with individuals who have lost faith and need someone to walk with them in their struggles and questions. Think about the places you live, work and frequent. Where is God inviting you to create a "front porch"?