



...a life giving journey, a church planting process.

*Tracking the Spirit is following and joining Him
as He leads people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.*

TTS, at its core, is about building relationships that are ROOTED in the power of the Holy Spirit - not FOR us, (because it is not about us), not BECAUSE of us (because we cannot save ourselves).

Tracking the Spirit is about the all-consuming love that God has for Jesus (through whom ALL things hold together and to whom ALL of creation is given) Heaven is offered through Jesus alone - who is the head of all creation. It is not we who build the church, but Jesus. It is not we who harvest, but the angels.

It is not we who witness, but the Holy Spirit brings about the words and tenders each heart to know that Jesus is the only way to eternal life with God. Tracking the Spirit is following and joining Him as He leads people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This knowledge is true freedom; allowing service with joy, witnessing with confidence and love with abandon - and again, that is not of ourselves but through Jesus in whom we live and have being..... so it is about building relationships that are ROOTED in the power of the Holy Spirit..... and on and on.

The following was written by a Northwest District Pastor to his congregation after having attended one of the first TTS informational events in 2001 – used by permission.

Note: This congregation is involved in planting a church in another nearby community (about 20 miles away).

“TRACKING THE SPIRIT” An Introduction

What is our “Business” as a church?

“What business are you in?” Have we thought about that? Ponder the Great Commission and your personal obedience to it. What am I doing, not only to BE a disciple, but to MAKE disciples?

The best way to “make disciples” is to plant new churches. Studies have demonstrated this beyond argument.

How’s business?

In the wide world, very good. Christianity growing (80,000-100,000 new believers every day! 3500 new churches every week!), often because of the implementation of outreach-based small groups.

But in the USA, not so well. Not a single county in the USA has a larger “churched” population than it did 10 years ago! The USA is the 3rd largest mission field in the world – behind China and India (in sheer number of non-churched people) In the Pacific NW, 80% of people have no connection with a Christian Church.

The LCMS is part of that unhealthy picture. We have been on a very long, slow decline for 30 years. The average congregation gains only 2 new converts a year. Like a little child that fails to thrive, ours is an “unhealthy” church.

In the Pacific NW, 80% of our synod’s churches are plateaued or declining. What to do?

The Traditional way of growing new churches

We DO start new churches. But in current pattern, it demands LAND (expensive), a salaried professional “mission developer” (that means a trained pastor – in short supply), and usually a new building or rented quarters. The average cost of a new mission start is \$750,000+ over first 5 years!

The LCMS is poised to start about 60 of these traditional plants this year. At same time, however, we are about to close 260 or so of our existing churches! You do the arithmetic...

Let’s look again at what makes for “healthy churches”.

Foundations of a Healthy Church

- “Holistic Small Groups” (groups where people share and experience the wholeness of life in Jesus Christ – these must not be cliques but rather outreach oriented groups)
- “Church Planting” (a healthy church is one that reproduces).

What is “Tracking the Spirit”?

It is a movement within our district to empower churches to improve their health and to grow, implementing the two foundational factors mentioned above -- SMALL GROUPS (outreach based) and CHURCH PLANTING.

What about the name “Tracking the Spirit”? We confess in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit is “The Lord and Giver of Life.” In the New Testament, we are urged, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” So it is the desire in this movement to let the Holy Spirit do the leading into health and growth. We are following His “tracks” into a healthier future.

Is this a NEW approach?

Actually, it is a return to something we see in the New Testament, where the church grew by the beginning of small home-based groups. Paul’s missionary method allowed him to start a new congregation in a host home, appoint leaders, then move to the next city and do it again.

It differs from our current mission-starting practice in these key ways:

- It is based on HOMES initially, and so it does not require the acquisition of land or erection of buildings.
- It is primarily lay-led and utilizes existing congregations and pastors for foundational support.
- The end result is envisioned not simply as an “established” congregation but as a new “planting” congregation, allowing the process to continue. (multiplication not duplication)

In other words, it allows us to start new churches without pastors, land, or new buildings up front. Note: it may involve a change in our picture of what a “church” looks like...smaller, more mobile, less “visible”?

The District’s Vision

Leaders in our district have a vision...in their “picture of a preferable future,” they envision a minimum of 5000 new people in the Northwest District coming to a saving relationship to Jesus Christ by end of 2004. (The District comprised of 80,000 people right now).

How?

District desires to identify 33 congregations who will be willing to become “Planting congregations” in next biennium. Those congregations would equip their people to plant a new church in next few years through outreach-based small groups.

The Component Parts

Planting Church – an existing congregation that covenants to plant a new church. The new congregation is not formed from a group from this “mother” church. New believers form the new church.

Church Planters – members of planting church who begin home-based groups in order to lead people into relationship with Jesus Christ.

Disciple Makers – People who will equip new believers with the basic instruction in the faith and training in the Christian life.

Church Developers – The people who help the “next step” happen – gathering these new believers into a congregation to start communal life.

New Churches – combined groups of new believers, who in turn become “planting churches”

Where You might fit

Presently we need people who will under-gird this effort with prayer so that we “follow” the Spirit instead of running ahead of Him. District has a large prayer chain already.

We also need (in my mind, at least) six “church planters” (single or couple) who will covenant to take up this work as their primary service to the Lord. The spiritual gifts that would seem helpful are HOSPITALITY, EVANGELISM, and SHEPHERDING (not “TEACHING”).

That service would involve:

- a) A commitment for a period of time (1-2 years?)
- b) A willingness to be trained (Pastor and District leaders will help) and to attend ongoing leader support meetings
- c) The use of their home on a weekly basis
- d) A commitment to PRAY for unchurched people daily
- e) A willingness to make the group primarily an OUTREACH group rather than a Bible study group

These Home Groups are envisioned primarily as “relationship-building” groups. (People to people, people to Christ). If some people eventually want more (as we hope!) and desire baptism, Lord’s Supper, worship, that will happen in another setting, perhaps in a combined way with another group.

Pastoral care and leading will come, initially, from the pastor of the planting church. It is our hope that God will lead gifted lay people to be trained for Word/Sacrament ministry in the LAP (Leadership Advancement Process) model. (Trained lay leader under pastor’s supervision).

Church planters are not required to join the new church unless they desire. People within the new groups who come to serious commitment to Jesus Christ may, in turn, become new “church planters.”

What has happened– how is the Holy Spirit accomplishing his work?

Report the Northwest District BOD April 2004:

Tracking the Spirit is following and joining Him as He leads people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Recent statistics are showing that there is growth in religious activity in the West; specifically Christianity. From our perspective, we agree. People are discovering the Holy Spirit’s power in their lives on a daily basis and being set free to share the Gospel message in natural, relational ways.

The district's original goal through Tracking the Spirit was to plant 33 churches and mentors, 396 interest groups, and count 4,750 new believers in Christ by end of 2004. But we only see the present clearly and God sees the first and the last – to date we have over 50 new fellowship communities that will come to fruit in 2004-2005, over 500 interest groups, and have reached over 20,000 people with the Gospel message through relationships that have/will build an opportunity for them to respond to Christ's love for them.

Involved in this local ownership and new approaches appropriate to specific areas is a celebration of uniqueness. Congregations, ministries and individuals are forming Coalitions of Encouragement and thereby strengthening their purpose in Christ and outreach to their communities. Some are impacting lives through placing themselves within reach of those who may not have the opportunity to worship in the "traditional Sunday morning" method; like Pastor Butch Olsen who has helped begin worship services at two retirement/care centers in the Portland area; Tamyé Tapia who has relinquished the leadership of an internet discussion group she was instrumental in starting to others because the Holy Spirit is working so rapidly through this delivery method; and the literally hundreds of people who are reaching within their areas of influence through interest groups. Churches are being planted, too. Generations of Worship in Wilsonville grows rapidly; a result of fervent prayers and the work of the Holy Spirit leading the way for the past two years (or better). Other congregations have committed to planting churches and results will be reported soon.

Some of the 50 plus district locations actively participating with Tracking the Spirit are: Twin Falls (and the surrounding area), Idaho Falls (and the surrounding area), Hailey, Nampa, and Boise, Idaho; Spokane, Yakima, Mercer Island, Snohomish, the Okanogan region of Washington state; Portland, Salem, Eugene, Wilsonville, Beaverton, Hillsboro, and Albany, Oregon; and Fairbanks, Homer, Anchorage and remote areas of Alaska.

Just in time training and support is critical. Courses geared toward the training of Tracking the Spirit facilitators, mentors, and other participants are soon to be offered through training developed by the Northwest District's LAP (Leadership Advancement Process) under the direction of Dr. Chris Reinke and the able administration of Lenette Schuldheisz.

Additionally, the challenge is making the teams of the district available for on-site encouragement, mentorship and training. As a result, gifts are being gathered to purchase a motor home that would "Track the Spirit on Wheels" and make the best use of available resources. (Contact Susan Olson at the district office for more information about how to assist with this project).

Other "Spirit Tracks" can be seen through the Circuit Rider Ministry which continues to grow and touch hundred of lives and a new Circuit Rider Ministry in Western Idaho begun recently. Ministries to various ethnic groups have grown beyond expectations. Ethnic missions/ministries currently include Vietnamese, Korean, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, African, and Indian cultures. Many additional cultures are being touched with the Gospel message through the work of the Tacoma Seafarers' Center which shares with those on ships docking in the Tacoma, Washington port.

Foundational to all of these blessings is that people throughout the district are praying. We began a prayer partners' opportunity in 2002 and now have over 500 partners regularly praying for their district, the Synod, those who do not know Christ and other concerns. Prayer retreats have begun through the ministry of CPR – Center for Prayer Renewal – lead by Pastor Richard Kiessling, Pastor Pete Peterson, Pastor Tim Renstrom and Pastor Paul Linneman.

So, what does this mean? Although it is "not about the numbers or reports but about hearts," Numbers and reports are a good way to "track" how the Holy Spirit is working and in tracking the numbers as best we can, we have found that similar to Paul's experiences, the numbers are increasing faster than we know. People throughout the district are Tracking the Spirit into relationships that, through the Spirit's power, are changing lives for eternity. To God be the glory and thank you for your prayers!

As of June 2004 – in addition the above items:

- Mobile TTS vehicle is purchased through the prayerful generosity of district churches and individuals and will soon be one the road to assist in planting through the ACTS model.
- TTS training for the SCLS (Sharing Christ with Lost Souls) "corporation" in Southern Idaho is almost complete (4 sessions) – they are reporting 48 new members (all de-churched or un-churched) in just one of the four coalition churches. Small groups beginning, natural and relational sharing of the Gospel is increasing daily – reporting over 40 shares (people who have heard the Gospel message through one of the SCLS disciples)
- New TTS coalition forming around Twin Falls, Idaho. First TTS session on "Purpose" is July.

- 3-4 or more TTS coalitions forming by the end of 2004 – possible 24 churches participating.
- Prayer Partners are now over 550.
- District Prayer Warriors team forming to work in conjunction with the CPR – Center for Prayer Renewal.
- Over 1,500 prayer cards (reminders to pray daily for specific people in ones area of influence that need to know Christ) are being used.
- People are praying more – more are praying daily for specific growth in hearts to know Jesus.
- Sharing Jesus Workshops are now over 40 with another 11 scheduling.
- Over 2,300 seeds of the Gospel message have been planted in those who are not attending church or do not yet know of Jesus.
- Over 50 churches in the Tracking process (does not include the many groups in working with Alaska Mission for Christ and Cross-County Ministries (formerly Idaho Circuit Rider; estimate 30 or more).
- Many are being baptized (numbers currently being calculated)
- 8+ new churches are sending down “planting roots”
- 40+ new fellowship groups have formed.