

Called to Witness, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 21041024
Joel 2:23-32 and Luke 18:9-14
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 24 October, 2004

What is the church? Our immediate response is often, “a building.” We speak of “going to church.” We get up on Sunday morning “to go to church.” We celebrate weddings and hold funerals “in the church,” But as Avery and Marsh’s song says, “the church is not a building, ... the church is a people.”¹

Our word “church” translates the Greek word *Ekklēsia* which is derived from a verb meaning, “To summon forth” or to call out. The church is the people of God— people summoned forth or called out of the population to be God’s people doing God’s work.

The Apostle Paul says, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We, the church, are Christ’s body. Jesus is no longer here on earth. He died twenty centuries ago and, as tradition teaches, was resurrected and ascended into heaven. Through God’s spirit, Jesus’ followers or disciples were transformed into the church. The church is Jesus’ followers continuing his work, his teaching, and his healing in this world.

A church building is a place where the people of God gather to worship, give thanks, learn and have their spiritual wells replenished to go out into the world to serve God and humanity. The church is you and I, wherever we may be, doing the work of Jesus Christ in the world today.

What is the church and why is it here? Each of us has a different answer to those questions. In the year and a half since I have been in Elon, I have witnessed confusion about the answers. Some want to defend a building against outside use. Others want more children in Sunday school. Some are content to come and be entertained, to listen to music, and to leave here feeling good. Others want the church more involved in outreach and mission.

The confusion dissipates our energy and saps our strength. Therefore, I am grateful that our Church Council, a month ago, approved a document to be distributed to each of us entitled, “A Proposed Statement of Calling for Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ.” We will have an opportunity to vote on this document and adopt it at the January 9 congregational meeting. It begins with a proposed mission statement and contains five answers to the question, “What is God calling Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ to be and to do?” We will spend today and four upcoming Sundays highlighting the document. If you did not receive the Statement of Calling in the mail, or if you have mislaid it, there are additional copies on the table in the narthex. This document begins the process of visioning for our future. Its purpose is to gather our thoughts about the church and focus them. It will gather our energies and concentrate them. Then we can be a more effective witness to Jesus Christ.

¹“I am the Church” by Richard K. Avery and Donald S. Marsh © 1972 by Hope Publishing Co, Carol Stream, IL 60187

The church, the Body of Christ, was born on Pentecost when God's spirit gathered the fearful disciples and empowered them. Peter stood up and repeated the words of the prophet Joel who said, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."² This document will help us focus on God's spirit among us, proclaiming God's love, dreaming dreams for this church and seeing visions of what this church and what the world can be like.

You and I, as the church, are called to be witnesses. These are not my words, nor the Council's words. These are Jesus' words. According to Matthew, Jesus' last words were, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."³ This is called "The Great Commission." We, as Jesus' disciples, are told by Jesus to get out into the neighborhoods and businesses and make disciples. This is the work of evangelism: telling others about the good news of God's love as shown by Jesus Christ.

The Statement of Calling, then, begins with a proposed Mission Statement that reads as follows: "In faithful response to his 'Great Commission,' the mission of Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ is to extend Christ's love to all people and, by our loving actions, lead people to be his disciples." We are called to make disciples: to invite all people to learn about Jesus and to follow his ways, not just to "save souls," or "convert people." God does the saving and the converting. Our job is to tell others through our words and actions that God loves them.

According to Luke, Jesus said, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴ That brings us to the first Calling in the document: "Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ is called to be a witness to the love and authority of God through Jesus Christ to the community." We will give evidence of God's love. People who come here and people who see us during the week will know that God is a God of love.

How can they know that through us? They will know it because a Stephen Minister listened to their problem. A meal was delivered through Meals on Wheels. A couple invited some students to their house for dinner. A church member gave their aunt a ride to the hospital for a test. A teacher invited a child to come to a youth group activity. A discussion group allowed their doubts and questions without judging.

God is calling you and me to speak; to evangelize; to witness. Once we approve this document, it will be up to each of us and each of our boards and fellowship groups and Sunday school classes to be creative: to dream dreams and see visions, and figure out new ways in which we can reach people and bring them into this loving and caring fellowship, this body of Christ, this people of God.

²Joel 2:28-29

³Matthew 28:19

⁴Acts 1:8