

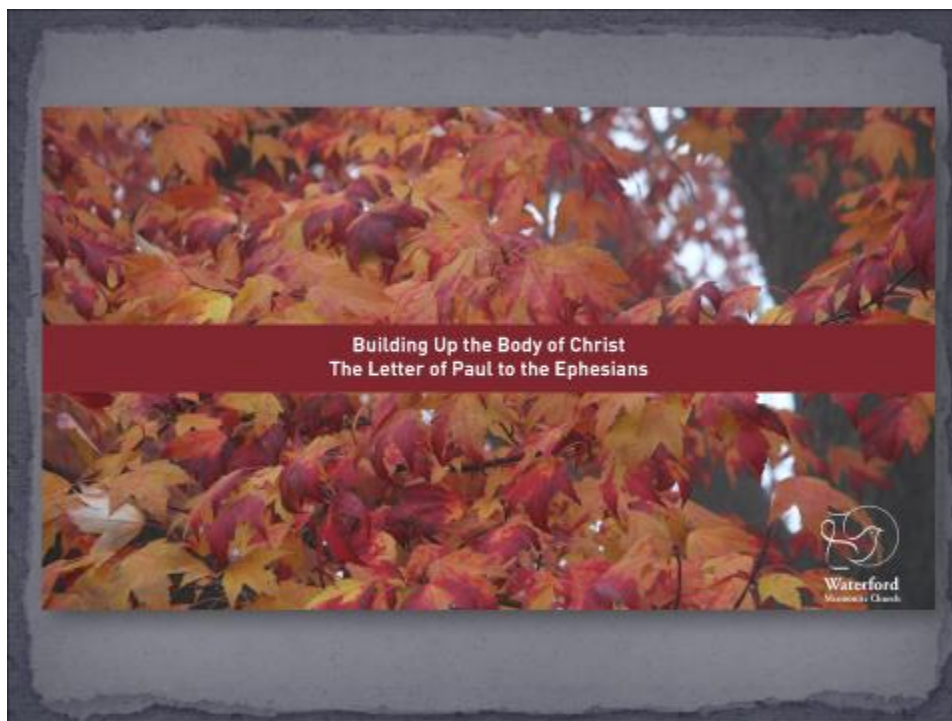
I. [blank PPT] Intro.: "What is 'church'?"

A. The bulletin in our hands says "Waterford Mennonite Church"

1. Those 1st 2 words are fairly specific ...
 - a) "Waterford" has specific geographic meaning on south side of Goshen
 - b) And "Mennonite" narrows it down quite a bit within an Anabaptist Christian tradition
2. But what is "church"?
 - a) This morning we sang a simple song telling us, "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."
 - b) But if that's true that wood and bricks & carpet, a logo or even a website do not define what a church is, then what kind of experience, or what kind of people is "church"?
 - c) The question is deceptively simple to ask but hard to answer

B. Those of you who've been around for 5 years or more may recall some ways we tried to answer it in 2010

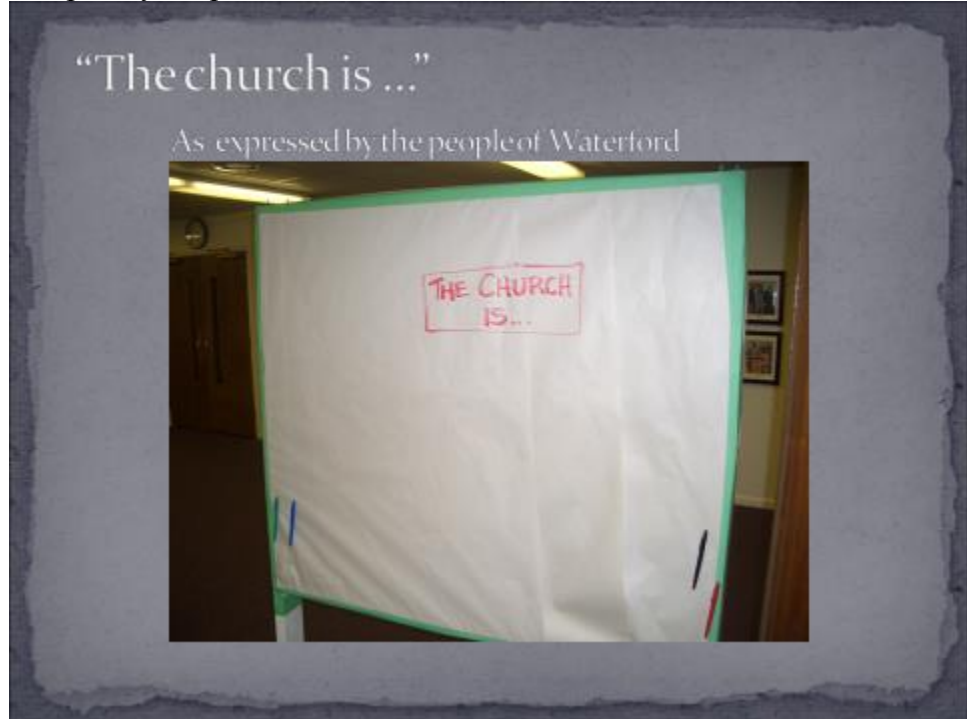
1. For eleven Sundays that fall, we spent time studying the book of Ephesians, in a worship series called "Building up the Body of Christ"



2. Our focus question for that series was "What does it mean to be

church?"

- a) And during that series, out in the foyer, we had a whiteboard where we invited the congregation to fill in their own responses at the end of another deceptively simple sentence: "The church is ..."



- b) Well before the series ended, both sides were filled with words & pictures from Waterford people

II. (Review church definition from 2010 Ephesians series)

A. I started off that series with a few possible ways to complete that sentence, based on authors & theologians who've studied Ephesians in depth.

B. So first we had a rather cosmic definition of church, from a Mennonite pastor & professor:

"The church is ..."

As described by theologians

<p>The church, or better "Christ-in-his-church", is God's means of reclaiming the whole world.</p> <p>Thomas Yoder Neufeld, <i>Ephesians</i> (Believers Church Bible Commentary), p. 19</p>	<p><i>A cosmic definition</i></p>
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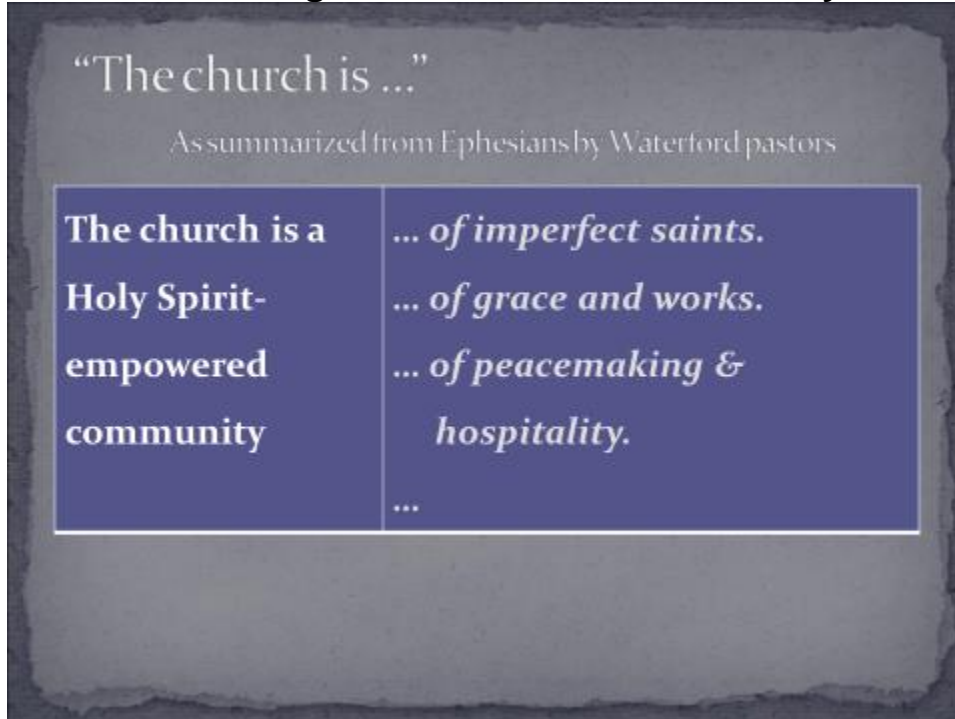
c. Then, drawing from Eugene Peterson's book Practice Resurrection, we had a fundamentally reorienting definition:

"The church is ..."

As described by theologians

<p>Church is not what we do; it is what God does, although we participate in it.</p> <p>Eugene Peterson, <i>Practice Resurrection</i>, p. 17</p>	<p><i>A fundamental reorientation</i></p>
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D. Finally, every Sunday in that series we had a longer rubric, "The church is a Holy Spirit-empowered community ..." that we filled in according to the theme for that Sunday



III. Now in 2015 we're over halfway thru our YOTB

A. Last week Cindy introduced us to the church as part of this broader interpreted holy history, with special emphasis on the groundbreaking story of the Jerusalem Council

B. Our timeline shows God's "solution accomplished" for the sin problem on the cross, at the empty tomb, and at Pentecost

1. The Holy Spirit's coming to people from all nations & ethnicities made it clear that God's salvation was for all, and the old "boxes" that the Jewish people had put around God were done away w/
2. But as time went on after Pentecost, the "solution accomplished" needed more for it to really take hold & spread, more than only the man Jesus of Nazareth
 - a) It needed even more than just the Holy Spirit poured down @ Pentecost
 - b) Although the sin solution was "accomplished" definitively, it continually needed to "be realized" in the contemporary world
 - c) The solution still needed some human legs on it

C. Another way to say this is that **after Pentecost, there was still a lag between God demonstrating this expanded vision of salvation ... and the early church owning it & demonstrating it themselves.**

1. The influence of the so-called Judaizers, who insisted that Christians had to retain outward Jewish practices, extended for years after Pentecost

2. But in the meantime, the Pentecost Spirit could not be contained, as God was breaking down walls of exclusivity almost immediately:

a) 1st, right after Pentecost, 3,000 people were baptized:

Diaspora Jews who were not from Jerusalem & who spoke different languages ...

the geographic "box" had cracks in it

b) 2nd, in Acts chapter 8, Philip goes to Samaria, that place with the descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel whom the Jerusalem Jews would have nothing to do with:

Philip, Peter & John proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, and those who accept the message also receive the Holy Spirit

The broken relationship between Jew & Samaritan is beginning to be restored! The cracks in the ethnocentric box are also getting bigger ...

c) 3rd, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian official who had come to the Pentecost feast ...

in distance, religious background & skin color, the Ethiopian was far removed from the Jerusalem Jews, yet Philip baptizes him into Christ!

Those boxes around God are getting riddled with cracks!

d) Finally, in Acts 10, Peter has his mind-bending dream on a rooftop where the line between pure and impure is blurred, and he meets and baptizes the Roman centurion Cornelius ...

Peter finally understands that the Gospel is fully open even to Gentiles, on whom the Holy Spirit was also poured out

Away from Jerusalem, those ethnocentric boxes & walls have already crumbled apart

3. All that remains is for the walls to come down for the church even in the stronghold of Jerusalem ...

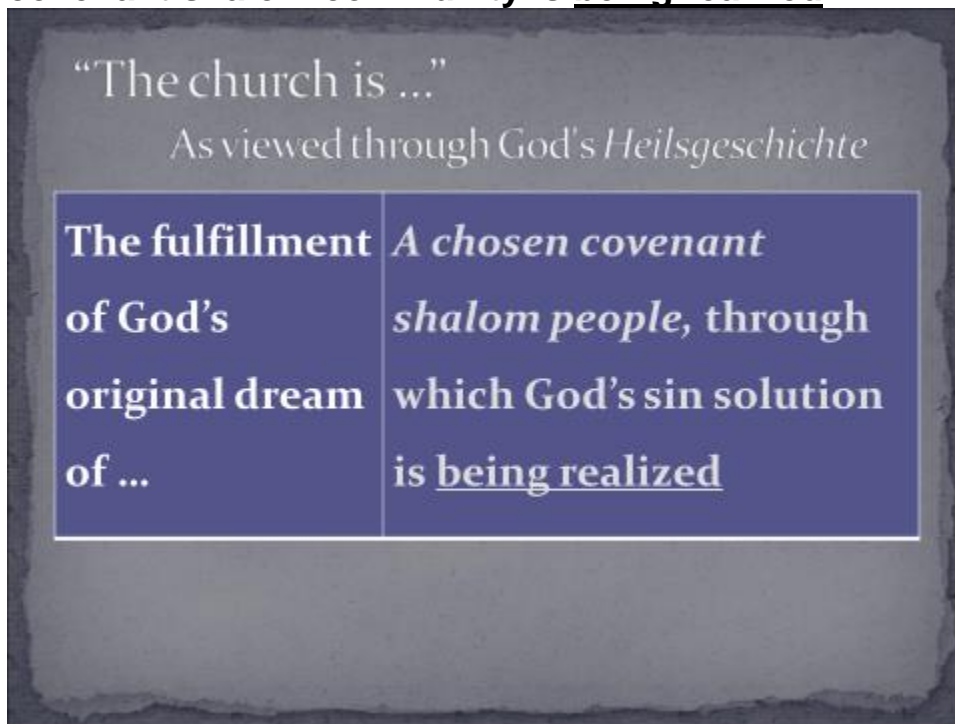
Text: Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 2:11-22

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- a) and that's what happens at the Jerusalem Council as Cindy described it last week:
- b) even among the leaders in the center of this movement, there is finally no distinction between Jew & Gentile believers in Jesus!
- c) And this state of the church demonstrated at the Jerusalem Council ... a state of amazing new unity because Christ has broken down old walls of division, this is what Paul writes so eloquently around that same time to the Galatians, and a decade or more later to the Ephesians

IV. The Jerusalem Conference is a significant marker on our Heilsgeschichte timeline because here the church takes on more initiative in spreading the kingdom of God

A. From this point on, God's sin solution thru a chosen, covenant shalom community is being realized!



B. Here the church, thru the Holy Spirit, becomes more of a direct actor in God's holy history.

1. Oh, certainly we do not save ourselves, as Cindy last week and Sara Wenger Shenk before her reiterated.
2. The work of Christ and the Holy Spirit are unique and powerful, and do not need replicating

- a) We do not need another supplementary redeemer or another sustainer!
- b) What we need now is to live out in our world that same divine redeeming & sustaining power

3. That is the solution being realized

V. I saw a beautiful glimpse of that on Thursday night at a gathering at Maple City Chapel, but it was actually only a hint of God's solution being realized in our own midst @ Waterford

A. The Elkhart County Jail Ministry had a dessert night and program about their ministries, led by Chaplain Cory Martin, who spoke to us here over a year ago

1. Featured speakers included Russ Hochstetler and Doug Cuney, who Russ first visited in the Elkhart County jail
 - a) It was inspiring hearing how much God has done in Doug's life to break the power of alcohol and despair, but some of that will have to wait here for 2 months or so until Doug shares his story in our worship, since Doug is now free to worship with us on most Sundays.
 - b) Also inspiring to me was how Russ Hochstetler allowed himself to be used as God's instrument to connect with Doug, thus breaking down walls between strangers, and between inmates and outside people
2. But beyond Russ himself, then he sought ways for Waterford people to also break down churchy walls between outsiders and insiders
 - a) Waterford members wrote cards & letters to an inmate they had never met, based solely on the recommendation of Russ, and of Kirk Martin, an inmate from our congregation.
 - b) And when Doug was released and showed up here, he had people welcoming him to worship and to Sunday School

B. As was mentioned at the banquet, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us, WE are not defined by whether our sins have landed us in jail or not.

1. Now we are defined by the peace Christ has brought us ... the peace of Christ removing our sin as a separation from God.
2. But as described in Eph. 2, it's not merely a personal reconciliation between God & ourselves as individuals.
 - a) The church itself exists because Christ grafted us Gentiles onto the "people of God" tree

b) Christ is in the business of reconciling groups that were formerly hostile & making a new place in the church for them to come together in Christ:

Jew & Gentile ... Slaves and free

Women and men

Anglo & Hispanic ... Black & white

Rich and poor ... Conservative and liberal

And although it seems hard for many of us to visualize right now, I believe that somehow God wants to find a way even in the church for gay and straight believers to find reconciliation thru Christ ...

3. Certainly an imperfect church is still struggling today to actually break down many of these walls, not just the sexual identity one

a) ... yet just when I sometimes am tempted to give up on this radical vision of God's, there are hopeful glimpses of churches that are not just homogeneous reflections of the polarization all around us in our culture.

b) Churches where working class people equally share seating space and discussion space with people making 5 times as much money ...

c) churches where translation of sermons or announcements into another language is seen as a small inconvenience for the sake of 2 language groups who feel united in Christ

d) churches where people who can't seem to agree on anything in secular politics still agree on local missions and common worship that deserve their united support

e) Churches like those named in the video at the beginning of worship

4. Can we be one of those churches?

VI. Conclusion: Thru the saving work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, God's sin solution was accomplished

A. But then it began being realized at the Jerusalem Council, where everyone truly became equal as believers in Christ

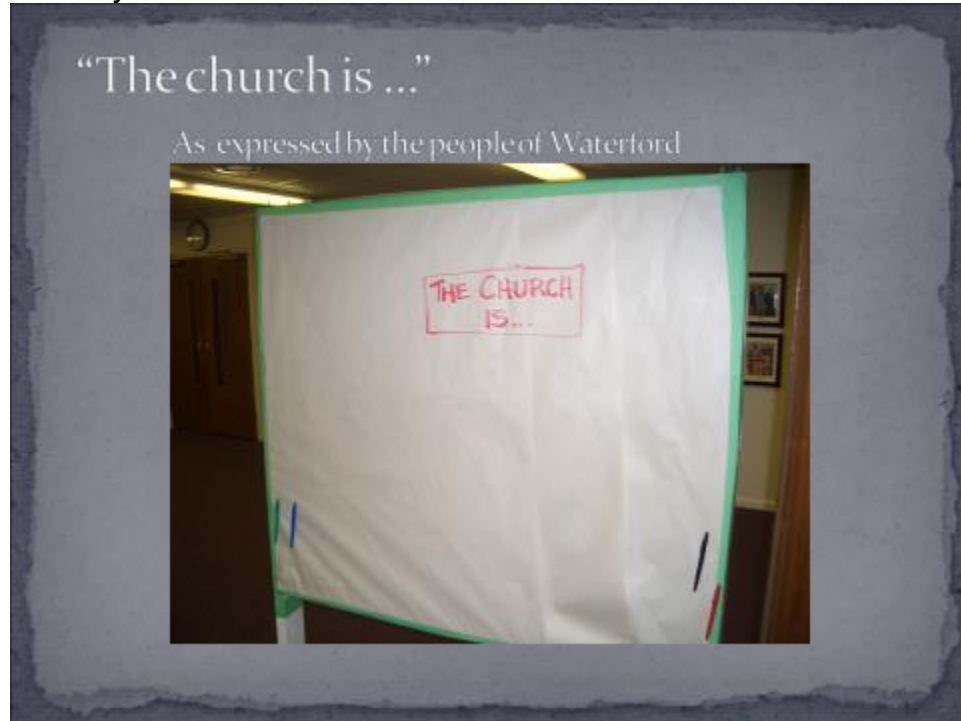
B. And the solution is still being realized in the church today ... Friends, that means you & me!

1. The Heilsgeschichte continues today through us!

2. God's holy history does not end with the Bible ... It continues to be lived out wherever the church of Jesus Christ gathers to worship

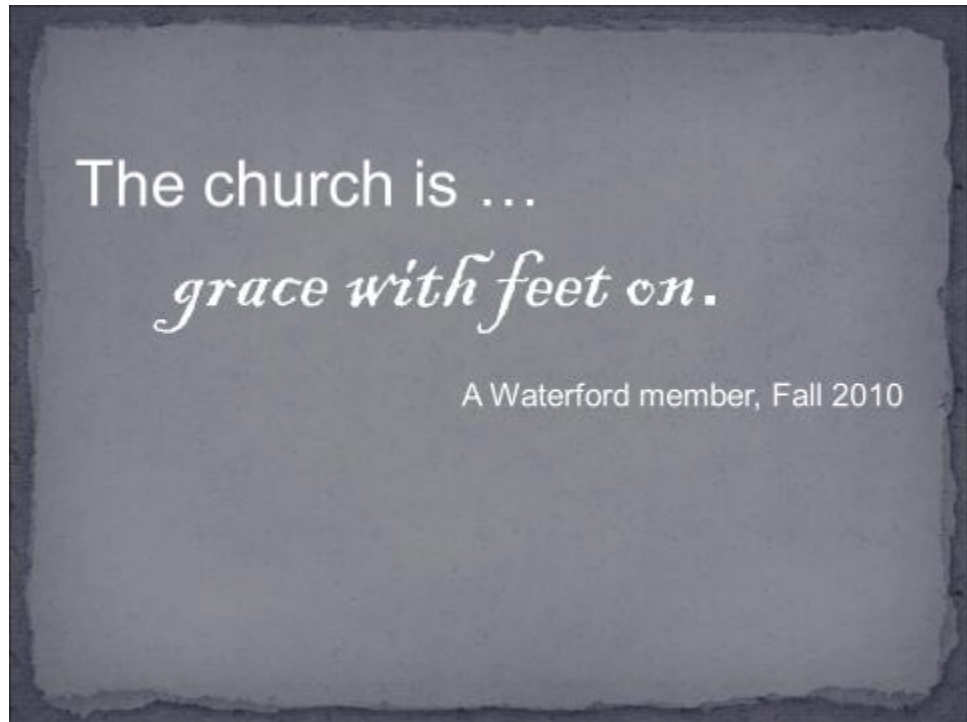
and follows him in lives of obedience

3. Do you remember that whiteboard that said "The church is ..."?



- a) By that end of that series there were many great responses written on it, but sadly this week I could not find any photo of that full whiteboard
- b) However, I do remember one simple yet profound response that stuck with me. It very much has to do with the solution being realized today.

c) Someone wrote down on that whiteboard, “The church is ... grace with feet on.”



4. How are you contributing to this holy history? What chapters of Heilsgeschichte are being written as you live them out?