Pentecost is one of my favorite seasons of the church calendar. According to Wikipedia, “Pentecost, celebrated fifty days after Easter Sunday, commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:1–31).” We celebrate every year the fire of the Holy Spirit landing on each one of us, inspiring us and setting us on fire to engage in the building of the church.

Our small church, Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, is involved in a project to renew our mission. Like the story of Tabitha being breathed new life by Apostle Peter, our church is being given new life by a project to build housing for the homeless on the northern portion of our church property. Peter tells Tabitha that because of her good works, God is not done with her. We often feel the same way - - that God is not done with us.

Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church is a small church in the heart of Silicon Valley. We are situated at the corner of Leigh and Moorpark avenues and right across from San Jose City College. On a good Sunday, we worship 10 members. Our pastor works full time as a psychologist and we are thankful he leads Sunday worship and Tuesday Bible studies.

Two years ago, we were faced with difficult decisions. Saddled with a $800,000 loan that we couldn’t pay off, the church council looked at a number of options, including selling the church and leasing out our fellowship hall to a non-profit organization. After much deliberation, we decided to partner with a non-profit developer to build affordable housing.
We had a bold vision for partnering with Mid Pen Housing to construct 106 units for the homeless and to provide them with wrap around services provided by the County of Santa Clara. In exchange for providing a 99-year lease to the non-profit developer, we would get a lump sum payment of $2.6 million to help us pay off the huge mortgage, rebuild our fellowship hall, and give us a needed infusion of cash.

Oftentimes, when the topic of building housing for the homeless is brought up, there is a reaction of “don’t build it here - - not in my back yard.” In our case, we didn’t get any such reaction. In fact, there has been nothing but support for helping meet a critical need in the heart of Silicon Valley, the home to unaffordable rents of $2,500 per month for a family of four.

We were smart about taking on this project. We approached rebuilding our mission like leaders intent on building the Jesus movement. And all movement building starts with bringing people together and training them up for a long march. One foot in front of the other is what we did for two straight years.

Together we learned how to talk with people which really means we learned how to listen to people’s stories. Too often evangelizing is construed as proclaiming the word of God from heaven. A more powerful approach is listening to others tell about their experiences here on earth.

Next, we learned how to facilitate meetings with a small group of people. When two or more people gather together we experience the power of God. Our church invited people to a 1st community meeting of all the groups that use our church. In this large community meeting, we had 6 to 8 mini meetings where we asked neighbors to imagine a different church.

From those meetings, we identified leaders who might want to take the next step to understand power and to analyze how the powerful get things done, including understanding how millions of dollars flow to needed community projects like building housing for the poor.

Did I mention that our Bishop, Mark Holmerud and Reverend Tita of the Sierra Pacific Synod got involved? They helped us by being a sounding board for ideas, and they pointed us to resources such as the Lutheran Office for Public Policy. They gave us a real experience of “church together.” We learned how to lobby public officials such as our City Council member Dev Davis and our County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg. Lobbying is just a fancy word for building relationships.

The most basic of relationships are those we have with neighbors who live near our church. We figured that those who might be the most interested in our housing project would be those who lived within 1000 feet of the church’s door step. Leaders armored ourselves by practicing an outline of a conversation, and then we went forth. We met people who were hungry for human contact and communication. Each person we spoke with got an invitation to a
large community meeting to be held within four days at our church. It helped that they also got an invitation mailed to them.

About fifty people attended a 2\textsuperscript{nd} community meeting! They were neighbors. And they were people from several neighborhood associations. Some attendees heard about the meeting from the internet. Allies attended who we had gotten to know through building a strategic list of leaders in the non-profit and homeless services community and by making phone calls and visits to them.

Snowballing is the effect of every action building upon the one before. As the snowball rolls down the hill the more snow sticks to the cold ball of ice and it grows and grows in size. A movement is built through the combination of all the actions that we took above. It becomes a force of its own that cannot be ignored by elected leaders. In fact, it becomes a movement that everyone wants to be a part of.

Our small church is poised to be a place where alcoholics come for AA meetings, homeless go to be fed, people learn job skills, neighbors seek sanctuary, families celebrate important anniversaries, and a small number of folk called Lutherans worship. And even in the midst of social distancing and shelter in place that temporarily hinder us from serving these communities, God’s Spirit strengthens us to look forward to grow these relationships in the next breath of new life at Immanuel. We are glad and sometimes amazed that God isn’t done with us yet.

\textit{By Erik Larsen, Church Council President}

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to \texttt{mic@spselca.org}.